

The Cultural Significance of the Amulet Project

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When we look back at Ireland's social history, it quickly becomes apparent how significant and important projects such as this one are. From early modern Ireland up until the beginning of the twentieth century, pregnancy and other "women's issues", childbirth, and infant mortality were taboo subjects that were not openly discussed.

Limbo, in Christian theology, is the supposed abode of the souls of unbaptised infants. The Latin word *limbus* refers to a "border" or to an uncertain period of time or space. The Latin root word *limen* means "threshold". The notion is that babies who die without baptism cannot enter heaven because they have not been absolved of original sin. It is the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church that every human being is born with original sin and baptism is required to amend or cancel out this, symbolically washing away sin, as well as being the official rite to make a person a member of the spiritual community. According to Catholic dogma, the absence of baptism would result in the soul of that person being prevented from entering heaven. Limbo is a theological hypothesis and it has been debated as to whether it is part of official Church tenets. Whether the concept of limbo belongs to official Church teaching or not is irrelevant when it comes to folk belief. The fact is that the concept of limbo was historically taught in Irish schools as a Catholic belief and consequently it was widely accepted as an actuality by practicing Catholics. This had a subsequent effect on social perceptions and views in relation to dead infants. The idea is that the fate of babies who had died before being baptised was to be consigned to some indeterminate place in-between heaven and hell, some undefined afterlife in which they were to float about for eternity. The notion that the baby's soul could not enter heaven caused great distress, as did the belief that they were relegated to limbo and at risk of being lost, eternally separated from God. Conceptually, the imagery connected to limbo is very dark, sad and bleak. Canon Law stated that dead babies could not be baptised. Since the babies were not baptised, they were denied funerals and could not be buried in the sacred ground of the church graveyard because only hallowed souls i.e. those who had been baptised as Christian could be given these privileges. This caused enormous difficulties in Irish society. It wasn't until Vatican II (1962-65) that Church council relaxed its rules about limbo and introduced a funeral rite.

On into the twentieth century, the burials of unbaptised babies were tainted with shame and guilt because of the association with sin. Their death was not treated like any other death in the family but was shrouded in secrecy and indignity. The burial itself was most often clandestine. Due to the fact that people were not allowed to bury the baby in the consecrated cemetery ground, they would try to get as close to the graveyard without actually burying the baby in the graveyard. Many babies' bodies were buried right next to the cemetery wall or outside and almost against the church wall in an effort to be as close as possible to sanctified ground. Because these burials were not officially sanctioned, they would have had to be carried out in secret, often at night and with limited time, resulting in the digging of shallow graves.

In other cases, the babies were buried on the landscape. The Irish language words *cillíní* (anglicised as killeens) and *ceallúnach* refer to the burial grounds of unbaptised children. Sometimes the chosen places would be liminal in themselves, symbolically “in-between” places. Hedgerows and ditches were common sites since they are located between fields, not specific to one field or the other, but to both. Another site might be between the sand and the sea when the tide was out or at town-land boundaries. The “midway” position of the burials reflects the concept of limbo as an intermediate world. Another, more practical reason, was that these places were more specific and easier to find again than more indiscriminate places like the middle of a field. There were also mass infant graves on the landscape and places that were traditionally designated as burial places for “limbo babies”, for example *Oileán na Marbh* (Island of the Dead), off the west coast of Donegal. Although in the past, these graves and mass burial grounds were most often unmarked, there would have been local knowledge of them and folklore connected with them.

The reality of the babies’ interment in officially anonymous plots of land had a huge social and cultural effect. In many cases, babies were buried in a shoebox rather than a coffin. Their deaths were oftentimes not recorded in any official document. Their graves were unmarked. All of these factors contributed to the symbolic exclusion of these little lives from normal community life and from society as a whole. Formally and publicly, it was as if they never existed at all. People did not talk about this openly because of the stigma attached to the burial and the fact that the person was not baptised. The social exclusion also meant that the baby’s identity was marginalized. A big factor is that they could not be buried in a family plot with relatives but instead were thought of as alone and isolated out in the countryside.

This segregation of the baby from the rest of society meant that remembrance of the dead person was also prohibited. There was not a legitimate funeral and no explicit gravesite and so no focus for commemoration. Along with the devastation of losing a child, parents did not have access to a proper funeral service in order to ritually say goodbye. Their grief was, officially and publicly, unrecognised and there was no closure. This inevitably led to a suppression of emotions. Since visiting the burial plot might have been difficult, there wasn’t a focal point for the expression of grief and feelings of loss.

It is important, both psychologically and socially, to recognise the grieving process and acknowledge the life of a child, even if that child only lived in the uterus or for a very short time after birth. The recognition of a new life, albeit short, is culturally important and the disregarding of this can be damaging in many ways. The Amulet Project set out to create layettes and amulets that could be buried with a stillborn baby as well as charms that could be given to bereaved parents in remembrance of the baby they lost. This is extremely important for a number of reasons. Emerging from a culture where the death of the unbaptised person would be hushed up and the associated stigma and fear, it is significant that an art project could act as a vehicle for open discussion of this issue.

The layettes and amulets are created using traditional crafts, such as crochet. The makers of these items are aware of their intended use and many involved in the project have commented that they put their love and energy into the creation, with the baby in mind. This is a way for the community to acknowledge the life of the baby, even though they don’t know the baby personally. The baby can be buried with an outfit made by hand especially for them. Parents are given something tangible, in the form of an amulet like a stuffed crochet heart or crocheted rosary beads, which they can take home from the

hospital. Hospitals are often viewed as sterile and clinical and one aim of the project is to bring the empathic human side of the hospital to the fore in cases where a stillbirth occurs. The sympathetic feelings can be conveyed through the presentation of knitted emblems as mementos of the baby's existence.

There is the wider cultural significance of the openness to discussion, remembrance and respectful recognition of the life of the little person who lived a short time with us. It also encourages an open expression of emotion, which might have been denied in Ireland's past. Parents could frame their amulet as a memorial keepsake and place it in a focal point of the house as a commemorative plaque to their dead child. This also offers a point of opening for dialogue in that relatives and friends can ask about it or make reference to it. A stillborn baby is no longer a hushed or forbidden conversational topic but recognised as an experience belonging to those parents and the memory of that child can be freely shared with others in the community. The development from a past in which this issue was veiled in secrecy, with no outlet for socially expressing grief to a society where community projects can give something unique and special directly in respect for the little life that has passed is important. Hopefully projects such as this one are reflective of a paradigm shift in social mores and evident of a changing attitude in Irish culture toward the death and remembrance of babies and infants.