Rachel Watts

Dr. Palmer

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<p style="text-align:center">Eerie: The Scottish Word England Got from America</p>

The word *eerie* is a natively English word, originating from Common Germanic and tracing all the way back to Old English. Strangely, however, it was not broadly used in British English until the 20th century, which, even more strangely, was nearly 50 years later than it was adopted into American English. So how did such a deeply English word come to be used in America before it was used broadly in England? And how did its meaning change so drastically along the way?

The word *eerie* in the original sense means 'fearful, timid,' and was first used in this sense circa 1373. The word likely originated from the Old English *argh,* a now-obsolete word (except in the Northern English dialects) meaning 'cowardly, pusillanimous, timid, fearful; (also) weak." This word originated in Common Germanic, and was documented as early as c885. It was used in Old English, specifically the West Saxon dialect, Middle English, and through the 15th and 16th centuries in Scottish and northern English. *Eerie* itself first occurs in the Northern dialect of Middle English, and is regarded by the Oxford English Dictionary as "properly Scotch." *Argh* likely underwent a process of weakening, as 'cowardly, pusillanimous' is somewhat stronger language than is 'fearful, timid,' but it was very mild. The change between the two words was morphological more than any other, with *eerie* pronounced /iːri/, and *argh,* spelled erȝ, in Middle English and may have been pronounced [ɛrç] or [ɛrx]. *Erȝ* likely then gained the -y suffix, meaning 'having the quality of.'

Beginning in 1792, *eerie* is also used to mean 'fear-inspiring; gloomy, strange, weird" by Robert Burns and is last recorded to be used in this sense in 1875. The main difference between these definitions is that the first usage, 'fearful, timid' is an emotion or experience felt by an individual. Examples of this usage given include A. Ramsay in 1728 saying "My dear, I'm faint and iry" and A.D. Whitney writing "Do you feel eerie?" in 1876. In contrast to this, the second usage is a quality possessed by an object or situation. This is demonstrated well by Robert Burns, saying: "Be thou a bogle by the eerie side of an auld thorn" in 1792[1].

Interestingly, the second definition is closer to the modern usage of *eerie,* stated to be 'expressing the notion of vague, superstitious uneasiness' ("eerie | eery adj."). This usage also has to do with the quality of an object, rather than a feeling of timidity experienced by the speaker. This suggests that the modern definition is more closely related to the second definition than it is to first. But why would this be true?

The answer to this lies in the region in which the word is used, and who is using it. *Eerie* is, as has already been stated, a "properly Scotch" word. It is primarily used by Scottish and northern British individuals, and this is reflected in the second definition when Scottish poet Robert Burns uses it in the sense of 'fear-inspiring; gloomy, strange, weird' ("eerie | eery, adj."). The majority of the people using the word *eerie* in recorded British English until the 20th century are Scottish. It was very much a dialectal word. In fact, excepting an instance in 1572, all instances of the word *eerie* (and other spellings such as eiry, iry, and irie) recorded in the corpus Early English Books Online have the word used in the sense of "every," as spelling in the period was largely unstandardized (Davies 2017-).

In the 19th century, one begins to see the word used in the same sense as detailed above by none other than Robert Burns, as collections of his poetry are published and spread. The word

also occurs in dictionaries of Scottish words and in collections of Scottish songs, but there are no recorded usages in general British English. In the 1830s, Scottish author Walter Scott also uses *eerie* in the same sense, as does Scottish writer George MacDonald. Interestingly, MacDonald provides some context for his use, qualifying the word with phrases like "the eerie feeling, as the Scotch would call it" in *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood* in 1866 and saying "she felt a little eerie, as Robert would have called it" in 1871's *Robert Falconer.* Both of these uses are in the qualitative sense, the same as the manner Burns used it and the same as our modern usage. This qualification indicates that the general reader may not have been familiar with this manner of usage—it was unique either to Scotland or to Burns, more likely the former than the latter.

The first recorded British instance of use *eerie* in this sense was Frances Hodgeson Burnett, a British-American author, in 1901, when she wrote the following: "as if she stood in the presence of things eerie." The word occurred again in 1922's *Miss Arnott's Marriage* by British author Richard Marsh. The word really took off in Britain, however, in a rather unexpected manner: the American Hardy Boys mystery series. Beginning with 1928's *Hunting for Hidden Gold,* numerous Hardy Boys books used the word *eerie* in the Scottish, qualitative sense. In the 1930s, the Nancy Drew books did the same. And from then through the 1950s, the most common instance of the word *eerie* recorded is in pulp fiction, particularly mysteries and supernatural fiction. It was not until the 1960s and 70s that it began to appear in more academic, culturally "high-brow" works such as *Theory and Technique of Playwriting* by J.H. Lawson in 1960 and *Structuralism in Literature* by Robert Scholes in 1974 (Davies 2011-)[2].

In contrast to this, the first usage of the word *eerie* in America was, according to the Corpus of Historical American English, in 1859 in an anthology entitled *My Third Book: A Collection of Tales*, wherein the word was used in the descriptive sense as Burns and his

contemporaries use it. The usage only grew from there, with Herman Melville using it in the novel *Clarel* in 1876 and Harriet Beecher Stowe saying "eeire, as the Scotch say" in 1869's *Oldtown Folks.* By 1903, American publications such as the Atlantic and Harpers were using the word regularly, as was Cosmopolitan by 1906. By the 1920s, *eerie* had well and truly entered the American vernacular: in 1926, The New York Times was recorded as using the word, and a year later the New Yorker was as well (Davies 2010-)[3]. It was at this point that American pop culture exports to England, such as the aforementioned Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew books, likely facilitated the broad re-introduction of the word into British English.

Why had *eerie* made its way into American English so much sooner than British English, even though it was a natively English word? The answer lies in the reading lives of the 19th century American writers. According to Alex Murdoch, Scotland served as a cultural model for the relatively young United States. Scotland had forged a national identity around independence, while still being technically English. America, having lost their "Englishness," sought a new connection to the language, and took Scotland as a model. Thus, the 19th century American writers read and were heavily influenced by Scottish authors like Robert Burns and especially Walter Scott (Murdoch). This influence likely resulted in an earlier adoption of the word *eerie* in the sense the Scottish used it, and thus the sense we currently use it.

Because of the wide spread of popular culture, when America exported its books to England, the word *eerie* was introduced not as a strange, Scottish word but as a common English word, and became more widely used in British English than it had previously been.

Although *eerie* originally meant 'timid,' the 18th and 19th century Scottish usage of 'gloomy, strange, weird' is closer to our modern usage ("eerie | eery adj."). By looking at the usage patterns over the last 200 years, it can be determined that this is likely because of the

Scottish influence on American literature in the 19th century, and the subsequent dissemination of American popular literature in the 1920s and 30s. This spread of the Scottish usage adopted in the 1800s influenced our modern usage, and left us with a word far different from the original Old English 'cowardly' that we might have used.

Endnotes

1. All quotations and definitions to this point taken from the Oxford English Dictionary unless otherwise noted

2. Data and quotations preceding until previous citation are from the Google Books Corpus of British English accessed through english-corpora.org

3. Data and quotations preceding until previous citation are from the Corpus of American Historical English accessed through english-corpora.org

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