

Translations Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Translations is a three-act play set in the tumultuous nineteenth century country of Ireland. The action takes place in a hedge-school where students are faced with the invasion of English speaking soldiers. One of these soldiers falls in love with an Irish girl and then mysteriously goes missing. The son of the master of the hedge-school is forced to go into hiding to keep from being condemned for the crime, although he is not responsible for the soldier's disappearance. Translations is a play about love, tradition, and the circumstances that force the break with these traditions.

The first half of Act one sets up the atmosphere of the city of Baile Beag and introduces the main characters. Midway through this act Owen, one of the head master's sons, returns from Dublin. Much to his brother and father's dismay Owen is employed by the British army to help make a new map of Ireland. It is Owen's job to translate conversations between the English speaking soldiers and Irish speaking citizens of the town. Unfortunately, Owen does not do a very adequate job of translating Lancey's words. He does not tell the students this map making project is a military operation.

In the second act of the play Owen and Yolland begin to realize how difficult their project of translating all the Irish place names into their English equivalents will be. Owen is unsentimental about the project and sees it only as another job while Yolland actually develops a deep love for the Irish language, culture and country. Yolland also falls in love with Maire, a girl who attends the hedge-school. Up to this point it had been understood that Maire and Manus would get married. When Manus sees Maire and Yolland embracing after a dance he goes after Yolland with a stick. Although Manus does not injure Yolland, Yolland goes missing the next day. Manus runs away because he is afraid he will be arrested in connection with Yolland's disappearance.

In the final act of the play Captain Lancey issues a warning to all the citizens in Baile Beag that the entire city will be destroyed if Yolland is not found. It appears Doalty plans to help organize some type of uprising against the English army with the help of the Donnelly twins. The play ends with an atmosphere of uncertainty. Yolland has not been located and no one seems to have information about where he might be. The futures of the various characters included in the play are also unclear. The play closes with Hugh attempting to quote from Greek mythology, an attempt at which he fails.



Act One

Act One Summary

Translations is a three-act play set in the tumultuous nineteenth century country of Ireland. The action takes place in a hedge-school where students are faced with the invasion of English speaking soldiers. One of these soldiers falls in love with an Irish girl and then mysteriously goes missing. The son of the master of the hedge-school is forced to go into hiding to keep from being condemned for the crime although he is not responsible for the soldier's disappearance. Translations is a play about language, love, tradition, and the circumstances that force a break with these traditions.

The play opens with Manus working with hedge-school student Sarah. Although everyone in the town has accepted that Sarah is unable to speak, Manus is trying to teach her to talk. Meanwhile Jimmy reads from Homer's Odyssey. Manus praises Sarah warmly when she manages to repeat a sentence. Manus then directs Sarah to set out stools for the other students as he chats with Jimmy about Homer. Jimmy is obsessed with Athene and believes Grania, a lady who lives in their town, is like a goddess from the Odyssey. He tries to get Manus to agree that Jimmy himself looks like Ulysses. Manus converses with Jimmy and jokes with Sarah easily as the three prepare the barn for that night's classes.

Manus wonders why his father and master of the school, Hugh, has not shown up for classes yet. Sarah shows him by signs that Hugh has attended a christening and is probably enjoying drinks at a local pub. Manus decides his father will return tipsy and prepares to take charge of the classes for the night. Meanwhile Sarah gets a bunch of flowers she has hidden in the straw at the barn and presents them to Manus. She runs from Manus in embarrassment but he follows her, thanks her for the gift and prompts her to say the word "flowers."

Maire, another student, enters the schoolroom. Manus is embarrassed that he has been caught by Maire in the act of kissing Sarah. Manus tells Maire he saw her out working in the hay. She ignores him and instead strikes up a conversation with Jimmy. After the two speak briefly in Latin, Maire bemoans the fact she knows more Latin than English. She shares with Jimmy the one English phrase she knows. Manus tries to correct her English but she ignores Manus and talks only to Jimmy. Maire asks for water and Manus gives her his bowl of milk. Manus apologizes to Maire for not visiting the night before and explains he was writing a letter for a friend. Manus offers to help Maire in the hayfield the next day. When Maire brushes him off, Manus asks her what she is so grouchy about. At this moment students Bridget and Doalty enter the school room.

Bridget and Doalty are excited making fun of their school master and talking about a prank they played on soldiers surveying their town's land at the same time. Doalty is carrying a surveying post he stole from the soldiers. Bridget is worried he will be arrested. Apparently Doalty has been having "fun" with the soldiers by moving their



surveying poles when they weren't looking. Doalty mimics the English speaking soldiers and tells the others how they took their surveying machine apart to find what was wrong with it. Hugh has still not arrived so Manus decides to take charge of classes for the night. He takes assessment of his students and asks why the Donnelly twins are not there. Manus does not get a straight answer to his question. Bridget begins a story about how two horses belonging to English soldiers were found but stops herself before she finishes the story.

As the students settle into their studies Maire tells Manus her passage money for America has come in. Manus asks her if she plans to go and she responds she has no choice. Maire asks if Manus has applied at the new national school for the headmaster position, and Manus says he has not because his father has applied. At this point Maire turns the conversation away from Manus and talks to Bridget about her friend Seamus. Bridget tells the other students that Seamus has been traveling and has smelled the sweet smell of a corn blight in Port. There are worries of a blight in their town as well. Maire scolds them all for being pessimistic. Doalty teases that he plans to avoid the coming doom by applying to be headmaster of the new national school. The students discuss the changes the new school will bring and how it will affect their lives and the lives of their children.

Sarah indicates to the others that Hugh is on his way and the students settle down to serious business. Hugh enters in a business-like fashion and in the process of telling the students about the baptism, quizzes them on word etymology and meaning. Hugh then tells the students he encountered Captain Lancey who told Hugh some of the workers' equipment was misplaced and two of their horses had wandered off. Hugh tells the students he suggested the Captain talk to the students himself but Lancey is unable to because he only speaks English, while the students speak no English. At this point Maire interjects her strong desire to learn English. Her speech causes a stir among the students which Hugh handles by ignoring. He moves on to his next item of business. He informs the students he has been hired to teach at the new national school. His only stipulation is that he be allowed to run it as the hedge-school has been run. After this announcement, he leaves the student's under Manus' direction.

As Hugh moves toward the steps, Owen enters the room. Owen is Hugh's youngest son. He has apparently been absent for a long time as he greets the students and his family lovingly. He has come with two soldiers, Lancey and Yolland. Lancey and Yolland have come to aid in the military's map making process. Both Hugh and Manus seem upset that Owen is on the military payroll and thus a member of the military. As Owen goes to fetch his friends, Hugh prods the students to help him clean the school room. During this activity Manus once again approaches Maire about going to America. She chides him for expecting marriage when he has no home and no job. She says she feels she has no choice but to make the trip and create a better life for herself.

The soldiers introduce their project to the students. Because the students do not speak English and the soldiers do not speak Irish, Owen translates what each group is saying. His translations, however, are not an exact representation of what the soldiers are saying. Manus is the only one who notices this discrepancy and points out the problem



to Owen. During the meeting Hugh has been imbibing to the point he is now drunk and is forced to take his leave.

Act One Analysis

This first act sets the scene and tone of the entire play. Through the opening section where the students slowly filter into the school each character shares information that is vital to the understanding of the play. It is evident that language is very important to the play. One of the first characters is Sarah, who is unable to speak. The entire community believes she is dumb. Manus, however, has been able to teach her to say a few words and phrases. Sarah's lack of language begins to build the theme of the differences in languages and means of communication. She communicates by signs and gestures. This opens the theme of the difficulty in communication between people who speak different languages. This difficulty is obvious when Lancey and Yolland attempt to describe their work to the students. Each group can not understand the other's language. Owen tries to act as an interpreter, but is a selective interpreter. He oversimplifies what the soldiers are trying to say and neglects to mention to the students the two men are performing a military operation.

Another theme that opens in the first act is the theme of love. It is obvious that Sarah has a crush on Manus. She loves him for what he is, a simple teacher. Manus' affection for Sarah, however, appears to be that of a brother for a sister. His real love interest is Maire, a strong-willed student with high expectations both for herself and her future husband. She is disappointed that Manus has not applied to teach at the new national school and believes he now has no future and nothing to offer her. At the end of the first act Maire is introduced to Yolland, who becomes her love interest.

It is also obvious in the first act that there is high political or military tension in the area. A group of soldiers has been camped out near the town for two weeks. These soldiers are responsible for making a new map of Ireland for taxation and military purposes. Groups of Irish citizens are responsible for playing pranks on the soldiers. Some of these pranks are only annoying, like Doalty moving the surveyor's pole, while others are more violent. It is indicated in this first act that the Donnelly twins, who once attended the hedge-school are responsible for the disappearance of two of the soldier's horses.

In addition to the introduction of these themes, the first act also introduces a wonderful variety of characters. There is Jimmy who is enthralled with Latin and Greek. He searches for his own Greek goddess who will fall in love with him. Hugh is the highly respected teacher at the hedge-school. Although he appears to spend much of his time either tipsy or drunk, he is obviously esteemed by his students as they will settle down and work for him in a way they don't do with Manus. Manus is more of a friend to the students than a teacher. He takes a personal interest in each of his pupils. Maire has a love for life but is frustrated with the unwillingness of the people she lives with to modernize or better their lives. Doalty and Bridget serve as comic relief as they jab and poke fun at each other. Yolland is a soldier but does not have the hard edge most

soldiers have. He admits he has fallen in love with their area of Ireland. Yolland also has a desire to learn Irish.

Important things to note in this act include Doalty's insistence that there will never be a potato blight in their town. Also note the interactions between Maire and Yolland at the end of the act. In addition, keep in mind the students' unwillingness to talk about why the Donnelly twins are no longer involved in the school. Naming, a theme which begins in this first act with the mention of the christening, is another thread in the story that will reappear later.



Act Two, Scene One

Act Two, Scene One Summary

Act two follows a few days after the action of Act one. Yolland and Owen are busy trying to change Irish place names into their English equivalents. Yolland has become comfortable in the hedge-school and is enjoying his work. The men take into consideration the sound of the current Irish name and its meaning as well as the English translation of the current Irish name when coming up with a new English name for each place. Owen is frustrated the men are not making better progress on their work. Lancey has also been putting pressure on Yolland to finish the place names more quickly. As Owen and Yolland work, Manus enters the room. Yolland attempts to talk to Manus, but Manus refuses to talk to him in English. Manus admits he is confused by people like Yolland.

As Owen continues to work, Yolland talks about the resentment he feels from the townspeople. Yolland tells Owen that Lancey is looking for the Donnelly twins in order to question them. He also states that he knows Maire lives in the house just above the location where the soldiers are camped. Yolland says he sometimes hears music coming from the house. Owen suggests that Yolland drop in on Maire one night. Yolland then asks Owen if he believes Yolland would ever be able to live in Ireland. Owen tells Yolland he would not be able to survive an Irish winter. At this point Doalty interrupts the two by running into the school room. He has come to tell Manus that there are two men who want to talk to him.

After Manus and Doalty leave, Yolland tells Owen how he came to be in Ireland by complete accident. He was supposed to be stationed in another area of the world but literally missed the boat and thus wound up in Ireland. Yolland goes on to share with Owen that Lancey reminds him of his own father. Yolland also describes a strange sensation of easiness he feels in Ireland with the Irish people. He realizes, however, that even if he were to learn Irish and live in that city, he would always be considered an outsider. Owen tries to encourage Yolland by telling him he could learn to act like a natural born Irish person. At this moment Hugh interrupts the conversation by coming downstairs. Yolland obviously tries to impress Hugh with his attempts to learn Irish as well as his astonishment at Hugh's achievements. Hugh makes it obvious he is not impressed with Yolland or his English language. Owen steps into the conversation and tries to cover for Yolland, but Hugh manages to get his point across to Yolland that language is a very powerful tool. In fact, Hugh insinuates that people can often become trapped or imprisoned in a useless language. He infers that while the Irish people may be poor, their language is rich and vibrant.

Yolland is impressed with Hugh's understanding of the impact that the new map and place name changes will have on the people. Owen defends the project stating that they are simply clarifying place names and changing these names to modern English. Owen defends his position by using an example of a cross roads named after a well long dried



up and a person no one remembers. At this point in their conversation Yolland once again refers to Owen as Roland, a name by which Yolland has been mistakenly been calling Owen all along. Owen angrily corrects Yolland and the two realize how ironic their situation is. They are laughing together when Manus enters.

Manus has good news to share. He has been offered a job which will provide him with a home and food as well as a salary. As Manus, Owen, and Yolland are celebrating, Maire enters to bring Manus his milk. While Manus is upstairs transferring the milk to another container, Maire initiates a conversation about a dance to be held the following night. She insists Yolland be told about the social gathering and Yolland asks if he can come. Owen acts as a mediator as this "date" is set up between Maire and Yolland. As the scene closes, Yolland is loudly voicing his pleasure at being included in the dance.

Act Two, Scene One Analysis

In this scene Yolland and Owen begin their work replacing Irish place names with English alternatives. The work is not as easy as they thought it would be. Yolland is experiencing pressure from his superiors to work more quickly. Yolland, however, has developed a love for the Irish city and is finding it difficult to change the present names. Owen, on the other hand, has no problem with changing any of the names. Owen shows no sentimentality for his homeland even though he knows the origins of most of the place names.

It is in this section of the play that naming, or putting a name to something, becomes very important. This idea of naming is seen in the first act where Hugh attends a christening where a baby is named. In the second act, Yolland and Owen refer to their act of renaming the Irish places as a type of christening. However, there is a difference in putting a name to something that didn't have one before and changing the name of something that already had a name. Also note the significance of section where Owen finally tells Yolland his name is not Roland. Yolland has been calling Owen by the wrong name all along. Instead of becoming angry Owen has not made any corrections until the point he become frustrated with Yolland for not wanting to change the place names. Perhaps Owen's lack of concern that his own name has been changed by Yolland explains why he is so unaffected by the changing of names of places in his home town.

Meanwhile, Manus has good news. He has finally been offered a job that will give him both a home and salary. Instead of being impressed, however, Maire seems more interested in getting Yolland to attend a dance with her. It appears that Maire and Yolland have been waving at each other across the field when they see one another. Yolland seems pleased he will be allowed to attend the dance, just as any other Irish citizen.



Act Two, Scene Two

Act Two, Scene Two Summary

Maire and Yolland have run away from the dance together and are now trying to communicate with each other. Yolland tries speaking loudly with great separation between the words. Maire attempts to speak to him in Latin. Although neither understands the words the other says, they enjoy the sound of each other's voice. Yolland finally begins repeating the names of the Irish cities that he has learned. As he repeats these names Maire moves toward him and takes his hands. Although they don't understand each other's words, they understand the message each hopes to portray. They are caught up in their emotions and they kiss. Sarah enters just in time to see the two kiss. She speaks Manus' name, then leaves.

Act Two, Scene Two Analysis

Language is of utmost importance in this scene, which is the climax of the play. In this scene Yolland and Maire break away from the others to spend time alone. Although they do not understand much of each other's language, they manage to make their feelings known through their tone of voice and gestures. This inability to speak each other's language underscores the idea that while language is important, it is possible to communicate in rudimentary ways even without a common language. In fact it is almost this inability to understand and communicate that is the most important feature of this scene. In addition to Yolland and Maire's inability to communicate with each other, Sarah, another character who lacks language skills, sees Maire and Yolland kiss and knows what this kiss will mean to Manus. However, Sarah is unable to tell Manus about what she has seen, or even tell others that she saw Yolland, unharmed by Manus, after Yolland left the dance.



Act Three

Act Three Summary

At the opening of Act three Manus is packing to go away. He is afraid he will be arrested in connection with Yolland's disappearance even though he was not involved. Manus tries to get Owen to promise to tell the people at Inis Meadhon that it will be a while before he can get there. Although Owen doesn't seem to be able to commit to promise, Sarah does promise. Owen tries to convince Manus that if he leaves, it will make the soldiers even more suspicious of him. Owen believes that if Manus tells Lancey he only yelled angrily at Yolland from a distance that Lancey will understand and clear him of the crime. Before he leaves, Manus gives Owen last minute instructions about the school and the care of their father. He also asks Sarah to talk for him one last time and tells her there is nothing to stop her from reaching her goals.

After Manus leaves, Owen tries to communicate with Sarah but is unable to understand her gestures. As he gives up trying to understand her, Bridget and Doalty run into the room. They are excited about the destruction that has come over their town as a result of Yolland's disappearance. The pair reports that fifty more soldiers have arrived in town and are searching every square inch of the town. Owen questions Bridget and Doalty about what they saw at the dance the night before. Bridget becomes uncomfortable with Owen's questions and asks him to stop. Owen then starts to questions Doalty but doesn't get any information about Yolland from Doalty either.

Maire is next to enter the hedge-school. She is very upset and has even forgotten to bring her milk with her. Maire begins to ramble. She first asks Owen if he believes Yolland is all right, then states she herself believes something bad has happened to him. Maire ends her rambling by telling Owen that Nelle Ruadh's baby, the one that was christened in the first act, has died.

After Owen and Doalty briefly discuss how stupid it was for Manus to run away, Lancey enters the school room. He orders Owen to translate for him. Lancey tells the students that if Yolland is not found the soldiers will first shoot all the livestock, then they will evict certain people and tear down their homes. If Yolland is still not located after these actions the soldiers will demolish the entire parish. While Lancey is still questioning the students, Doalty notices the soldier's camp is on fire. Before leaving the school to check on the fires, Lancey threatens Doalty personally. Bridget smells the sweet smell of the potato blight and believes the entire town is in trouble. Doalty convinces her it is only the smell of the army tents burning. Meanwhile, Sarah finds she is no longer able to talk. She seems convinced she will never talk again.

Doalty tells Owen there are groups of people, including the Donnelly twins, who will fight the English soldiers and try to protect their town. Doalty leaves Owen alone. At this point Hugh and Jimmy enter. Hugh announces someone else has been hired to teach at the new national school. Next, Jimmy tells Hugh he is getting married and asks Hugh to be



his best man. Hugh agrees and learns Jimmy is to be married to Athene. Both Hugh and Jimmy are close to being drunk. After Jimmy's announcement, he falls asleep. Hugh finds the name book and as he looks over the new names, Owen comes down with two bowls of tea. Owen attempts to apologize for the mistake he made in working with the soldiers but Hugh brushes off the apology.

Hugh begins to speak to Owen about the new names and the changes they will bring. Owen believes he is being lectured and asks his father to stop. Hugh makes the point that Jimmy has come to the point where he no longer understands that the factual past is gone and relives this past through the life embodied in the language of the past. As Hugh is remembering the heroics of his own past, Maire re-enters the school. When he sees her, Hugh promises her that he will teach her English. He reminds her that he can teach only words and grammar, not meaning. As they talk, Maire asks Hugh the translation of the English word "always." She then tells Hugh she believes when Yolland comes back, he will return to the school. Jimmy tries to explain to her the controversy her romance with the English officer has caused because they are not from the same group or background. The play closes with Hugh attempting to recite information about Greek mythology, an attempt at which he fails.

Act Three Analysis

At this point in the play, all of the catastrophes caused by the conflicting languages come full force. The soldiers are prepared to destroy the town if Yolland is not located. Sarah has become so distraught by Manus' departure that she loses her ability to talk. Maire is distraught and unsure about her own future. She comes back to the hedge-school because she is comfortable there and because she knows Yolland was comfortable there. Hugh agrees to teach Maire English; however, he seems to give her little encouragement that it will be a worthwhile venture. The play ends in absolute uncertainty and upheaval.

Notice the similarities between acts one and three. After Manus leaves, Owen is alone with Sarah in the school room. Like Manus in the first act, Owen asks Sarah where Hugh is; unlike Manus, however, Owen is unable to understand Sarah's gestures. From this point on, everything that was accomplished in the first act is undone in the final act. The baby that was christening in the first act dies in the last act. Although Hugh believes he has been accepted as master of the new national school, he learns in the final act that another applicant has been hired. Also in the last act the students smell the sweet smell of the potato blight, a blight they thought would never affect their city. At this point, however, the potato blight is the least of the students' worries since they are currently under threat of being killed by the English army if Yolland is not located.

The tone of the play changes from one of comfort and familiarity at its opening to one of despair and destruction. In the midst of the destruction threatened by the English soldiers, the baby, a symbol of new life and hope, dies. At the conclusion of the play Hugh stumbles over the words as he attempts to quote a once familiar passage of literature. As the final scene of the play fades into darkness, the audience is left

wondering exactly what will happen to the people of the Irish city. The final feeling is that of uncertainty and doubt.



Characters

Manus

Manus is the son of Hugh, who is the head teacher at the hedge-school. Manus is also the brother of Owen. Manus walks with a limp because of an accident when he was a child. According to information in the play Manus was injured when his father fell over Manus' crib when Manus was an infant. Manus teaches for his father and leads the school if his father is away. He earns no salary, only room and board. He is a good teacher and cares deeply for his students, but balks at change. For instance, he has promised his girlfriend Maire he would apply for a job at the new national school but has procrastinated in putting in his application until after his father also applies for the job. Maire is upset with Manus for not taking the opportunity and applying for the position first. Manus would also rather teach his students the classics in Latin and Greek instead of helping them learn the modern English language. Manus is resentful of Yolland's presence in their town and for this reason refuses to speak in English, the only language Yolland understands, when he is around Yolland. Manus is angry with Yolland when he sees Yolland embracing Maire and goes after the soldier with a stick. After Yolland's disappearance Manus is afraid he will be arrested in connection with this disappearance because of his actions. For this reason, he runs away to avoid being punished for the crime of which he is innocent.

Lieutenant George Yolland

Yolland is an accidental British soldier. Unlike most soldiers, he is not hardened or unmoved by the people around him. He still takes almost a romantic view of the world. Yolland tells Owen he actually had been hired as a clerk but accidentally missed the boat that would take him to London. Afraid to face his father Yolland joined the Army and ends up in Ireland involved in the mapping process. Although he is shy, quiet and unwilling to speak in front of the students at first, Yolland quickly becomes comfortable in the hedge-school. Yolland admits to Owen he has fallen in love with the country around him. Although he knows he would never be accepted by the townspeople, Yolland wants to live in Baile Beag. Yolland shows his seriousness about his desire to live in Ireland by trying to learn Irish. In addition to falling in love with Ireland, Yolland also falls in love with Maire. On the last night that he is seen alive, he has attended a dance with her. Yolland and Maire leave the dance to spend time together. Although he doesn't know enough Irish to communicate with Maire, Yolland repeats the Irish place names to her. It is during this recitation the two draw near to one another and finally kiss.



Maire Chatach

Maire is a very strong-willed, strong-minded young lady who attends Hugh's hedge-school. She is willing to speak her mind and share her opinions even when it makes others uncomfortable. Marie has ten younger brothers and sisters. They have no father who lives with them. In addition to attending the hedge school Maire also works in the hay fields for money. Maire is the love interest of Manus. However, Maire is frustrated with Manus' lack of a home and job and his refusal to break with the old traditions. She wants to learn English, Manus wants to teach the classics. Maire wants Manus to be successful like his brother while Manus does not have these ambitions. Maire ends up falling in love with Yolland who disappears after the two spend an evening together.

Sarah John Sally

Sarah is a young student at the hedge-school. Manus seems to take a special interest in the girl as he tries to teach her how to talk. In return, Sarah seems to have developed a crush on Manus. It soon becomes evident that Sarah can only talk when Manus is around to prompt her. After he leaves the city, she no longer tries to speak and seems to indicate speech is not worth the effort. Sarah sees Maire and Yolland together after Manus threatens Yolland with the stick and knows that Yolland was not harmed by Manus. However, her inability to speak does not allow her to defend the one that she loves.

Owen Hugh Mor

Owen is Hugh's youngest son and Manus' younger brother. He is the successful owner of nine shops in Dublin. Owen accompanies Lancey and Yolland into the school and helps them describe their map-making process to the students. Although he probably is trying only to keep the peace, Owen oversimplifies the interpretation of Lancey's project in their town. Once they learn of the soldiers' plans for the town, Manus and Hugh are very upset with Owen. Manus is openly distressed with Owen's career while Hugh simply drinks more because of Owen's position with the Army. After Yolland disappears and Lancey begins treating Owen as an enemy instead of a friend, Owen admits his whole alliance with the English Army was a mistake.

Hugh Mor O'Donnell

Hugh is the head master of the hedge-school at Baile Beag. He is the father of Owen and Manus. Although he is a citizen of a small Irish town Hugh appears to think he is much more sophisticated than those around him. Hugh is well-versed in Latin and Greek and also speaks English. Although he tries to appear very self sufficient Hugh actually depends on his son Manus to take care of him. Hugh is offered the position of the head master at a new national school and believes he will obtain the position. Hugh



is highly disappointed when another man, a former bacon curer, is selected for the job. In the end of the play Hugh promises to teach Maire English.

Captain Lancey

Captain Lancey is the military official who first approaches Hugh about the army's misplaced equipment and wandering horses. Hugh suggests Lancey talk to the students about his problems in person but Lancey is unable to do so because he speaks only English. Lancey's primary role in Ireland is to make a new map of the area for the military. This map will determine a new tax schedule. Lancey is portrayed in the play as a military figure head who gives orders and expects them to be followed. After Yolland's disappearance Lancey threatens to have the entire Irish parish ravaged if Yolland is not located.

Jimmy Jack

Jimmy is an eccentric older man who attends the hedge school because he enjoys learning and the company of the other students. He is sometimes referred to by Manus as the Infant Prodigy. Jimmy's great loves are the heroines from the Homer's Odyssey. The characters and circumstances of these plays appear to be as real to him as the daily world around him. Although he is fluent in both Greek and Latin, Jimmy is not well versed in personal hygiene. He never bathes and wears the same clothes both winter and summer. At the end of the play bachelor Jimmy announces he is engaged to marry Athene. Although the other characters seem to recognize the lady he is speaking of, it is unsure if Jimmy is actually engaged or if he is trying to live out his fantasy world in real life.

Doalty

Doalty is a character who seems to have been interjected into the play both as a form of comic relief as well as a means of information about the uprising against the English Army. Doalty appears to be connected in some way with the Donnelly twins, a pair of boys who once attended the hedge-school but then mysteriously stopped attending. It is insinuated these twins may be involved in an active revolt against the soldiers. Doalty admits to playing pranks on the soldiers, such as moving surveying poles while the soldiers are trying to take measurements. Doalty adds humor to the play as he picks at and flirts with Bridget.

Bridget

Along with Doalty, Bridget adds comic relief to the play. She is aware of the pranks Doalty plays on the English soldiers and is afraid Doalty will be arrested. Bridget is on the receiving end of many of Doalty's jabs while at the hedge-school. Bridget takes Doalty's jokes well and appears to be happy to be his companion.



Objects/Places

Hedge School

A hedge school was a school formed when Penal Laws in Ireland attempted to keep Roman Catholic religious leaders from teaching in schools. These hedge schools generally met in barns or private homes and were not sponsored by the Irish government.

Homer's Odyssey

Jimmy Jack reads from this Greek play and appears to believe the characters in the play are as real as any of the people who live around him.

Flowers

Sarah presents a bunch of flowers to Manus in the first act of the play as he teaches Sarah how to speak. Manus uses these flowers as a tool to teach Sarah to say the word "flowers."

A Surveyor's Pole

Doalty steals this pole from the soldiers who are working on the new map of Ireland.

New National School

Hugh is invited to be the headmaster of this new school which is sponsored by the government. Hugh's students at the hedge school believe these national schools will replace hedge schools. In the closing act of the play Hugh learns a man formerly employed as a bacon curer has been hired to be headmaster of this school.

Name Book

It is in this book that Owen and Yolland record the English translations of the Irish place names.

Inis Meadhon

Inis Meadhon is an island where Manus is hired to start a hedge school.



Dance

It is from this dance that Yolland and Maire run away to spend time with one another.

Soda Bread and Black Tea

This bread and tea make up the meals that Manus fixes for his father.

Banister

Manus suggests to Owen that before Owen leaves he have someone fix a banister on the stairs that lead to Hugh's rooms above the hedge school so that Hugh will not hurt himself on the stairs.



Themes

The Power of Language

The central idea of this play is the power that language holds over a people and their culture. The entire being of a society is caught up in the language that they use. This language portrays their beliefs, their traditions and their individuality. If one takes a group of people, as in this play, and attempts to change the language of their lives, it changes the meaning of their entire being. Yolland alludes to this idea when he tells Owen that he feels even if he learns Irish, he will still never truly understand the subtle meanings of the Irish language and be able to understand the Irish people. Yolland believes he will always be considered an outsider because his primary language is English. Hugh also makes the statement that the factual past is not necessarily what shapes the people of any particular culture. It is instead the way these facts are portrayed through the language that a particular people use. For instance, the Odyssey can be translated into English, but it loses some of the connotations implied in the original Greek text.

Ironically Sarah's inability to speak also illustrates how powerful language is. If Sarah had the ability to speak, she would have been able to tell everyone in the community that she had seen Yolland and Maire together. Through her language she would have the power to try to convince the soldiers that Manus was not responsible for Yolland's disappearance. Instead, Sarah cannot tell anyone what she saw the night of the dance.

Reactions to Modernization

One of the central themes in this play is the reactions of the various characters to the loss of tradition and approaching modernization of their world. Manus is one of the characters most impacted by these changes. He feels comfortable in the hedge school and does not want to leave his comfort zone. As a result, he does not apply for a job at a new school. However, it appears Manus' father will leave his son behind when he does apply for the same job at the new, modern school. Along with his unwillingness to move to a new job, Manus also holds his students back by teaching them the classics and avoiding lessons in English. It is perhaps Manus' refusal to modernize that causes him to lose his sweetheart. Because Manus shows no desire to better himself as a result of his fear of the modern and the unknown, Maire believes he is not interested in her.

The main action of the play is focused around the English soldiers' attempt to Anglicize the names of places in the small Irish city both for military and taxation purposes. While trying to translate names of certain places Owen and Yolland determine that some place names are not even appropriate any more because the basis for the place names no longer even exist. For this reason the two wonder if the new modern names should be



based on the traditional names, or should be changed to reflect the modern circumstances.

Some instances where the characters in the play react to modernization are interesting because they are reverse of what might be expected. It seems that Owen, who grew up in the area, would be sentimental about the names of the places he grew up near. Owen, however, seems to have no trouble coming up with new, modern names. It is instead Yolland, who has no ties to the area and does not even speak Irish, who becomes upset with the proposed changes and declares the two should leave the names as they are.

Political Unrest

A glimpse of the political unrest felt by the people in this Irish city is also portrayed in this play. In this beginning this unrest is seen only by harmless pranks such as those played by Doalty when he moves the soldiers' surveying equipment. After Yolland's disappearance, the soldiers' actions toward the Irish citizens become violent. If Yolland is not found the soldiers claim they will eventually destroy the entire area. Some citizens, such as the Donnelly twins, are apparently involved in active conspiracy against the English soldiers. These twin students have disappeared from the school, and it is suspected they may have been involved with Yolland's disappearance. Although none of the students are willing to talk about the actions or location of the twins before their townspeople are threatened by the English soldiers, after these threats are given Doalty decides to call upon the twins to lead a revolt against the soldiers.

Style

Point of View

As is the case in most plays *Translations* is told from the first person point of view of each individual character. Through their lines characters have their own opportunity to share their own thoughts and feelings with each other and with their audience. The story is told through dialogue. Descriptive passages serve only to describe to those acting out the play what motions they should make or what the setting should look like. This form keeps the audience focused on the idea of language and the impact of this language. Although many of the characters speak different languages, all their lines are presented in English, which allows the audience to know what the characters are saying. The action of the play also takes place in the span of just a few days, making the story ideal for a stage play.

Setting

The majority of this play is set in a nineteenth-century hedge-school located in northwest Ireland. Friel sets his play in the fictional city of Baile Beag, in the real Ireland county of Donegal. The school meets in a building formally used as a barn. Although animals are no longer kept here, it is obvious the school was once a barn. There are still farming implements, straw and empty stalls in the building. Nearly all the action of the play occurs in this barn. Hugh, the master of the school, and Manus, Hugh's son, live above the school. The only other setting used in this play other than the barn is in the outdoor scene where Yolland and Maire profess their love to each other.

Other places in the town are mentioned in the play, but action does not take place there. For instance, Sarah indicates Hugh has gone to Anna na mBreag's, which is a local pub. Other places referred to in the play include the hay fields where Maire works, Maire's house, and the fields where the soldiers are camped.

Language and Meaning

Interestingly, this play is about language and the meaning of this language. There are a variety of different languages the characters speak. These languages include Greek, Latin, Irish and English. Even Sarah's communication in the form of gestures can be considered a kind of language. While these differing languages cause confusion and misunderstandings among the characters, the real story is the way in which language can represent and give meaning to an entire culture. For instance, Jimmy is obsessed with Latin and Greek, two languages that are not even used at the time except in the hedge school. Jimmy's unchanging, stale appearance personifies these dead languages. Although they were beautiful in their time, these languages are now out of date and need new "clothes."



Language is used in the play as a tool to separate people. For instance, Hugh will communicate with Yolland in English but does not hesitate to tell Yolland that English is a plain and plodding sounding language. Manus knows English but refuses to speak to Yolland in the language that Yolland understands. Manus would rather allow his brother to translate than speak directly to this person whom he sees as a traitor. Both Hugh and Manus use their differing languages to make Yolland feel like an outsider. In much the same way language is also used in the play to connect people. Sarah feels very deeply connected to Manus, the man who taught her how to talk. This connection is so strong that when Manus goes away, she is no longer able to talk. The play also shows that differing languages need not keep people apart. For instance, although Yolland and Maire share different languages they find a way to rise above these differences and communicate with each other.

Structure

This story is structured as a play to be acted out on stage. There are three acts. Act one has one scene, Act two has two scenes and Act three has one scene. The entire play, complete with scene descriptions and directions for the actors, is reproduced in this work. Although this is a play where the main characters speak different languages, almost all text is presented in English. The exceptions are the Greek and Latin phrases that Jimmy and Hugh use. Translations for these Greek and Latin phrases are found at the end of the play.

This story molds well to the form of a play. Friel's well-developed, lively characters tell their story in a way that would be difficult to portray in an expository form. Because it is a play, the story is told mainly through dialogue. The only exceptions to this primary use of dialogue are the sections that describe the settings or give stage directions.



Quotes

"That's the height of my Latin. Fit me better if I had even that much English." Act one, pg. 8.

"Sweet smell! Sweet smell! Every year at this time somebody comes back with stories of the sweet smell. Sweet God, did the potatoes ever fail in Baile Beag? Well, did they ever - ever? Never! There was never blight here. Never. Never. But we're always sniffing about for it, aren't we? - looking for disaster. The rents are going to go up again - the harvest's going to be lost - the herring have gone away for ever - there's going to be evictions. Honest to God, some of you people aren't happy unless you're miserable and you'll not be content until you're dead!" Act one, pg. 18.

"'Uncertainty in meaning is incipient poetry' - who said that?" Act one, pg. 36.

"Even if I did speak Irish I'd always be an outsider here, wouldn't I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won't it? The private core will always be...hermetic, won't it?" Act two, Scene one, pg. 48.

"But remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen - to use an image you'll understand - it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of...fact." Act two, Scene one, pg. 52.

"Say anything at all, I love the sound of your speech." Act two, Scene two, pg. 63.

"I had a stone in my hand when I went out looking for him - I was going to fell him. The lame scholar turned violent." Act three, pg. 70.

"Leave me alone, Owen. I know nothing about Yolland. If you want to know about Yolland, ask the Donnelly twins." Act three, pg. 75.

"He left me home, Owen. And the last thing he said to me - he tried to speak in Irish - he said, 'I'll see you yesterday' - he meant to say 'I'll see you tomorrow.' And I laughed that much that he pretended to get cross and he said 'Maypoll! Maypoll!' because I said that word wrong. And off he went, laughing - laughing, Owen! Do you think he's all right? What do you think?" Act three, pg. 77.

"If Yolland hasn't been got by then, they will ravish the whole parish." Act three, pg. 81.

"The sweet smell! Smell it! It's the sweet smell! Jesus, it's the potato blight!" Act three, pg. 83.

"We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home." Act three, pg. 85.



"James thinks he knows, too. I look at James and three thoughts occur to me: A - that it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. James has ceased to make that discrimination." Act three, pg. 88.



Topics for Discussion

Explore the idea that language is a tool that can be used to unify or divide. Also, identify the different types of languages as portrayed in the play.

Discuss the significance of Sarah's inability to speak. How does her lack of speech impact the action of the play?

Compare and contrast Manus and Owen. Include the brothers' personalities and careers as well as their roles in the play in your discussion.

Consider Owen's translation of Lancey's description of the work the soldiers will be doing. What would have been the impact if Owen had translated Lancey's words correctly? How does this skewed translation fit into the main theme of the play, the idea of the power of language?

When Yolland goes missing, Manus runs away because he is afraid he will be accused in the disappearance. If you were in Manus' situation would you have reacted the same way? Why or why not?

Consider Maire's insistence that the hedge-school students learn English instead of the classics. Do you agree with her viewpoint? Why or why not?

How does Manus' unwillingness to modernize fit into the action of the play? Might things have turned out differently if he'd been less resistant to change?

Consider the significance of Jimmy's love of the classics. What does his marriage proposal at the end of the play represent?

Explore the significance of the inclusion of the christening and the death of Nellie Ruadh's baby. Why is this detail included? Why is it important to the play?