

Discuss the theme of death in literature about Brittany. You should make detailed reference to at least two works studied, and you may wish to address the wider contexts of tourism or politics.

By T. J. Conde

According to Maura Coughlin in the poignant opening to her book chapter '*Sites of Absence and Presence: Tourism and the Morbid Material Culture Of Death In Brittany*', people have been 'drawn to view, represent and repeat anecdotes about, and sometimes participate in, Breton ritual observances of the cult of the dead.'¹In this particular instance, Coughlin is referring to the droves of tourists that have flocked to Brittany since the 19th-century to view these unusual spectacles, but what was the catalyst for this outburst of interest in the subject and how much truth lies at the actual heart of the matter?

This essay will discuss the theme of death in literature about Brittany. It will focus, in the main, on extracts from Antole Le Braz's '*La Légende de la mort en basse-Bretagne*'² (1893) and '*L'Intersigne*'³ by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, from the compilation, '*Contes Cruels*' (1895). Using examples and references from both of these pieces, the paper will attempt to outline some of the main aspects of the notion of death associated with Brittany, along with the narrative devices used. The stereotypes and traditions that inevitably derived from this genre of literature, marketing the peculiar scenes, will also be discussed as well as the unique Breton figure of the '*Ankou*'.⁴ In conclusion, the essay will explore the wider scale implications this has had on the field of tourism as well as touching on the political situations of that time and today, that might have had, or still have, an effect on the perception of Brittany. Parallels with other societies, particularly Celtic will be made if present.

Le Braz's '*La Légende de la mort en basse-Bretagne*' is a collection of tales purporting to be genuine Breton narratives from primary sources, the Breton peasantry themselves. This can be construed as both an attempt by the author to legitimise and authenticate the narratives contained within his own book, but also, to distance himself from the tales and make it deliberately blatant that they are not from his own hand. '*L'Intersigne*' is a short story from *Contes Cruel*, which in many respects, displays similarities to tales within La Braz's book. Both authors are also Breton's themselves.

A similarity mutually shared by the texts is that they make use of the narrative technique, the framing device. In essence this is method of creating a story withing a story, encapsulating the tale. Villiers does this from the very outset of '*L'Intersigne*' putting the narration of the tale firmly in the hands of his friend 'Baron Xavier'⁵ p.182 and thus distancing himself from what he then describes as 'those extraordinary, amazing, mysterious coincidences which

¹ M. Coughlin, 'Sites Of Absence And Presence: Tourism And The Morbid Material Culture Of Death In Brittany' in *Death Tourism: Disaster Sites as Recreational Landscape*. ed. By B. Sion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 183-204.

² A. Le Braz,, 'Dealings with the Dead: Narratives from '*La Légende de la mort en Basse Bretagne*', trans. A.E. Whitehead (London: Redway, 1898).

³ A. de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, '*L'Intersigne*', in *Contes Cruels, or Cruel Tales*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, 1985).

⁴ A.Minard 'Ankou' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) p.67.

⁵ A. de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, '*L'Intersigne*' p.182.

occur in people's lives'⁶ Equally here, distancing his beliefs as well. Le Braz does this in a way that almost frames his entire book, as mentioned above every tale has the distinction of having a name, or occupation of a person supplied as to where it had been recorded. Not only does Le Braz separate himself from the tales but he also constructs the whole work in such a way as to make it look like a scientific study, complete with academic preface, into something highly unusual, namely the Bretons beliefs.

At first glance these practices may seem surprising coming from two authors of Breton heritage, but they were yearning for the praise of their associates in Paris who 'saw Brittany simply as other to France: they defined the region by what it lacked, what it failed to possess.'⁷ This is all relevant to the theme of death in literature concerning Brittany as these writers as well as their predecessors and successors are the very people responsible for accentuating the oddities of the Breton people, compared to the rest of France, into the stereotypes known today. This includes the unique way in which they think about and express their beliefs surrounding death. This can be seen in the following quote from Heather Williams:

Most writers, though, like Le Braz, are keen to exploit the idea that death has a special importance for Bretons, and also to stress Brittany's unique incarnations of and mythology of death. The most well-known of these features is the figure of the Ankou'⁸

The Ankou is usually present in some shape or form in literature that involves both Brittany and the theme of death.⁹ The word is cognate with the Welsh word *angau* and Old Irish *écae* both meaning death.¹⁰ The Ankou is usually described as the image of a skeleton carrying a scythe and wearing a hat, much like the grim reaper. 'In parts of Brittany the Ankou or his servant is understood to be the last person from the parish to have died in the previous year.'¹¹ This is an important fact as people are much more likely over time to respect a tradition or belief that could involve one of their own kin.

Tale number six is apparently supplied by a weaver, and then relayed to Le Braz via a school master, note how the information is now 3rd hand before being translated from Breton into French and so can no longer be considered primary source information. 'Eight Omens of a Death' is a good example, however, of the superstitious nature of the Breton people being portrayed by Le Braz. The lady in question experiences a series of omens in the months and weeks leading up to her husband's death. These are said to have increased the days before his eventual demise. The superstition shines through as the lady describes a perfectly reasonable explanation for the events in the same sentence but is nevertheless totally convinced that it cannot be anything but the supernatural. For example, she says 'then there passed over my face a cold, damp breath which might have come up out of a cellar.'¹² This is a common

⁶ A. de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, '*L'Intersigne*' p.182.

⁷ S. Gemie, '*Brittany 1750-1950: The Invisible Nation*' (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007) p.86.

⁸ H. Williams, '*Death In Brittany*'

<https://www.academia.edu/23359503/Death_in_Brittany_conference_paper> [Accessed 15/12/21].

⁹ S. Marsden, Personification Of Death In Breton Mythology, <<https://www-bridgemaneducation-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/en/asset/396407/summary>> [Accessed 16/12/21] For A Visual Representation Of The Ankou Please See Here.

¹⁰ A. Minard, '*Ankou*' p.67.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² A. Le Braz, '*Dealings with the Dead*' P.74.

description of ‘the cold death’¹³ described elsewhere in literature. The woman also talks of ‘a noise as of the moving of planks, and, next, the regular knocking of a hammer driving in nails’¹⁴ and ‘a violent beating against the door.’¹⁵ All of these mentioned and the other omens, are part of the crescendo that builds up with more and more frequently occurring events which ultimately ends in the man’s death. The night before this happens, the lady recalls ‘the jolting of a cart fell upon my ear’¹⁶ which was ‘more startling because there was no roadway near our house.’¹⁷ This cart is then heard, ‘the creaking of the ill-oiled axle-tree became more and more distinct’¹⁸, this is an unmistakable Ankou reference, he is often depicted riding a screeching cart laden with bodies.¹⁹ There is no doubt who the cart belongs to after hearing this and she ‘heard it come to rest against the gable end’²⁰ before looking and seeing nothing but still hearing the screeching wheel, the cart then circuits the house three times, as if the house has been chosen or earmarked by the Ankou. Finally, with a ‘tremendous knock thundered on the door’²¹ it comes to rest, eerily waking the husband in the process. The next day her husband dies and it becomes clear that all of the omens experienced were the lead up to this incident, as if the husband was being stalked by death incarnate. The omens become more frequent and severe the closer one gets to the inevitable end. There also seems to be a personal association to the effects involved or experienced in some of the omens. This can be witnessed in the case of the sheet that the husband is eventually buried in suddenly becoming his weight²² or the fact that the lady seems to ‘recognise my husband’s footstep, such as it was in the old days, when he was well and came home from his days work.’²³

‘*L’Intersigne*’ has some striking similarities to the ‘Eight Omens of a Death’ tale told by Le Braz’s book. Firstly, as pointed out by Ellen Badone, ‘intersigne, is a local Breton term for omen which first appears in the publications of folklorists working in Brittany during the late nineteenth century.’²⁴ Looking past the similarities of the names, the narrative of events is also remarkably comparable, however unlike the quite obvious allusions to the Ankou in the Le Braz tale, the insinuations are more subtle in this case. Like the lady from Le Braz’s tale Xavier seems to be chased by omens, from the very minute he arrives at the Abbé Maucombe’s home. He talks of ‘a chill in the air’²⁵ in a similar fashion to the lady and again

¹³ A. Minard, ‘Ankou’ p.67.

¹⁴ A. Le Braz, ‘*Dealings with the Dead*’ P.76.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.77.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.78.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Oxford Reference, ‘Ankou’

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609674.001.0001/acref-9780198609674-e-214> [Accessed 16/12/21].

²⁰ A. Le Braz, ‘*Dealings with the Dead*’ p.78.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, p.77.

²³ Ibid, p.76.

²⁴ E. Badone, ‘Death Omens In A Breton Memorare’ *The Journal Of The Folklore Society*, vol 98, Issue 1, (1987).

²⁵ A. de Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, ‘*L’Intersigne*’ p.188.

he states, 'I was icy cold'²⁶ and 'I was afraid of a cold hand seize mine in the darkness.'²⁷ It would appear then that this is a common theme.

When Xavier awakes in his bed there is a priest holding out a cloak and 'a bird of the night with a horrible cry passed between us'²⁸, unbeknown to Xavier, is a personal omen in the sense that he borrows the cloak from the Abbé Maucombe, again with direct comparisons visible in the previous tale analysed. Moreover, in this case the omen goes a step further and Xavier actually gets a vision of the last time he will see the Abbé alive. In the conclusion to the story, Xavier takes a cloak from his friend and again hears a shrill 'horrible cry' of a bird and again the three-cornered hat is mentioned.²⁹ Xavier 'heard ticking sounds and sharp creaks in the woodwork.'³⁰ Similar noises are heard by the woman in the La Blaz tale, wood knocking is again heard as the door taps 'three sharp imperious little knocks'³¹ this style of knock as opposed to a rat-a-tat-tat style has a more sinister sound. The Ankou imagery isn't as stark in this story, but it is still there all the same, in the knocking of wood, signaling the cart and the screech of the birds as the squeaky wheel.

Could it be possible that these superstitions and traditions are so deep rooted in the Breton culture simply because of the fact that Brittany is so isolated and primitive? Isolated areas are not subject to the same rigors of change as more accessible, urbanised environments. The inaccessible are prone to harbor archaisms of all types, whether that be language, traditions and folklore or even landscape features. The ingrained traditions and rituals surrounding the dead in Brittany may well be left over from a bygone age, even pre-Christian in some cases, like that of the Ankou himself.³² Society elsewhere has emerged from these over the course of centuries, but progress and change take longer in remote and rural communities even today. This is summed up here by Maura Coughlin when referring to Finistère in Brittany:

The experience of modernity and its institutions were slow in arriving. Life's most significant and transitional events such as birth, death and mourning all happened in the home in nineteenth-century Brittany, as there were no social structures to manage or mask these phases of life.³³

An interesting parallel with Brittany's unique culture surrounding death and the afterlife is that of Ireland. The Irish death culture also has a certain air of uniqueness surrounding its beliefs and mourning practices, untouched and not corrupted from outside influences. Wales can be explained as not having this as it has been to a much larger extent disrupted through history and anglicized in some respects. An example of these traditions can be seen in the Gaelic mourning ritual of keening³⁴ which is representative of the type of ideas that were ripe for exploitation in Brittany in the 19th century.

²⁶ Ibid, p.193.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, p.192.

²⁹ Ibid, p.197.

³⁰ Ibid, p.190.

³¹ Ibid, p.191.

³² H. Williams, 'Death In Brittany' p.3.

³³ M. Coughlin, 'Crosses, Cloaks and Globes: Women's Material Culture Of Mourning On The Brittany Coast' in *Women and Things: Gendered Material Practices, 1750-1950*, (Ashgate, 2009).

³⁴ 'Keening Tradition' <http://www.keeningwake.com/keening-tradition/> (2021) [Accessed 16/12/21].

The association of death with Brittany is often thought of as unique, but this is clearly not the case, many societies have their own distinctive ways of mourning, as the Irish comparison shows, each with their own traditions and beliefs. What appears to have transpired in the case of Brittany is that these, principles, rituals and practices, that are indeed often distinctive to that society, have been exploited, manipulated and exaggerated for both political leverage and financial gain, by the way of tourism. Bretons through history are just as responsible for these as non- natives as the references from the texts mentioned above clearly show; both authors themselves heralding from Breton culture.

Bibliography

- Badone, E. 'Death Omens in a Breton Memorate' *The Journal Of The Folklore Society*, vol 98, Issue 1, (1987).
- Coughlin, M. 'Crosses, Cloaks and Globes: Women's Material Culture Of Mourning On The Brittany Coast' in *Women and Things: Gendered Material Practices, 1750-1950*, (Ashgate, 2009).
- Coughlin, M. 'Sites of Absence and Presence: Tourism and the Morbid Material Culture of Death in Brittany', in *Death Tourism: Disaster Sites as Recreational Landscape*, ed. Brigitte Sion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 183-204.
- Gemie, S. '*Brittany 1750-1950: The Invisible Nation*' (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007).
- 'Keening Tradition' <http://www.keeningwake.com/keening-tradition/> (2021) [Accessed 16/12/21].
- Le Braz, A. '*Dealings with the Dead: Narratives from 'La Légende de la mort en Basse Bretagne*', trans. A.E. Whitehead (London: Redway, 1898).
- Marsden, S. 'Personification of Death in Breton Mythology' <<https://www-bridgemaneducation-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/en/asset/396407/summary>> [Accessed 16/12/21].
- Minard, A. 'Ankou' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By John T. Koch (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) p.67.
- Oxford Reference, 'Ankou' <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609674.001.0001/acref-9780198609674-e-214> [Accessed 16/12/21].
- Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, A. 'L'Intersigne', in *Contes cruels, or Cruel Tales*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1963, 1985).
- Williams, H. '*Death in Brittany*' https://www.academia.edu/23359503/Death_in_Brittany_conference_paper [Accessed 15/12/21].