Dancing at Lughnasa Study Guide

Dancing at Lughnasa by Brian Friel

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Introduction

Dancing at Lughnasa, by Brian Friel, one of Ireland's most important playwrights, was first performed at the Abby Theater, in Dublin, in 1990, and garnered the 1991 Olivier Award. In 1998, *Dancing at Lughnasa* was adapted to the screen in a film directed by Pat O'Connor and starring Meryl Streep.

Dancing at Lughnasa opens with a monologue by Michael, who introduces his nostalgic memories of the summer of 1936, when he was seven years old, and the five Mundy sisters, who raised him in rural Ireland, acquired their first wireless radio. Their older brother, Michael's Uncle Jack, had just returned from twenty-five years spent as a missionary in a leper colony in Uganda. Michael was born out of wedlock to Chris, the youngest of the Mundy sisters, and Gerry Evans, who deserted her and the child and only returns every couple of years to see her. The radio, which breaks down more than it works, unleashes unarticulated emotions in the five women, who spontaneously break into song and dance, with or without its aid. By the end of the year, as the older Michael explains in monologue, two of the sisters, Rose and Agnes, had run off, never to return, and Uncle Jack had died of a heart attack.

Friel's play employs the central motif of dancing and music to explore themes of Irish cultural identity, nostalgia, historical change, and pagan ritual.

Author Biography

Brian Friel was born near Omagh, County Tyrone, in Northern Ireland, on January 9,1929, to Patrick, a teacher, and Christina (MacLoone) Friel. When he was ten, the family moved to Londonderry, where his father became the principal at Long Tower School, and the young Friel attended St. Columb's College from 1941 to 1946. In 1946, he enrolled in a seminary at St. Patrick's college in Maynooth, from which he graduated with a B.A. in 1948. Friel subsequently abandoned his plans to enter the priesthood, and entered St. Joseph's Teacher Training College in Belfast, which he attended from 1949 to 1950.

From 1950 to 1960, Friel worked as a teacher in Londonderry, during which time many of his short stories were published in the New Yorker. Encouraged by this success, Friel quit teaching in 1960 to become a full-time writer of short stories and radio plays, as well as stage plays, which were produced at the Abbey Theater in Dublin. In 1954, he married Anne Morrison, with whom he had five children. To learn more about the theater, Friel spent six months in 1963 at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

This experience was followed by the production of his first internationally successful stage play. *Philadelphia, Here I Come*! garnered critical and popular acclaim, first at the Dublin Theater Festival, in 1964, and then in New York and London. The play concerns the thoughts and memories of a young Irishman shortly before he leaves Ireland to emigrate to America. *Philadelphia, Here I Come*! ran for over 300 performances at the Helen Hayes Theater, Broadway's longest run of an Irish play. Friel subsequently produced approximately one play per year, garnering such awards at the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best foreign play, 1989, *for Aristocrats*, and the Olivier Award, 1991, for *Dancing at Lughnasa.*

In 1980, Friel, along with Stephen Rea, founded the Field Day Theater Company in Northern Ireland to provide Irish playwrights with an outlet for works of social and political significance. Friel's most critically acclaimed play, *Translations*, was performed at the Field Day Theater that same year. Friel has lived in Donegal, Ireland since 1973.

Plot Summary

Act I

Act I is set "on a warm day in early August, 1936," in the "home of the Mundy family, two miles outside the village of Ballybeg, County Donegal, Ireland." The play opens with a monologue by Michael, who introduces the play as a nostalgic memory of the summer when he was seven years old. The family of five sisters who raised him have just acquired their first wireless radio. The sisters, most of them in their thirties, include Kate, Maggie, Rose, Agnes, and Chris (Michael's mother). In addition to the arrival of the radio, Michael's Uncle Jack, who has been a missionary in a leper colony in Uganda for the past twenty-five years, has returned home. Michael explains in this opening monologue that he was a child born out of wedlock, and had only seen his father, Gerry Evans, a few times.

The action of the play opens as the five sisters do chores while occasionally breaking into singing and dancing, inspired by their new radio. Michael, as a boy, discusses with his aunts the kites he is building. Agnes suggests that they all attend the upcoming local harvest dance, to which Maggie, Rose, and Chris respond enthusiastically. But Kate vetoes the idea, saying that they are all too old to attend the dance. The sisters discuss a local boy who is suffering from severe burns that he got while attending the Festival of Lughnasa, a pagan tradition. When the radio, which only works intermittently, is turned on again, the sisters all break into a frenzied dance together, which only ends after the radio breaks down again and the music is cut off. Looking out the window, they see Gerry Evans, Michael's father, who has not paid them a visit for over a year, approaching the house. Despite the disapproval of her sisters, Chris approaches Gerry in the yard, where they both talk and laugh. Gerry tells Chris that he has gotten a job selling gramophones, and that he will soon be joining the military to fight in Spain. Gerry spontaneously takes Chris into his arms and dances with her. Later, Uncle Jack explains rituals and ceremonies in which he participated in Uganda, without regard to his Christian profession. Act I ends with Jack re-enacting a ritual dance and drumbeat from Uganda.

Act II

Act II takes place "in early September, three weeks later." In the opening scene, Maggie is doing chores in the kitchen, and Michael sits writing what he says is a letter to Santa Claus when Uncle Jack enters, about to take one of his many walks of the day. Jack describes at length a ritual ceremony he participated in Uganda, which included the sacrifice of animals. Jack then leaves for his walk. Chris and Gerry enter, as Gerry explains that he has just signed up for military duty in Spain. Gerry climbs a tree in an attempt to fix the radio by working on the antenna. Agnes returns home, carrying pails of blackberries that she has picked. It is discovered that Rose, who had told Agnes she wasn't feeling well and was going home to rest, is not home. Rose then returns home,

and explains that she had arranged to go on a boat ride with Danny Bradley, the married man with whom she is in love.

The adult Michael then provides a long monologue that explains the fate of most of the characters. Agnes and Rose left the family and never returned; twenty-five years later, Michael discovered that they had gone to London, where they became destitute, and eventually died. Michael also learned, after Gerry's death, that his father had maintained a legitimate wife and three children in Wales, which Chris never knew about. Uncle Jack died suddenly of a heart attack within a year of his return to Ireland.

The scene returns to the kitchen in September, 1936, where the women are doing chores and talking amongst themselves. Gerry looks at the completed kites the child Michael has made; each have "a crude, cruel, grinning face, primitively drawn, garishly painted."

The adult Michael ends with a monologue in which he states that, with Agnes and Rose gone, and Uncle Jack dead, "much of the spirit and fun had gone out of their lives; and when my time came to go away, in the selfish way of young men I was happy to escape." Michael goes on to express the significance of music and dance to his nostalgic memories of that summer of 1936.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Michael Evans narrates the story of his childhood spent growing up in Ballybeg, a small town in County Donegal in northern Ireland. The tale begins in the summer of 1936, when he is eight years old. Michael is the illegitimate son of Chris Mundy and Gerry Evans, a ne'er-do-well from Wales. Chris and her son live with her four sisters Kate, Agnes, Maggie, and Rose, and her brother, Jack, a Catholic priest.

Kate is a schoolteacher and the wage earner for the family. Agnes knits gloves to bring in extra money. Rose, who is slightly retarded, helps around the house and seems to be especially attached to Agnes. Maggie tends to the chickens and prepares meals.

Father Jack had a significant career as chaplain to the British forces in East Africa and then stayed on in Uganda to work as a missionary. He has been returned home to Ballybeg, supposedly because he is sick with malaria. The real reason he has been brought home is that, instead of converting the natives to Christianity, he has been converted to their paganism. He is disgraced in the Church and the community, which previously had lionized him. He has also disgraced his family, and they are embarrassed and humiliated. Previously, his heroic image had redeemed the family somewhat from the stigma of Michael's illegitimate birth.

Lughnasa is a Celtic pagan harvest festival that has been adopted by and adapted to the Catholic Church. Along with other annual celebrations, it helps define the calendar of the village. Lughnasa is originally a tribute to the Celtic god, Lugh.

The sisters have acquired a wireless radio, which they have named Marconi. This radio plays only intermittently, because the battery expires quickly, and the wireless set has some undefined mechanical problems. When the radio works, wild Irish music streams from it, and the sisters dance with abandon.

Kate is not only the wage earner, but also the voice of reason and restraint in the family. There is much tension between the desire to abandon moral, emotional and physical restraints and adherence to social proprieties and Catholic standards of behavior. The agitation is clearly sexual in nature, as the sisters live celibate lives, but it is also religious.

Gerry Evans, Michael's father, turns up unexpectedly from time to time, bragging about a new job and making unfulfilled promises of a bicycle for Michael.

Kate spoils Michael with gifts she can ill-afford and demonstrates devotion, love, and affection for the child, although she disapproves of his father and the nature of his birth. Maggie, on the other hand, teases him and picks at him. We see little in the story regarding the feelings of other characters for Michael.

Michael, for his part, occupies himself by making kites. When his father visits and dances with his mother to the music from the radio, he hides behind a tree and watches.

Act 1 Analysis

In this play, Brian Friel, the playwright, uses soliloquy to provide the narration to make the action understandable. Soliloquies, passages in a play that are spoken by one character addressing the audience while the others are silent, are seldom used in modern drama. Friel uses this device in this play in his own creative way. The speeches by the grown-up Michael provide the information that finishes out the story. We would not have the details about what happened in Africa without Michael's explanations, nor would we know the eventual outcome of the family without them. They also underscore an important theme of the play, which is the effect that his unconventional upbringing has had on Michael. An important use of soliloquy is to show the mind of one character.

This story seems overfull with so many characters. Nevertheless, each has an important function in the story and adds color and dimension. The protagonist of the story is Kate, who holds the family together. She also provides unconditional love and generosity to Michael, which is possibly the source of his strength as an adult. She adores Michael and even says that she wishes he were hers. Kate is the the arbiter of behavior. The sisters would go off in all directions, except for her stabilizing influence and restraint. On the other hand, she is also the one who establishes the repressive atmosphere that makes her sisters feel they are living in a pressure cooker. This is, of course, necessary to the plot.

Chris has broken free of the stultifying restrictions of the Irish Catholic lifestyle of the 1930s to give the family Michael, who lights up their lives. She has not, however, saved herself from a depressing and limited existence characterized primarily by struggle. Michael's father is charming but irresponsible and provides no support for the child. He makes empty promises that lead to disappointment all around. He eventually fades away entirely, and only at the end do we find that he has had a family in Wales all along.

Agnes earns enough money to buy clothes for herself and Rose and occasionally provides a small amount of spending money. She functions to give insight into the personality of Gerry, who flirts with her and dances with her. She doesn't resist, even though she knows that Chris is watching, and we realize what a womanizer Michael's father is. Agnes and Rose are paired. They work together on the gloves, and they go berry-picking together. She expresses the despair of her life in her plea to Kate to allow them to go to the dance at the Festival of Lughnasa. "I'm only thirty-five. I want to dance," she says. We learn, later in the story, that her life ends tragically. She and Rose run away to lives of poverty, despair and eventual death on the streets of London.

Rose is slightly retarded and seems to be the special charge of Agnes. Rose also helps Maggie take care of the chickens and is upset, in the closing scene, when a fox kills her white rooster. Rose feels the stifling influence of the life they all live and breaks out by

having an affair with a married man, to the chagrin of her sisters. We find out later that Rose dies in London in an institution.

The character of Maggie is not quite as developed as that of the other sisters. We do see an interesting dimension in her relationship with Michael. Whereas Kate spoils him, Maggie teases him. She cares for the chickens and is in charge of tea every evening. When Agnes and Rose leave, she takes up their roles and responsibilities. She is a mixture of the emotionally charged Chris, Agnes, and Rose and the more stable Kate and her adherence to tradition. She is a transitional figure with regard to the plot's contrast between restraint and abandon.

Jack, the priest who has gone astray, plays a pivotal role in the plot. He represents both conflicts. He has started out as a symbol of Catholic righteousness and order and has ended up very strongly representing the hedonistic abandonment of paganism. The character of the community is revealed in its reaction to him. He has been a hero for most of his life, and the community has looked forward to welcoming him home triumphantly. When it is revealed that he has become a turncoat and no longer exemplifies the values of the Church, they not only reject him, but also his family. It is because of his scandalous life that Kate is denied her teaching position, which is so important to her and her family.

Gerry, Michael's father and Chris's paramour, is charming and irresponsible. He embodies the characteristics so often seen as typically Irish, never happy and always restless. Gerry follows no schedule but his own, cannot hold a job, makes promises he cannot keep, goes off to fight a war that he has no stake in, flirts with the sister of his child's mother, and all the while has a family of his own in Wales.

The story is set in a town called Ballybeg, which means "small town," located in County Donegal of northwest Ireland. The year is 1936, the year leading up to Ireland's declaration as a free state. Eamon de Valera, the revolutionary most responsible for the separation from Great Britain, was to become the head of government within a year. The village of Ballybeg has a dual identity, a pagan one and a Christian one. Kate, particularly, clings to Catholicism in her guidance of the family. Ironically, Father Jack, the Catholic priest, is the most pagan of all. He has become totally immersed in the pagan lifestyle, rituals, and practices of the culture of Ryanga, Uganda.

De Valera brought the industrial revolution to Ireland. He said in a speech, "Let them build a factory in every hamlet." The life of the country was changed forever, bringing it into the 20th Century. This is significant to the setting of this story, because the new glove factory turned the lives of Agnes and Rose upside down. Michael alludes to that when he says he has the feeling that everything is changing and nothing is as it seems.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

On one of his visits, Gerry is persuaded to try to fix Marconi, although he knows nothing about radios. He climbs a tree and works on the antenna, and the set seems to work better. Kate has not accepted that Father Jack has abandoned his faith and continues to implore him to say Mass again. He promises to do so, but he sees it as an opportunity to introduce his pagan practices to the village.

Rose turns up missing, and the sisters panic, planning to launch a search. However, she comes home before they begin and reveals that she has been with a married man. She believes he is in love with her. He took her out in his father's boat, they spent the day together, and Rose refuses to reveal any more details about their rendezvous.

The industrial revolution has come to this village in the form of a glove factory that will take away the income that Agnes and Rose bring with their knitting. Eventually, they run away to London, where they have trouble finding jobs. They begin to drink and to sleep in parks and doorways. Michael finds them 25 years later, but Agnes has already died of exposure, and Rose is near death in a hospital. She dies in her sleep two days after he finds her. Chris, on the other hand, takes a job in the glove factory and lives out an unfulfilled life in a job that she hates, linked to a man who is irresponsible and eventually disappears.

Gerry has enlisted in the Brigade and will go to Spain. He is wounded in the war and is no longer able to dance, although he continues to visit from time to time. Then the visits end altogether. In the mid-50s, Michael receives a letter from another Michael Evans, his half-brother. Their father Gerry died peacefully in Wales, nursed by his wife and his three grown children.

Father Jack becomes stronger but never returns to the Church. He reveals more and more about the pagan life he has lived in Uganda. He dies of a heart attack within a year of his returning home on the eve of La'Lughnasa. The sisters mourn him. Kate is inconsolable. She has been dismissed from her teaching job in the parish, because of Jack's departure from the faith, but eventually takes a job as a tutor.

Michael ends the play with a soliloquy in which he remembers his years with the family. Mostly, he remembers the music and the dancing. He remembers that the life went out of the house with Jack, Rose and Agnes gone. He left as soon as he was old enough to do so.

Act 2 Analysis

The conflicts in this story are many, but are all interconnected. The one that strikes the reader first is the contest between repression and freedom. Kate enforces the

repressive norms of the Irish Catholic Church. The tension fairly crackles when the sisters break out in dancing to the music from the radio. The music is Irish, but the dancing is pagan. They dance with wild abandon, and Kate is indignant, although in Act 1 there is a scene where even she dances with the others. These women seem to have been so repressed that they never married. At this stage of their lives, their sexuality is always just below the surface. They are fascinated by Gerry. Each of them evidences sexual frustration. Rose, who is slightly retarded and less inhibited, acts out their desires by having an affair with a married man.

Another important conflict is between paganism and Christianity of the Catholic variety. The village fairly pulses with its pagan influences. In fact, some of the pagan rituals are still practiced in the rural areas. The life of the people is organized around a pagan calendar that is only slightly Christianized. In this story, we see the fall event, Lughnasa. Father Jack, of course, embodies both sides of the conflict. In him, we see that paganism has won hands-down. Paganism represents the abandon that the sisters resist. Christianity represents the restraints that hold their lives together. When the sisters dance, paganism breaks through the Christian veneer. Marconi is the unreliable pagan deity for the sisters. It transforms them into dervishes, suggesting a pagan ritual. It is here that the cultural and sexual desolation of their lives is relieved, if only momentarily. In a strange way, it also allows them to express solidarity with each other.

An important theme that is highlighted by the character of Michael, both as child and adult, is what happens when an illegitimate Irish child is brought up in a household where the fibers that hold it together are fraying. The grownup who is now telling the story is stable and free of the polar influences of his childhood. Perhaps the love he received in that household has been his salvation. His final speech indicates that he understands the role the dancing played in the lives of the sisters. It was the only means they had of communicating their frustration over the desolation and limitations of their lives. He sees it as an expression of the need for paganism in a life plagued by routine.

Another theme revolves around change. Michael observes at one point that he was aware that things were changing within the family and things were not what they seemed. Ireland was changing. With independence from Great Britain finally achieved and the revolutionary, Eamon de Valera, at the head of the country, things were not going to be as they had been. In addition, the industrial revolution had been sweeping over Europe for some time and had at last reached this small village in the far reaches of Ireland. Life would never be the same for the family, nor would they ever be the same for Ballybeg or the country.

Characters

Gerry Evans

Gerry Evans, thirty-three, is the father of the illegitimate son Michael, whose mother is Chris. Gerry and Chris were never married, and Gerry had abandoned her with their child years earlier. Gerry appears unexpectedly every year or so, and Chris, despite herself, is charmed by him all over again each time. But Gerry is unreliable, and has a new idea for a career path with each visit. He does leave to fight in Spain, where he is injured in a motorbike accident that leaves him with a limp. He continues to visit Chris and Michael every year or so, but disappears around the time of World War II. After Gerry's death, Michael learns that his father had a wife and three children in Wales throughout all those years, unbeknownst to Chris.

Uncle Jack

See Jack Mundy

Agnes Mundy

Agnes, thirty-five, is the middle of the five sisters, and knits mittens to support them. After a local knitting factory makes their home knitting work obsolete, Agnes and her sister Rose eventually leave the family home, never to return. Twenty-five years later, Michael locates Rose and Agnes in London, where Agnes has died, and Rose soon dies in a hospice for the destitute.

Chris Mundy

Chris, twenty-six, is the youngest of the five sisters. Her son, Michael, was born out of wedlock, her love child with Gerry Evans. When Gerry returns after more than a year's absence, he charms Chris all over again, despite herself and her sister's disapproval. Gerry jokes with her, makes her laugh, and frequently breaks into a dance with her. Chris is repeatedly taken in by Gerry's unreliable promises, believing him when he says he will return soon, and that he has purchased a bicycle for Michael. Three weeks later, Gerry does return briefly, during which time he and Chris enjoy a rejuvenation of their romance before he leaves for military work in Spain. Chris never learns of Gerry's legitimate family in Wales.

Jack Mundy

Jack, fifty-three, also referred to by Michael as Uncle Jack, is the brother of the five women, and uncle of Michael. He spent twenty-five years as a missionary priest in a

leper colony in Uganda, and has recently returned to Ireland, sick with malaria. It turns out that Jack was asked to leave the priesthood for participating in local, non-Christian ceremonies and rituals in Uganda. In Ireland, he seems mentally confused, as well as physically ill. He cannot keep the names of his five sisters straight, and has trouble remembering English words, having spoken mostly Swahili during his years in Uganda. The character of Uncle Jack highlights Friel's theme of paganism, as he frequently refers to local spiritual practices in Uganda, and seems to have strayed far from his Christian faith. Kate helps Uncle Jack to reinvigorate his health with long walks several times a day. Michael explains in a monologue toward the end of the play that Jack died suddenly of a heart attack within a year of returning to Ireland.

Kate Mundy

Kate is the oldest of the five sisters. She is forty years old, and was once a schoolteacher. Kate is the most resistant to the changes taking place around her, and is especially critical of the "pagan" singing and dancing that the radio has brought into her household.

Maggie Mundy

Maggie, thirty-eight, is the second oldest of the five sisters, and works as the cook and housekeeper of their home. Michael describes his Aunt Maggie as "the joker of the family." She is the one who suggests naming the new wireless radio Lugh, after the "old Celtic god of the Harvest."

Michael Mundy

Michael, as a young man, functions as a narrator and describes the action of the play through direct monologue to the audience, in the form of a nostalgic reminiscence of a time of his childhood when he was only seven years old. Michael is the illegitimate child of Chris and Gerry, and only sees his father about once a year. The child Michael in the flashbacks is primarily intent on making and painting a series of kites; only toward the end of the play are his paintings displayed to the audience, when they reveal a series of faces expressing strong emotions.

Rose Mundy

Rose, thirty-two, is the second youngest of the sisters, and works knitting mittens to support the family. Rose is in love with Danny Bradley, a married man with three children, with whom she sneaks off for a boat ride one afternoon.

Themes

Memory

A central theme of Friel's play is memory. The action of the play, which takes place in the later summer of 1936, is framed as a depiction of Michael's memories of his childhood. In his closing monologue, the character of Michael as a young man explains the significance of these memories:

And so, when I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936, different kinds of memories offer themselves to me. But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often; and what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory. In that memory, too, the air is nostalgic with the music of the thirties.

Friel is interested in personal memory not as a means of reproducing factual incidents, but as a means of recapturing the atmosphere of the memory. Thus, for Friel, memory is "simultaneously actual and illusory," because it is true to the emotional content of the memory without necessarily being true to the actual events that took place. Music is central to Friel's play because of the extent to which he associates nostalgic memories with "the music of the thirties."

Change

Friel's play is concerned with the theme of change. The acquisition of the wireless radio in the Mundy household represents a turning point in the make-up of the family, as well as in rural Irish cultural history. The radio in 1936 is a newfangled technology that brings mass-produced popular culture into the home. The entry of this variety of music into the Mundy home unleashes repressed urges in the five single women who live there. The radio is also a harbinger of more significant historical and socioeconomic changes; namely, the Industrial Revolution. The opening of a knitting factory replaces the cottage industry by which Rose and Agnes had supported themselves by hand knitting at home. Kate, the oldest of the five sisters, expresses her anxiety at the realization that change is in the air:

You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best you can because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held together much longer. It's all about to collapse.

This anxiety over change is also raised by the introduction of pagan practices and ideas into the Mundy home. Because she is the most resistant to change, Kate is especially dubious of the singing of pagan songs, and the explanations of pagan rituals from Uganda, which Uncle Jack describes at length.

Paganism

Paganism and pagan ritual are central themes of Friel's play. The play is set during the festival of Lughnasa, a local pagan harvest ritual of which Kate is disdainful. Furthermore, Friel presents all dancing and singing, which permeate the action of the play, as a form of pagan ritual. Uncle Jack brings back from Uganda a wealth of experiences with non-Christian ceremonies and rituals, including sacrifice of animals and native dances. Kate makes the connection between paganism, or non-Christian belief, and the music brought into the household by the radio when she exclaims: "D'you know what that thing has done? Killed all Christian conversation in this country." In an Act II monologue, Michael explains that Jack's recollections of his experiences in Uganda continued to bring more "revelations" regarding pagan rituals and ceremonies. Michael explains that "each new revelation startled shocked stunned poor Aunt Kate." But Kate makes some peace with Jack's expressions of paganism when she "finally hit on the phrase that appeased her: 'his own distinctive spiritual search.'" Friel seems to be celebrating such a personal "distinctive spiritual search," as expressed through the pagan rituals of music, song, and dance by the various characters.

Style

Setting

Friel's play is set in "the home of the Mundy family, two miles outside the village of Ballybeg, County Donegal, Ireland, in 1936." While County Donegal is a real geographic location (where Friel himself resides), the village of Ballybeg is Friel's fictional creation, utilized as a setting in many of his plays. Act I takes place in early August, and Act II takes place three weeks later, in early September. The historical setting of 1936 is significant for several reasons. The family's acquisition of their first wireless radio provides the novelty of modern technology and popular culture during that time. The historical setting is also relevant to the intrusion of the Industrial Revolution on rural Ireland. At the beginning of the play, Agnes and Rose support the family by knitting at home. A knitting factory, however, is opened nearby, and the supplier for whom they work loses all of her business to the larger company. The cottage industry by which Agnes and Rose had earned their living becomes obsolete before their very eyes. As Michael explains in monologue, "the Industrial Revolution had finally caught up with Ballybeg." This event is significant to Friel's theme of nostalgia for the rural Ireland of his childhood, as well as the theme of historical changes in Irish culture.

Monologue

The character of Michael as a young man appears in the play addressing the audience directly in a series of monologues that introduce, explain, and conclude the play. The entire play is thus presented as a depiction of Michael's nostalgic memories of this particular period in his childhood. Through this monologue, Michael explains to the audience the circumstances and history of his family, the eventual fate of each of the characters, and the significance of these memories.

Music

Music is a central theme of this play, in which the new wireless radio in the Mundy household represents an agent of change. The dialogue is thus interspersed with music coming from the radio, as well as the musical outbursts of the various characters. Specific song lyrics and types of music are therefore significant to the meaning of the play. Friel provides very specific descriptions of the radio music in the stage directions. For example, at one point the radio is turned on while the Mundy sisters do chores in the kitchen: "The music, at first scarcely audible, is Irish dance music 'The Mason's Apron,' played by a ceili band. Very fast; very heavy beat; a raucous sound. At first we are aware of the beat only. Then, as the volume increases slowly, we hear the melody." The Mundy sisters then slowly break into a frenzied dance that only partially matches the music, and is expressive of their repressed desires. At other points, characters break into snatches of popular songs, as well as folk songs, which Kate refers to

disdainfully as "pagan songs." Music is associated with "pagan," or non-Christian, ritual again when Uncle Jack breaks into a rhythmic dance he learned in Uganda, beating two sticks together for musical accompaniment; the stage directions state that: "Jack picks up two pieces of wood ... and strikes them together. The sound they make pleases him. He does it again and again and again. Now he begins to beat out a structured beat whose rhythm gives him pleasure."

Historical Context

Abbey Theatre

Friel's early plays were performed at the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The Abbey Theatre, established in 1904, has been an important influence in the history of twentieth-century Irish drama. In 1899, the poet William Butler Yeats and other Irish writers established the Irish Literary Theatre to promote Irish dramatic works. In 1902, this organization became subsumed under the Irish National Dramatic Society, which in 1903 was renamed the Irish National Theatre Society. The Abbey Theatre was located in an old theater on Abbey Street in Dublin, thanks to the financial contribution of a wealthy Englishwoman. In 1904, it opened with a series of plays by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge. Synge's controversial satiric work, *Playboy of the Western World*, first staged at the Abbey in 1907, lead to rioting and violent protest by outraged audiences in Dublin, New York, and Philadelphia. After a period of difficulty, the Abbey Theatre became state subsidized in 1924. In the 1950s, the Abbey Theatre was destroyed in a fire, and was relocated to the Queen's Theatre, until 1966, when a new theater was built at the original location on Abbey Street.

Uganda and Swahili

In Friel's play, Michael's Uncle Jack has recently returned from twenty-five years spent as a missionary in a leper colony in Uganda. During that time, Uncle Jack spoke Swahili with the local population, and has forgotten many English words. Uganda is a country in Africa which, during the mid-nineteenth century, was subjected to "exploration," first by Arab traders in search of ivory and slaves in the 1840s, and then by Egyptian and Sudanese slave traders in the 1860s. In 1856, Mutesal became the ruler of Buganda, a state within the region now called Uganda. The famous British explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, arrived in the region in 1875, and persuaded Mutesa to allow Christian missionaries to enter Buganda. In 1877, the first missionaries, from the Church Missionary Society, arrived, followed in 1879 by missionaries from the Roman Catholic White Fathers Mission. Missionaries became influential in the region and were responsible for the establishment of schools in the early 1900s. In 1890, the British declared the region to be under their rule; that same year, a treaty between the Imperial British East Africa Company and Buganda's new leader, Mwanga, secured Buganda as a region under British influence. In 1894, the British government declared Buganda a "protectorate." After several revolts in 1897, the Buganda Agreement of 1890 determined that local chiefs would maintain power while agreeing to operate under British authority. During the interwar years of the 1920s and 30s, the power of local chiefs receded under British intervention. After periods of civil unrest during the post-World War II era, however, Uganda was granted national independence in 1962. The Swahili language spoken by Uncle Jack in Uganda is the mother tongue or "lingua franca" of many countries along the Eastern Coast of Africa. Swahili originated from the arrival of Arab traders in Africa, and was originally written in Arabic (although it is now

written in the Roman alphabet). It was first adopted by Bantu-speaking tribes, and is similar in grammar to Bantu languages. The use of Swahili eventually spread further into Africa via the Arab ivory and slave trade. European traders and colonists in Africa also began to use Swahili in their contact with African peoples. Today, Swahili is spoken in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda.

Critical Overview

Brian Friel is one of the leading Irish playwrights of the twentieth century. Friel's works have been praised for their skillful focus on Irish cultural identity. Referring to Friel as a "modern master," and "Ireland's most important contemporary writer," Richard Pine praises the playwright who "has maintained a tradition of Irish literature by addressing local themes which have universal significance." Pine goes on to describe the thematic concerns of Friel's dramatic settings in Ireland:

Friel's Ireland, if it exists at all, is a complexity of loyalties, horrors, hopes, confused time sequences, hostilities of the sacred and the profane, a constant probing of its role as victim, a continual belief in the restoration of a way of living and thinking which was beneficent and provident but which has somehow turned tragic and punitive.

Critics particularly note Friel's use of language as a means of expressing issues of Irish nationalism. F. C. McGrath notes that, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, "The language ... is intensely lyrical." Richard Pine asserts that "Friel has provided us with a new language, an Irish-English more powerful than English-English, to express ... 'concepts of Irishness.'" Alan J. Peacock states that several of Friel's plays "make exhilaratingly explicit a preoccupation with the dubieties, the duplicities, limitations and simultaneous analytical, expressive and transcendent qualities of language which is ubiquitous in Friel's drama." Peacock goes on to list some of the thematic concerns addressed by Friel's use of language:

The power of naming and its political or metaphysical consequences; the problematics of self-definition through language and the tyranny of imposed definitions at a personal, social or national level; emotional inarticulacy at the individual level and cultural aphasia at the national; authentic and inauthentic narrative these are the kind of themes which insistently feature in Friel's drama.

His 1990 play, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, is one of Friel's most popular and most critically acclaimed. It has garnered many awards, including the Evening Standard, Writers Guild, Plays and Players, and Olivier, as best play of the 1990-91 season, as well as the Tony and the New York Drama Critics Circle award for best new play of the 1991-92 season. Critics especially note the scene in Act I during which the Mundy sisters spontaneously break into expressionistic dance, inspired by the music from their new radio. Claire Gleitman asserts that "This scene, so quickly famous, is strikingly effective in its invocation of the repressed impulses that lie beneath the sisters' calm exteriors." Gleitman goes on to explain that "For a brief moment, the play modulates from Friel's characteristic naturalism into an expressionistic interlude that reveals, with breathtaking compression, the subterranean lives of the characters." Christopher Murray concurs that "The most extraordinary scene in the play, as anyone who has seen *Lughnasa* on stage can testify, is the spontaneous dance which erupts in Act One, as the five sisters join in a wild response to traditional Irish music on the radio." Fintan O'Toole agrees that "The play's most vibrant moments the wild dance in the first act are moments of surrender by the sisters to the force of music, the urge of the dance, a force at once joyous and

tyrannical, a dance of grief and liberation." Peacock refers to this scene in the Abbey Theater production as "a piece of pure theatre: Ireland's finest theatrical writer had brought off the core scene in his drama entirely in non-verbal terms."

Friel's first critical and popular success was the production of *Philadelphia, Here I Come*! (1964), which garnered the author immediate international acclaim. It became the longest running Irish play on Broadway, playing over 300 performances at the Helen Hayes Theater. Friel followed this success with approximately one play per year for the next ten years. In *The Loves ofCass McGuire* (1966), an eighty-nine-year old Irish woman returns to Ireland after living in America for thirty-four years. This production was followed by *Lovers* (1967), *Crystal and Fox* (1968), *and The Mundy Scheme* (1970), a political satire that met with resounding failure; according to June Schlueter, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "The play's inadequacies were confirmed by its unhappy reception on Broadway ... where it closed after only four performances." *The Gentle Island* (1971) centers on the Sweeney family, the only remaining inhabitants on the island of Inishkeen, off the coast of Ireland. *The Freedom of the City* (1973) is set in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, when, in 1970, British troops killed three civil rights demonstrators in Northern Ireland. Subsequent plays by Friel include *Volunteers* (1975), *Living Quarters* (1977), *Faith Healer* (1979), *and Aristocrats* (1979).

In 1980, Friel and actor Stephen Rea founded the Field Day theater, devoted to Irish plays of social and political significance. The first production of the Field Day was Friel's masterpiece, *Translations* (1980). *Translations* takes place in Donegal, Ireland, in 1833, and focuses on the closing of Irish schools by English authorities, who imposed English language schools on the local Irish populations, in spite of their protests. Schlueter comments that "The contemporary struggle in Northern Ireland resonates in Friel's sensitive treatment of the collision between the English and the Irish." In *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), Friel focuses on a group of characters as they await a ferry that never comes. *Molly Sweeney* (1994), is about a forty-one-year-old blind Irish woman who regains her sight after an operation. Friel's most recent play to date is *Give Me Your Answer*, Do! (1997).

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the motif of song and dance in Friel's play.

Song and dance are major motifs of Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa.* They symbolize the play's central thematic concerns with paganism and societal change. The instrument of change in the Mundy household is the acquisition of the family's first wireless radio. The presence of the radio, which functions only sporadically, inspires in the Mundy sisters a spirit of freedom and expressiveness heretofore repressed within their traditional Irish Catholic household. The setting of the play during Ireland's pagan tradition of the Festival of Lughnasa provides a backdrop of pagan dance, music, and ritual, which is (inadvertently) inspired in the Mundy sisters by the radio. Throughout the play, various characters spontaneously break into song and dance, more often than not, at times when the radio itself is broken. Various references to the technology that made possible the spread of popular musical culture to a mass audience, such as the radio and gramophone, are included. References to American movie stars, such as Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Shirley Temple, and Mae West, known for their song and dance routines, as well as references to specific song lyrics from Broadway and Hollywood musicals, elaborate the play's central thematic concerns.

Act I of Friel's play takes place during a Festival of Lughnasa, in rural Ireland. Elmer Andrews explains that Lughnasa "was one of the four major pre-Christian, Celtic festivals.... Basically a harvest festival, Lughnasa was celebrated over fifteen days in honour of the god Lugh, one of the most important Irish gods." Andrews goes on to conclude that "Thus, Lughnasa is traditionally associated with sexual awakening, rebirth, continuances. ..." Andrews points out that "These motifs of sexual awakening and magical transformation are central to Friel's play." Furthermore, the association of the ritual of Lughnasa with pagan song and dance is significant within the play because the sexual awakening of the Mundy sisters is inspired by the similarly pagan music emanating from their newly acquired radio.

In Friel's play, changes in both family dynamics and traditional Irish culture are represented by the arrival of the Mundy family's first wireless radio in 1936. The Mundy sisters dub their new radio, "Marconi because that was the name emblazoned on the set." A brief history of radio broadcasting helps to put this key element of the play into a broader context. The first radio broadcast was transmitted in the United States in 1906, and included music, poetry, and a talk. The first radio station, however, was not founded until 1921, but soon led to the opening of many other radio stations across the United States. In the United Kingdom, the first radio broadcast, which was transmitted from Ireland, was not made until 1919. Throughout the early 1920s, the opening of radio stations, and the acquisition of radios in private homes, spread rapidly throughout the world. In the United Kingdom, the Post Office banned non-government-sponsored radio broadcasts until 1921, when it granted the Marconi Company the right to broadcast for

fifteen minutes per week. In 1922, the Marconi House established a radio station in London. Radio broadcasts were regulated in the United Kingdom, beginning in 1922, by the British Broadcasting Company, until 1927, when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a public regulatory organization under the supervision of Parliament, took its place. The presence of the Marconi brand radio in Friel's play links technological advances to the spread of popular culture (in the form of music), which inspires the performance of pagan rituals of song and dance in a spiritually repressed family and society.

Michael's father, Gerry Evans, who stops by the Mundy household every few years to visit Chris, Michael's mother, embodies the free-spirited, pagan rituals of song and dance. Gerry tells Chris that he has gotten a job selling gramophones. "This country is gramophone crazy," Gerry tells Chris. "People thought gramophones would be a thing of the past when radios came in. But they were wrong." The gramophone was an early phonograph player, which eventually developed into the modern hi-fi record player, and has, since the 1980s, given way to the compact disk player. The first phonograph recording can be dated to Thomas Edison's experimental success at recording onto a wax cylinder in 1877. In 1887, Emile Berliner patented the gramophone, which utilized a disk for phonographic recording. In 1898, a branch of the Gramophone Company was established in London, and eventually branches spread throughout Europe. In the 1890s, phonograph recordings were a novelty of public entertainment, but by the 1910s, phonographs were popular in private homes. The popularity of the newly developed radio in the mid-1920s, however, resulted in a significant decline in popularity of phonographs. But in the early 1930s, several mergers reinvigorated the industry. In Friel's play, Gerry's mention of, and association with, the gramophone links his character to the pagan rituals of popular song and dance inspired by newly developed technologies of mass culture, such as the gramophone.

Thus, in Friel's play, while technological advances in the form of the newly erected knitting factory result in the death of tradition (in the form of the cottage industry of knitting), technological advances in the form of radio broadcast and mass-produced music reproduction inspire a mass audience to get back in touch with traditional pagan expressions of spirituality through song and dance.

Friel's play makes reference to the famous dance duo of classic Hollywood musicals, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. In Act I, after the five Mundy sisters break out into a frenzied song and dance, inspired by music from the radio, Maggie lights a cigarette and says, "I'll tell you something, girls: this Ginger Rogers has seen better days." In Act II, toward the end of the play, Michael explains in monologue that, "The last time I saw [my father] was dancing down the lane in imitation of Fred Astaire, swinging his walking stick, Uncle Jack's tricorn at a jaunty angle over his left eye." Fred Astaire (1899-1987) and Ginger Rogers (1911-1995) became an enormously popular dance duo in Hollywood's musical comedies throughout the 1930s, beginning with their first film together, Down to Rio, in 1933. Subsequent Astaire-Rogers films included *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935), *and Swing Time* (1936). During the time in which Friel's play is set 1936 Astaire and Rogers would have been well known for their song-

and-dance routines both in these films and through the mass marketing of recorded music and radio broadcasts.

In Act II, Gerry first dances with Agnes, then asks Chris to dance with him. When she refuses, Maggie enthusiastically blurts out, "I'll dance with you, Gerry!" In preparation to dance, Maggie kicks off her shoes, saying, "Stand back there, girls. Shirley Temple needs a lot of space." Shirley Temple (born 1928) was an enormously popular child movie star during the 1930s, known for her tap-dancing routines that were accompanied by song and music. Perhaps her most famous routine is "On the Good Ship Lollipop," and some of her better known films include *The Little Colonel* (1935), *and Wee Willie Winkie* (1937). It is significant that Maggie associates herself with both Ginger Rogers and Shirley Temple, as her character seems to embrace, perhaps more so than some of the other sisters, the pagan spirit of song-and-dance.

References to Hollywood movie stars known for their song-and-dance routines are just one link between the medium of mass-produced popular culture to the pagan spirit of song-and-dance that preoccupies the Mundy household in Friel's play.

At various points in the play, characters sing lyrics from "Anything Goes," the title song of the Broadway musical, *Anything Goes* (1934), which features songs by the famous musical composer Cole Porter (1892-1964). Porter composed an incredible string of hit musicals for both Broadway, including *Gay Divorcee* (1932), *Anything Goes, Red, Hot and Blue* (1934), and *Silk Stockings* (1955). Many of these were adapted to the screen and became hit Hollywood musicals as well, including *Anything Goes* in 1936, which starred Astaire and Rogers. Many popular hit songs emerged from Porter's successes on the stage and screen, including "I Get a Kick out of You," "I've Got You Under My Skin," and "Just One of Those Things," as well as "Anything Goes." In addition to his association with the popular entertainment forms of Broadway and Hollywood musicals, Cole Porter was known for his nontraditional relationships, such as his open homosexuality in conjunction with his open marriage to a wealthy divorcee. (A musical tribute to Cole Porter was compiled in the 1990 album release, *Red, Hot, and Blue*, which features Cole Porter songs as performed by various pop musicians.) Reference to a song by Porter in Friel's play indirectly invokes the free-spirited lifestyle that Porter led, as well as the free-spirited sexual implications of his famously risque song lyrics. It is this free-spirited quality that Friel associates with the pagan ritual of song and dance.

The specific lyrics to the song "Anything Goes," sung by characters in Friel's play, further develop the themes of popular culture both supplanting tradition and inspiring paganistic spirituality. While dancing with Agnes, Gerry sings several stanzas from "Anything Goes":

In olden times a glimpse of stocking Was looked on as something shocking... anything goes. Good authors, too, who once knew better words Now only use four-letter words Writing prose, Anything goes. If driving fast cars you like, If low bars you like, If old hymns you like, If Mae West you like, Or me undressed you like, Why, nobody will oppose. When ev'ry night, the set that's smart is in 'trading in nudist parties in Studios, Anything goes.

These lyrics pick up on several key motifs and central themes of Friel's play. The basic gist of the song is that social morals in the modern world have loosened to such a great extent that "anything goes" particularly, open expressions of sexuality are referred to in the song as characteristic of changing times: "a glimpse of stocking," exposing a woman's leg; the use of "four-letter words" even in print; even nudity, as indicated by the phrases "me undressed" and "nudist parties." These changing times are also associated with the development of modern technology, as referred to in the song through the mention of "fast cars." In Friel's play, as well, the release of sexual repression and other pagan impulses as a result of changing times is associated with the development of modern technology in the form of the radio. This is significant in that the five Mundy sisters, at the beginning of the play, are characterized by a deep sexual repression that is only unleashed with the arrival of popular music via the radio.

The reference to Mae West (1893-1980) in Cole Porter's lyrics furthers develops the focus of the song on outward sexual expression as an acceptable facet of modern times. Mae West is best known for her outward display of female sexuality on both the Broadway stage during the 1920s, and in Hollywood movies during the 1930s. On Broadway, West was given greater artistic freedom, and became enormously popular for the character Diamond Lil, whom she created through a musical that she both wrote and starred in. The degree of controversy aroused by West is indicated by her arrest in 1926 for her role as a prostitute in her play *Sex.* After her film debut in 1932, West became equally popular and controversial for her Hollywood movies, such as She *Done Him Wrong* (1933), *I'm No Angel* (1933), *and Belle of the Nineties* (1934), in which her characters were often based on Diamond Lil. West became a target of Catholic organizations pushing for greater censorship in Hollywood movies, a battle that they effectively won with the institution and enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1934. West was especially known, on both stage and screen, for her sexual innuendoes, as expressed in her musical numbers, dialogue, and bodily gestures. The significance of a reference to West in Friel's play is to invoke the image of a woman famous for her outward expression of female sexuality as a means of contrast to the sexually repressed Mundy sisters. West's risque expression of sexuality through her song-and-dance numbers once again suggests that the Mundy sisters experience a form of sexual awakening through song and dance.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Leah Ryan is a writer and a teacher of dramatic writing with an MFA in playwriting. In the following essay, Ryan examines the effect of the loss of meaningful ritual in the lives of the characters in Dancing at Lughnasa.

Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa, written in 1990, surrounds the lives of five grown sisters in rural Ireland in 1936. Though the eldest sister, Kate, struggles to maintain a hard-working, god-fearing Catholic household, Ireland's pagan origins beckon constantly, and the tension between the two ideologies threatens the family's already tenuous harmony. The characters have many unrequited longings (such as romantic love and material possessions) but the lack of religious or spiritual ritual is conspicuous.

Brian Friel was born the son of a Catholic teacher in County Tyrone, Ireland in 1929. He is known not only as a playwright but also as a theatre director and a short story writer. He now lives in County Donegal, which is also the setting for *Dancing at Lughnasa.*

The five Mundy sisters keep chickens and knit gloves to support themselves. Kate, the oldest sister, earns the only steady wage in the household as a schoolteacher. Economic hardship and isolation are taken for granted. The only males present are Michael, age seven, the son of Chris (the youngest sister), and Father Jack, the Mundy sisters' only brother, a priest who has just returned from a twenty-five year mission in Africa.

Lughnasa is not a place, as the title might suggest, but a pagan festival of the harvest, complete with roaring bonfires, ritual chants, and animal sacrifice. The fires of Lughnasa seem to burn off in the distance throughout the play; we're always aware of their presence. The Mundy household, though, is not a place where such revelry is enjoyed. Not only is it limping along financially, but sibling relationships are strained to a breaking point. Kate, as the eldest and the wage-earner, feels obliged to be the arbiter of everyone else's moral conduct. This positioning of the sisters is clear from the first scene, when Chris muses that she might begin wearing lipstick, and Agnes retorts, "As long as Kate's not around. Do you want to make a pagan of yourself ?" All things forbidden are associated with paganism.

Dancing at Lughnasa is a memory play. Our window into this world is provided by Michael. He appears to us as an adult and takes us through the story like a narrator, but also plays the role of the seven-year-old Michael, making us ever aware that we are looking backward into childhood through the eyes of an adult.

The play opens with a monologue by Michael, in which he prepares us for the world we are about to enter. He explains that this is the summer his Uncle Jack, whom he had never before met, came home from Africa. He tells us that this is also the summer the family got their first wireless radio set. The set is less than reliable, but its effect on the household is dramatic. His mother and aunts have launched a spontaneous dance in the kitchen, something Michael has never seen before. Michael explains that the radio

has been named like a family pet; first Lugh, after the Celtic God of the harvest, but that name was nixed by the pious Kate and they finally just called it Marconi (the name stamped on the front of the set). Though he's only seven, he's somehow aware that the life he has come to know is on the verge of change: "I know I had a sense of unease, some awareness of a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was, of things changing too quickly before my eyes, of becoming what they ought not to be."

Almost as an afterthought, Michael explains that this was the summer his father Gerry came home for a brief visit. This event seems no more or no less important than the arrival of the wireless in his memory.

While Michael delivers his speech, he flies a kite, and the other characters stand behind him in a formal tableau. A tableau can freeze the world of the play and its characters like a painting. The use of tableau at the opening of the play also underscores the concept of the memory play. The characters are frozen in the midst of an activity that well represents them, much as the mind can capture a long-ago memory in a kind of single-frame snapshot. In this case, Father Jack (Michael's Uncle) and Gerry (Michael's father) are dressed in ceremonial uniforms. We learn that Father Jack was a chaplain in the military, and that Gerry is on his way to join the war in Spain. In this memory tableau, their uniforms might suggest the occasional (and mythic) role of men in Michael's life.

The Marconi, again, is unreliable, flickering on and off without warning. So, it seems, is Father Jack's conscious grasp on reality. Twenty-five years in Africa (first as a military chaplain, then as a missionary priest in a leper colony) have left him physically weak and mentally unhinged. His return has had an uneasy affect on everyone. Michael, who has heard Father Jack described in resplendent terms, is disappointed and confused by the first sight of his wasted, disoriented uncle. Jack seems to forget where he is rather easily, which unnerves his tightly wrapped sister Kate. He refers to Michael (whose parents are not married) as a "love-child" and says that in Africa it's good to have "love-children "; he goes so far as to encourage the other sisters to have one too. Jack often slips and refers to his sisters by the name of his African houseboy. But most unsettling is the fact that he seems to have come to regard the African rituals he witnessed (and participated in) for several decades as perfectly harmless and commonplace, giving no offense to his Catholic sensibilities. Father Jack's level of comfort with paganism is ultimately a catalyst to the household's disintegration.

The sisters have a kind of marriage (to each other), and have worn comfortable (if unsatisfying) grooves into their daily lives. Agnes and Rose earn a little money by knitting gloves, until eventually they're put out of business by a nearby factory. Maggie's job seems to be to keep the peace and make everyone laugh. Kate's role resembles that of an iron-fisted patriarch. She earns the wages and makes the rules. Agnes, along with her knitting, takes care of the house and does the cooking. Though all the women seem to help, it's clear that Agnes is relied upon to make sure it all gets done, and that Rose is her right hand. It's clear, also, that she feels taken for granted by Kate. Agnes finally says, "What you have here, Kate, are two unpaid servants." Agnes and Kate bicker like an unhappily married couple whose union is one of necessity. The forces pulling them apart are stronger than those holding them together.

Chris is the youngest of the sisters, and is also Michael's mother. When Michael's father arrives unexpectedly to see Chris, all the other sisters are as watchful and protective as young parents on their teenage daughter's first date. Kate is sure that Gerry is going to break Chris' heart again, and furious that he does not contribute financially to his son's upbringing. While some of the other sisters have affection for him, all are wary of the effect Gerry will have on their lives. For his part, Gerry is casual about his comings and goings, and is completely out of touch with his son, to the point where he invents a reality for Michael. He asks Chris how Michael is enjoying school, and when Chris tells him that Michael doesn't have much to say about it, Gerry quickly replies, "He loves it. He adores it. They all love school nowadays." It's clear that though Gerry feels a guilty twinge here and there, he feels no real sense of obligation, and has no moral dilemma telling Chris that he'll be gone again for an indeterminate period. Gerry and his son have no shared memories, no family traditions, no father-son rituals.

The women have created a home, something solid and constant. It's a place for Father Jack to come home to, and a place for Michael to grow up. Gerry seems quite comfortable abandoning the care of his son not just to Chris, but to the household created by Chris and her sisters. But of course this home is not as stable as it seems.

Rose, who is thought of as "simple," is constantly alluding to her fascination with a certain man in town named Danny Bradley, a man of whom all the sisters disapprove. Danny is a married father of three, and Rose's assertion that his wife has left and gone to England does little to reassure her sisters. Though she's not the youngest, Rose is the innocent of the family, and it seems that any man who preyed upon her would arouse the family's suspicions.

Meanwhile, the lack of male companionship has created an almost palpable sense of longing in the house. Long-ago suitors and missed chances at love hang in the air like ghosts. At one point, the women discuss attending the annual harvest dance, which none of them have gone to in years, but which was once the site of much youthful revelry. Briefly, the women enjoy a discussion of what they will wear and how much they love to dance. Kate, though momentarily swayed by the idea, forbids them all from attending, complaining that household expenses demand any extra money that would be spent on frivolities such as dances and fixing the wireless. It's dancing, though, that transcends their differences. In dancing, they find a sense of release and of belonging, which resembles religious ecstasy.

Kate denies herself everything she denies her sisters. The one man in town who seems to interest her, Austin Morgan, the shopkeeper, marries someone else. Kate is held together by work and a sense of order and obligation. All this begins to unravel when she loses her job (the implication being that Jack's African rantings do not befit a Catholic schoolteacher's household) and finally when Agnes and Rose leave home.

Throughout the play, the sisters discuss the Lughnasa festival that they know only from rumor. A local boy has been burned in the bonfire. How did it happen? Are animals actually sacrificed? Kate forbids discussion of the ceremonies but curiosity still hovers. Though the women appear to be practicing Catholics, there is a conspicuous lack of

religious ritual in their lives. Religion functions more as a set of rules and admonishments than as a source of strength and spiritual renewal. Perhaps it's not the faith they yearn for, but the ceremony.

Father Jack tells of animal sacrifices in Africa. He struggles to describe the rituals and finds himself at a loss for words. He has to grope for the word "ceremony." He suggests that in the realm of ritual, spoken language is unnecessary. Like the Celtic-inspired dance that the Mundy sisters seem ready to burst into at any moment, ritual transcends language and intellect. "Coming back in the boat there were days when I couldn't remember even the simplest words," he says. "Not that anybody seemed to notice."

In the final scene, Father Jack emerges in the uniform he wore in the opening tableau, but now it is worn and soiled. He hands off his hat to Gerry. Michael's kites have primitive, mask-like faces on them, suggesting that something pagan has taken hold for Michael to carry into the next generation. In his final speech, Michael talks about the disintegration of the household, and of his own departure: "In the selfish way of young men, I was happy to escape."

Like all the men before him, he can come and go without a sense of obligation. But Michael is self-aware and can name his own selfishness. He's also able to name the importance of ceremony and ritual, the dancing that his mother and aunts have denied themselves. The play ends with dance music reverberating over a dark stage. The music has the final word.

Source: Leah Ryan, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Elmer Andrews presents a detailed analysis of the characters and the importance of their "individual experiences" in the play.

Friel's play is set in 1936, in the months when De Valera was drawing up his Catholic Constitution for a Catholic people. 'Will you vote for De Valera, will you vote?' sings Maggie to Rose's song about Abyssinia. These women are the victims of an oppressively Catholic ethos, shortly to be enshrined in a Constitution which recognised 'the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society' and 'the special position of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of its citizens'. Responding to a demand in the country at the time for traditional Catholic social teaching in matters of marriage and family law, the Free State outlawed divorce, contraception and abortion. De Valera's programme, writes Robert Kee, was characterised by a 'homely narrowness' and 'pious dogmatism':

Conservative in social and economic outlook, paying limited attention to problems such as housing, slum clearance and social welfare in general, safely some would say smugly steeped in the orthodox moral and social teachings of the Catholic Church of that day, it offered little in the way of inspiration to the young. Emigration, so long held by nationalists to have been one of the evils of English rule and to have been caused by the lack of freedom, continued. A strict literary censorship banned at different times almost all the best modern writers, including Irish ones.

Terence Brown refers to 'an almost Stalinist antagonism to modernism, to surrealism, free verse, symbolism and the modern cinema', which combined with 'prudery (the 1930s saw opposition to paintings of nudes being exhibited in the National Gallery in Dublin) and a deep reverence for the Irish past'. Summarising the attitude of Irish writers of the 1930s and 1940s, Brown continues:

Instead of de Valera's Gaelic Eden, the writers revealed a mediocre, dishevelled, often neurotic and depressed petit-bourgeois society that atrophied for want of a liberating idea. O'Faolain's image for it, as it was James Joyce's before him, is the entire landscape of Ireland shrouded in snow: 'under that white shroud, covering the whole of Ireland, life was lying broken and hardly breathing.'

The repressive Catholic ethos may have helped to consolidate a sense of identity, but it certainly left little room either for modernism and cosmopolitan standards or for the instinctual needs of ordinary people or for the least remnants of 'pagan' tradition. . . .

Kate objects to levity, playfulness and novelty for they are threats to her fragile order. The hair cracks, we recognise early on, are caused not just by external forces over which the sisters have no control, but by equally unruly forces within the family itself, within consciousness (even Kate's). The greater the effort of repression, it would seem, the stronger the insurrectionary pressures. The great merit of the play is the

unmistakable tension which we feel between the very human desire for order and stability and the equally strong desire for excitement and new experience. This tension has various forms. On one level, it is a struggle between Christianity and paganism, on another, it is the challenge offered to civilised value by an irruption of repressed libidinal energy, at yet another, it is the harassment of the symbolic order of 'ordinary' language and fixed structure by a semiotic force outside language which disrupts all stable meanings and institutions.

Dancing is the play's central image for a contravention and violation of 'normal' reality. It is Friel's new expression of the secret life which before he had represented verbally (in the character of, say, Private Gar) but which we know in actuality never formulates itself in words, even in the mind. The dancing is the play's chief 'opening' activity which is disturbing because it represents a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the usual routine, a ritualised suspension of everyday law and order. In the repressive climate of the 1930s, dancing was regarded with some suspicion as representing a species of moral decadence and a threat to the morals of the nation's youth. These puritanical attitudes were reflected in the Public Dancehalls' Act of 1953 which required licensing of dance-halls. This pleased rural businessmen and the clergy for it did away with open-air dancing at crossroads and dances held in private houses. But it was a measure which contributed to the dying out of many traditional customs, though ironically the government which enacted it was officially pledged to a revival of Irish folklore and Irish traditional music and dancing.

When Agnes suggests that the sisters all go to the harvest dance, Rose quickly launches into 'a bizarre and abandoned dance' while Kate 'panics'....

In reacting to the dancing as she does, Kate is reacting to the *id*, to the assertion of the spermatic principle, the free imagination, the buried impulse. She represents the repressive force of Christianity inhibiting full and free embracement of this primitive, pagan, secret life of Pan. 'Just look at yourselves!' she shouts at her sisters, 'Dancing at your time of day. That's for young people with no duties and no responsibilities and nothing in their heads but pleasure'. In Kate's eyes, dancing is 'pagan', associated with a kind of sexual freedom which contravenes her strict Catholicism: 'Mature women dancing? What's come over you all? And this is Father Jack's home we must never forget that'.

Later, when Irish dance music comes over the radio, Kate's remonstrations are ignored by all the other sisters who, one by one, succumb to the music's strange enchantment. Friel comments that 'there is a sense of order being consciously subverted'. Their dancing, as Julia Cruickshank notes, is both an expression of individual identity and an affirmation of collectivity, the five sisters dancing as a family but still preserving their own distinctive personalities. Maggie's features 'become animated by a look of defiance' and she emits 'a wild, raucous "Yaaaah!"'. She draws her flour-covered hand down her cheek, patterning her face 'with an instant mask'. Described as a 'white-faced, frantic dervish', she is associated with the Ryangan natives amongst whom Father Jack has lived and who paint their faces with coloured powders and then 'dance and dance children, men, women, most of them lepers, many of them with misshapen limbs, with

missing limbs'. Similarly, the Mundy sisters find momentary release from harsh reality in the ecstasy of the dance. Maggie is joined by a transfigured Rose, Agnes and Chris. Agnes moves 'gracefully, most sensuously' while Rose dances wildly, her 'Wellingtons pounding out their own erratic rhythm'. Eventually, even Kate, who has been watching the scene with unease, suddenly leaps to her feet, flings her head back, and utters a loud 'Yaaaah!'. Kate, the most repressed of the sisters, dances alone. Her dancing, we are told, is 'ominous of some deep and true emotion', but it is 'totally concentrated, totally private'. When the music stops, the sisters selfconsciously and awkwardly recollect themselves, and the old routines are resumed....

The pagan connotations of the sisters' dancing is emphasised by relating it to the dancing which is a part of the festival of Lughnasa taking place in the 'back hills'. The play, that is, concerns itself with the collective as well as personal memory. Just as the sisters' dancing expresses their individual private feelings so the dancing in the 'back hills' is the manifestation of a hidden, submerged culture which neither colonial influence nor Christian teaching has been able to extinguish. When Maggie and Rose first break into song the appropriately exotic 'Abyssinia' song and dance around the kitchen, Agnes's comments again playfully echo Kate: 'A right pair of pagans the two of you'. Rumours of what has been going on at the Lughnasa festivities infiltrate the Mundy household. Kate, the guardian of Christian value, is appalled when she hears the story of how a local boy has been badly injured when, during the drinking and dancing, he fell into the bonfire. Young Sweeney becomes her prime example of the dire consequences of yielding to 'pagan' and dissolute impulses and letting slip the properties of civilised order. The boy's name links him with the ancient Irish archetype of pagan disobedience and impiety, the legendary Sweeney who defied the Christian authorities and was punished by being condemned to fly around like a bird for the rest of his life. Young Sweeney is a denizen of the 'back hills', the pagus, the wilderness beyond the bounds of civilisation. It is to these same 'back hills' that the sinister Danny Bradley later takes Rose courting. Kate claims to know the people who live there: 'And they're savages! I know those people from the back hills! I've taught them! Savages that's what they are!

Any good reference work on Irish myth and legend will provide information about the meaning and origins of 'Lughnasa'. It was one of the four major pre-Christian, Celtic festivals, the others being Oimelc, Samhain and Beltaine. Basically a harvest festival, Lughnasa was celebrated for fifteen days in honour of the god Lugh, one of the most important Irish gods. In Peter Berresford Ellis' A Dictionary of Irish Mythology we find that Lugh, cognate with Welsh Lieu and Gaulish Lugos, was a sun god, known for the splendour of his countenance, and god of all arts and crafts. Over the years this mighty god's image diminished in popular folk memory until he was simply known as 'Lugh-chromain', which became Anglicised as Leprechaun....

The dancing in the play is associated not only with the pagan festival of Lughnasa but also with African tribal rituals. As Cruickshank observes, the Celtic and Ryangan worlds are both small, neglected communities on the fringes of civilisation; both are ex-colonies, both are cultures rich in dance and ritual. Jack admires the Ryangan 'capacity for fun, for laughing, for practical jokes they've such open hearts! In some respect they're not unlike us'. And so, like the Sweeney boy, Jack has 'gone native', attracted by

ancient ritual and wordless ceremony. Jack's lapse from Christian orthodoxy is synonymous with his loss of language ('My vocabulary has deserted me'), the primary tool of the rational western mind. What Jack particularly values in Ryangan culture is the fact that there is 'no distinction between the secular and the religious'. The Ryangans allow the spiritual and the sensual to interpenetrate each other: 'almost imperceptibly the religious ceremony ends and the community celebration takes over'. Ryangan primitivism emphasises both the sensuous and the communal life. In Ryanga 'women are eager to have love children', Jack informs a horrified Kate who earlier, we may recall, sought to discourage Chris's participation in the festival dance by reminding her of her maternal role: 'You have a seven-year-old child. Have you forgotten that?'. Like Father Chris, the returned missioner in the early play, *The Blind Mice*, Jack is forced to reassess conventional piety in the light of his experience of the 'alien' and the 'Other'. Repatriated to Ballybeg, he seeks to create a new, more congenial 'home' for himself than the one he has inherited. Michael remembers him as 'a forlorn figure . . . shuffling from room to room as if he were searching for something but couldn't remember what'....

In the play, dancing signifies a freeing of human behaviour from predetermining norms and motivations and an attunement of the individual to his or her deepest impulses, to the rest of the group and, ultimately, to the cosmic forces symbolically (and actually) transmitted through the music on the radio, 'Marconi's voodoo'. It is Gerry to whom the sisters turn when their radio keeps breaking down. He is the one who tries to fix their aerial so that they can tune in again to the 'dream music'. He is their link with the 'Other', with the world beyond their usual, stifling routines. He leads them out of themselves and helps them to discover the submerged parts of their own being. Not only is he a professional dancer, he is also one of the birdmen of the play, one of those adept at flying. Aloft in the sycamore tree tinkering with the radio aerial, he sways and sings, " 'He flies through the air with the greatest of ease ... That daring young man on the flying trapeze'", while down below Agnes covers her eyes in terror, unable to watch the daredevilry of the dashing risk-taker, the 'clown' amongst the branches. Gerry is linked with the ancient Sweeney and, by extension, with the young pagan celebrant from the 'back hills'. He is also linked with the boy Michael, another 'flyer', who throughout the play is engaged in making and trying to fly two kites. Michael's kites are decorated with grotesquely painted, savage faces, which recall the painted faces of Jack's Ryangan dancers. In the complex web of parallels and correspondences which we find in the play, there is a connection between flying, dancing and pagan ceremonial. All of these activities are forms of release from the tyranny of routine and the pressure of the fact. Recalling earlier 'flying' motifs Cass's 'winged armchair' or Manus's 'airplane seat' we remain uncomfortably aware that flying can all to easily become mere avoidance, delusion, escapism....

The play would seem to emphasise lost opportunities, tragic waste, failure, a gradually diminishing life. And yet the feeling one is left with is not at all as simple as that. The play doesn't end with the narrator's blunt account of the ultimately tragic ends of the characters. Even knowing the destiny of his aunts, Michael remains 'fascinated' by the hypnotic, magical power of memory. 'The stage is lit in a very soft, golden light so that the tableau we see is almost, but not quite, in a haze'. This is the space somewhere

between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet. Life retains its aura of enchantment. The play refuses pessimism. Unlike Maggie, Michael is conscious of change change for good as well as bad. He acknowledges the sordid deaths of Agnes and Rose, but also registers the survival of young Sweeney. In the closing tableau, 'the characters are now in positions similar to their positions at the beginning of the play *with some changes*'. Michael's kites may never have flown in the course of the play, but they are still 'boldly' displayed, the savage faces on them 'grinning' defiantly. One of the kites stands between Gerry and Agnes, the other between Agnes and Jack, for the failure of Agnes's flight has to be balanced by the perpetually buoyant quality of Gerry's life and the freedom which Jack discovered. As Michael begins his final speech, Friel directs that the music 'It is Time to Say Goodnight' should be 'just audible' in the background. 'Everybody sways very slightly from side to side even the grinning kites. The movement is so minimal that we cannot be quite certain if it is happening or if we imagine it'. Like memory, our experience of the play itself is ambivalent. The liminal movement and sound act to undermine our sense of a solid, fixed reality. We are put in the position of Private Gar who, thinking of his childhood fishing trip with his father, 'wonders now did it really take place or did he imagine it'. Friel explores that space between objective fact and subjective imagining, that 'limbo' in which, as Michael puts it, 'everything is simultaneously actual and illusory'. Michael's final speech powerfully asserts a ghostly presence, an 'atmosphere . . . more real than incident', 'a mirage of sound a dream music' which mesmerically leads people out of themselves, even out of the prison-house of language. The play ends with Michael's vivid memory of 'dancing as if language had surrendered to movement as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness'. In his opening speech of the play, Michael speaks of a rite of passage, indicating how, on one level, this is a play about growing up, about the transition from innocence to experience: 'I had a sense of unease, some awareness of a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was'. The stability and solidity of his childhood world have been disturbed: 'That may have been because Uncle Jack hadn't turned out at all like the resplendent figure in my head. Or maybe because I had witnessed Marconi's voodoo derange those kind, sensible women and transform them into shrieking strangers'. He comes to recognise a deep mystery in life. He has seen frustration, break-up, unbearable drudgery, failure, but he also becomes aware of a force for change which, though it may threaten the 'safe' world of childhood, is also the ground of hope and aspiration. His final tableau rearranges the opening one and the most abiding memory he is left with is of 'atmosphere', of 'dream music', 'dancing' of a mysterious libidinal energy. The significance of this intuitive, illogical, level of experience is finally articulated verbally, in Michael's powerful, lyrical closing narration.

The play enacts an ideal balance between narration and enactment, the rational and the irrational, language and music, the religious and the secular, past and present. To live in one sphere alone is inadequate. As Julia Cruickshank observes, Rose may be the one 'not educated out of her emotions', but she perishes away from the security of the family. On the other hand, Kate, the one most alarmed by instinct and irrationality, makes a strenuous effort to adapt and come to terms with Jack's 'nativism'. Michael can't help but be amused by her valiant struggle to accept. 'Startled', 'stunned' and

'shocked' as Kate is by the change in Jack, 'finally she hit on a phrase that appeased her: "his own distinctive spiritual search", "Leaping around a fire and offering a little hen to Uka or Ito or whoever is not religion as I was taught it and indeed know it," she would say with a defiant toss of her head. "But then Jack must make his own distinctive search."' Ballybeg, too, is faced with the challenge of adapting to change in the form of the knitting factory. As in *Translations*, the community's survival depends on its ability to move with the times. Frank Rich, the influential even feared *New York Times critic*, commenting on the success of the Abbey Theatre production of the play at Broadway's Plymouth Theatre in October 1991, concluded his review with these words of appreciation of Friel's complex vision:

Even knowing that he (Michael) knows and what everyone knows about life's inevitable end, he clings to his vision of his childhood, a golden end-of-summer landscape in the production's gorgeous design, for what other antidote than illusions is there to that inescapable final sadness? *Dancing at Lughnasa* does not dilute that sadness the mean, cold facts of reality, finally, are what its words are for. But first this play does exactly what theatre was born to do, carrying both its characters and audience aloft on those waves of distant music and ecstatic release that, in defiance of all language and logic, let us dance and dream just before night must fall.

If in Faith Healer Friel takes us to the very edge of the postmodern Apocalypse, in Dancing at Lughnasa he recollects himself to affirm the vitality and dialogue of individual experience even when we are aware of what the future holds. Just as Chris's and Agnes's dancing is not simply socialised as Gerry's is, their story is not merely a chronicling of events. Like Father Jack's spirituality which cannot be held by the words of the Mass, it is fluid. The ultimate image of Friel's drama is of a space where 'language surrendered to movement'. The almost imperceptible fluidity of the play's closing tableau is a celebration of the power of theatre to renew and reveal, and a rejection of 'fossilised' history.

Source: Elmer Andrews, "Body," in*The Art of Brian Friel: Neither Reality Nor Dreams*, St. Martin's Press, 1995, pp. 220-234.

Adaptations

Dancing at Lughnasa was adapted to the screen in a 1998 film produced by Colombia TriStar, directed by Pat O'Connor, and starring Meryl Streep.

Topics for Further Study

Friel's play takes place in Ireland in 1936. Learn more about the history of Ireland in the twentieth century. What are the major historical events of the era? What is the significance of this historical context to the concerns expressed in the play?

In Friel's play, Michael's Uncle Jack has just returned from twenty-five years in Uganda as a missionary priest. Learn more about the history of European missionary efforts in Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What were the conditions of the Christian missionary efforts in Africa? In what ways were missionaries significant to the history of colonial Africa?

The initial incident that sparks the changes in the lives of the characters in Friel's play is the acquisition of a wireless radio, which broadcasts a variety of musical features throughout the play. Learn more about the history of the radio and its effect on cultural history. When did radios first become popular in private homes? What was the content of early radio broadcasts? How has the role of the radio in mass culture changed over history?

Friel is considered the most important Irish playwright of his generation. Learn more about the history of Irish drama and theater. Who are some of the major Irish playwrights of the twentieth century? To what extent are social and political concerns central to the literary traditions of the Irish theater?

What Do I Read Next?

Waiting for Godot (1952) is the masterpiece of the absurdist playwright Samuel Beckett, to whose works Friel's are frequently compared.

The Glass Menagerie (1944) by Tennessee Williams is a "memory play" to which *Dancing at Lughnasa* has often been compared. A man narrates the play as a memory of his mother, sister, and father who has abandoned them, addressing the audience directly, as in Friel's play. The lines, "I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion," and "In memory everything seems to happen to music," echo similar sentiments as expressed in Friel's play.

Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964) was Friel's first commercially and critically successful stage play. It is about the thoughts of a young Irish man about to emigrate to America.

Friel's *A ristocrats* (1979) is about an aristocratic Irish Catholic family on the verge of decline. In 1989 this play won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best foreign play.

Friel's *Translations* (1980) is considered by some critics to be his best stage play. It focuses on the theme of Irish national identity in the wake of British governmental policy in Ireland.

The *Diviner: Brian Friel's Best Short Stories* (1983) is a selection of Friel's short stories previously published in the New Yorker and other collections.

Molly Sweeney (1994) is another Friel play about a blind forty-one-year-old woman whose sight is unexpectedly restored, altering her relationship with her husband.

Give Me Your Answer, Do! (1997) is Friel's most recent play. Set in Friel's fictional country of Donegal, this play concerns an author, Tom Connolly, and his alcoholic wife, Daisy, who are visited in their rural home by a scholar, another author, and Daisy's parents.

Further Study

Chekhov, Anton, *Anton Chekhov's Three Sisters: A Translation*, translated by Brian Friel, Gallery Books, 1981.

Friel's translation of the Chekhov play to which *Dancing at Lughnasa* has sometimes been compared provides further insight into Friel's perspective on the two dramas.

Grene, Nicholas, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

This text provides critical discussion of the historical and political significance of major Irish playwrights.

Kerwin, William, ed., *Brian Friel*: A Casebook, Garland, 1997.

Kerwin's book is a collection of critical essays on Friel's drama and fiction.

Pine, Richard, *Brian Friel and Ireland's Drama*, Routledge, 1990.

Pine's work discusses Friel's stage plays in the context of the history and literary traditions of the Irish stage.

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Gleitman, Claire, "Negotiating History, Negotiating Myth: Friel Among His Contemporaries," in *Brian Friel: A Casebook*, edited by William Kerwin, Garland, 1997, p. 237.

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O'Toole, Fintan, "Marking Time: From Making History to Dancing at Lughnasa," in *The Achievement of Brian Frie*l, edited by Alan J. Peacock, Colin Smythe, 1993, p. 214.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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