

STRANGER IN THE ROOM:  
ILLUMINATING FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH IRISH DRAMA

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## Chapter One, A Brief History

This thesis centers on a country that has produced some of the greatest and most important English language dramas of the past two centuries. Within this cultural context, this thesis is also about a feminine revival in Irish theatre and how this can be a powerful tool to incite change. Early in history, Irish writers, and specifically dramatists, recreated a type of theatre that captured the true essence of what it meant to be Irish by representing their struggles, frustrations and humor. The Irish talent for storytelling connects back to its Gaelic roots and has remained a constant in the life of a culture that has passed down this art form for centuries. The focus of this thesis is to examine three contemporary Irish plays by prominent playwrights who came to the world of theatre from very different backgrounds. Each play is written by a different hand, yet all share a vital common denominator: the interaction of female character groups – groups that are central to the action of each play. What incited my interest in these three plays – Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone* and Marina Carr’s *The Mai* – was the playwright’s ability to expose what had been silenced in Irish history for so long. Each female character portrays one important aspect of Irish womanhood that has been tragically understated in the nation’s literature since the death of John Millington Synge: woman’s struggle between what she wants to be and who she is expected to be. These three plays will be scrutinized in terms of three elements of social control contributing to woman’s struggle in Irish society: myth, church and patriarchal tradition.

Later in this introductory chapter, I will address Foucault’s theory of “the family cell” and explain how relevant this theory is to the understanding of the Irish family. One way to approach this discussion is to question what informs the creation of these

characters and to speculate on both the dramatic significance (what the playwright wants us to take away from these plays) and the cultural significance (how this becomes a part of the Irish experience). In order to discuss Irish drama within this framework I must outline existing geographical, demographical, socio-political, nationalistic, and personal influences that inform select dramatists of the past century. For this discussion, I will draw on the work of Synge and Sean O'Casey in order to ground the later plays. Also relevant to this study is the incorporation of select theories of theatre that help to bring a broader perspective to the critical discussion of the contemporary plays.

It is not an easy task to set out to discuss the literary heritage of a country like Ireland because Ireland is a country like no other. The list of its literary giants is long and full of a richness whose melody is unique and complicated. While the work and perseverance of William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory with the Abbey Theatre cannot be overlooked, I had to choose a point of departure that largely bypasses some of the early notable literary revolutionaries. I begin this research with full awareness of the early work of Yeats and Gregory, but must start by discussing a more limited history of theatre as it leads to the three works of the late twentieth century dramatists who are at the heart of this thesis. In order to fully realize the potency of the Friel, Devlin, and Carr plays, a likely beginning for any discussion of Irish theatre would be John Millington Synge. The paradoxical role of Irish womanhood is central to his work and is framed within a consciousness of a native landscape that is also found in Sean O'Casey and others. This landscape is also referred to as "naturalist drama." Originating from the 1850s European landscape painting, naturalism as a theory for literature and drama evolved as secular and social issues became the subject of literature: "many elements of

‘naturalism’ became habitual, but the conscious description awaited further emphasis, in which the key term is ‘environment’” (Williams, 127). This movement portrayed character and action as being influenced by environment (natural and social) (127). When applied to the dramatists discussed in this research, it becomes clear that naturalism can be linked to Synge, O’Casey and earlier, George Bernard Shaw (who I will later discuss as having influenced O’Casey). To set the stage for the historical context of this development in literature and drama:

The years between 1900 and 1915 also saw a development of a quite different sort – the “Irish Renaissance,” the manifestation of an aroused nationalistic spirit in literature. But the theatre in Ireland was essentially a branch of that in England rather than a truly native institution. Then, during the nineteenth century, as nationalism and the accompanying concern for things purely local and indigenous increased, Ireland began to deny its English heritage and to glorify the Celtic. (Brockett, 160)

From this historical context comes the basis for the incremental growth of a specific identity for Ireland, separate from the Anglo-influence. These early efforts on the part of Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Moore and Edward Martyn (160) are therefore undeniably crucial. Another important factor to understand the contributions of the formation of the Irish Literary Theatre is to acknowledge the hard work and perseverance required to create an Irish dramatic movement and to convince audiences to consistently support it. The players in the “Irish Renaissance” were indeed aware of the social and political climate of the time and this awareness gave them the necessary tools needed to build a dramatic movement about Irish (Celtic) culture and for Irish (Celtic) audiences. Therefore, having its roots in the early nineteenth century, the notion of naturalism is working at the heart of the three contemporary plays of this thesis and helps define what Yeats and the other backers of the IRT were dealing with. “The theory of naturalism, in

fiction and drama, is then a conscious presentation of human character and action within a natural and social environment” (127). Indeed, it is crucial to note the influence of landscape on the dramatists and its impact on the characters in the plays.

These literary landscapes often have sharp and cruel edges that reflect complex historical realities. The convoluted history of Ireland produces the need to define geographic and political boundaries: Catholic and Protestant, tribe and state, myth and Church, male and female, the North and the Republic, Gaelic and English. As is the case with colonized societies, binary, opposing factors are created because of the imposition of one culture upon another. However, it is important to note that many of these contemporary plays deal with Irish problems that are deeply rooted in the culture and that are not a direct result of English colonization or its aftermath.

As seen in the focus plays of this thesis, there is a duality in all women: the person fighting against the confines of tradition and the person immersed in that tradition. The voice and presence of the Irish female had been long overlooked and underrepresented. One of the core texts used in this thesis is historian Dermaid Ferriter’s *The Transformation of Ireland*. This sociological perspective of Ireland’s history is sensitive to the omissions placed on its women. Ferriter reminds readers of female participation during the Easter Uprising<sup>1</sup> in 1916. *Cumman na mBan* was the “female wing of the Irish Volunteers,” a role that many women felt transcended “volunteer” status and actually made them participants in their war, this Irish war for independence (Ferriter, 215). The problem with the concept of women as soldiers was that the male counterparts could not

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<sup>1</sup> The Easter Uprising on Easter Monday, 1916... While the British were getting involved in WWI, Patrick Pearse and about 1,200 Irish freedom fighters led riots through the city centre of Dublin, capturing the main post office, which became the main headquarters during this nearly weeklong Irish rebellion against British occupation.

accept the image of their women in the front lines acting as combatants. Kathleen Clarke is the Irish female archetype for this claim – her husband was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), an organization formed in Dublin in 1858 that later became a part of the Irish Volunteers; the IRB organized the 1916 Easter Rising. Mrs. Clarke was discouraged from participating in the revolt because her husband “insisted her role was to ensure the well-being of the dependants of those involved in the rising” (Ferriter, 142). The message to women was ‘stay at home and care for the children,’ a catch-phrase for the male-prescribed role. However, many women participated in various positions of combat: bomb making, bomb detonating, espionage, etc. Because the image of Ireland’s female population was to be preserved as pure, women’s contributions were ignored when history began to take record of these events. With this prominent Clarke example as precedent, Ferriter describes how “later in the century, women were completely written out of the narrative of the Rising” (142). A poem by Brian Moore titled “Invisible Women,” (1916) depicts this absence:

For he sings of the bold Fenian men  
and the boys of the old brigade  
what about the women who stood there too?  
When history was made?  
Ireland, Mother Ireland with your freedom-loving sons,  
Did your daughters run and hide at the sound of guns?  
Or did they have some part in the fight  
And why does everybody try to keep them out of sight? (142)

This poem asks the question why female participation in Ireland’s struggles has gone unacknowledged. Who is to benefit if history is represented in this way? More importantly, who suffers by history’s lack of record – and what long-term effects does this have on those that have been overlooked? Female identity suffers as a result of this



male dominance and repression. This discussion is more closely analyzed in Kathryn Kirkpatrick's book, *Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities*.

In Kirkpatrick's account, the discussion of identity and women's roles seeks to record the female contributions previously gone unrecorded. To begin, it identifies the earliest organized women's suffrage group as dating back to 1908. One of its members, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, described the Irish oppression of women as not solely a problem to blame on the Anglo-colonization, but a problem with root causes in the culture itself. In other words, before and after the English, Irish women were not integrated into their culture. For the post-1923 Irish, connection "with partition and the Republic's embrace of a Catholic theocracy that enshrined women's domestic role in the state constitution" represented an effective block to the emancipation of Irish women (Kirkpatrick, 2). But the struggle's roots stretched back to the Women's Franchise League in the early 1900s. Interestingly, this sentiment is reflected in President Mary Robinson's 1990 election speech when she addressed the question of women's involvement in the definition of Irish nationalism:

...I was elected by men and women of all parties and none, by many with great moral courage who stepped out from the faded flags of the Civil War and voted for a new Ireland, and above all by the women of Ireland, who instead of rocking the cradle rocked the system and who came out massively to make their mark on the ballot paper and on a new Ireland.  
(McMullen, 32)

President Robinson illuminates the relevancy of gender to Irish history, as well as the relevancy, perhaps more importantly, of speaking to the whole of Ireland's women as one (powerful) voice, nationally. Just as electing female officials is an important challenge to male hegemony, so are the stories and dramas that bring silenced voices to the forefront. The playwrights of this thesis have in some way challenged the traditions that silenced

women and therefore challenged the elements of social control. The plays mentioned here have exposed what was hidden and shook the foundation of Irish cultural and literary tradition.

One of the early playwrights to provide the first significant dramatic commentary on the burdens of Irish womanhood was J.M. Synge. The next section of this chapter returns to 1898, far from the bustling of 1990s Dublin town to a very rural locale off the west coast of Ireland known as the Aran Islands. These islands, known as Aranmor, Inishmaan and Inishere are about thirty miles from Galway and are the setting and/or influence for Synge's plays. Synge was not yet a fully realized writer when he decided, with Yeats' encouragement, to visit the unexplored west coast and record the lives of the peasants who inhabited these almost uninhabitable islands. Given Synge's education, fluency in Gaelic, and overall amicable personality, the experiment was a complete success in terms of dramatic structure and fidelity to the spoken language of an earlier, almost pre-colonial world. Thanks to Synge, the outcome of this experiment was the lives of the Aran peasants transferred to such locales as Synge's own county Wicklow were recorded and presented in dramatic form for the first time. Even while a new independence movement was slowly moving past the home rule goals of the Parnell generation, the Irish literary revolution was already exploding on stage.<sup>2</sup> Synge's exposure of the lives of the secluded Aran dwellers came at the appropriate time in the Irish literary revival to help spread a sense of national pride. However, many of these plays were met with disapproval because the audience misinterpreted them as humiliating to the people of the Aran Isles. It was, for many, a far too public revelation of the darker

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<sup>2</sup> For further reading on the renaissance of the Irish stage and the years of Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge, see Mary Trotter's *Ireland's National Theaters: Political Performance and the Origins of the Irish Dramatic Movement*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001.

side of Gaelic society. Although writing in English, Synge captured the rhythms of the local language and the mythology. Even at the turn of the century, Gaelic was still the spoken language of the Islands and the people were spiritually ruled by pagan rituals built on historic Gaelic myths.

The people who inhabited the Aran Islands were mostly fisherman who felt dependent on the sea and controlled by some powerful force it had over their lives. Irish scholar T.R. Henn discusses Synge's literary contributions in the introduction to the 1963 Methuen Drama collection of all six Synge plays and addresses the islanders' perspective:

Since the sea takes them, the islanders do not learn to swim, for that would only prolong suffering...you must not take back what the sea has claimed; if your cap blows off, you must not look at it, but ask another whether it is floating crown or brim uppermost, and if the crown is on top, you must leave it, for the sea may think that you are beneath it, and take it as a simulacrum of you. All are aware of an immanence of the supernatural, of omens far older than Christianity. (34-35)

As in the case of Greek tragedy, Irish myth carries with it sets of rules that govern the lives of humans. *Riders to the Sea* is a one-act tragedy focused around one mother who loses her husband and all her sons to the sea. But of course it is also much more involved than the sea-god taking away Maurya's six male children. Here, tragedy comes in a variety of forms because the men are the breadwinners and must therefore rely on the sea for livelihood, but this sea is also the destroyer of them and the women they will leave behind.

One of Synge's major dramatic concerns is "man face to face with his mortality" (Brockett, 167) and this concern is prevalent in *Riders to the Sea*. This play emulates Greek tragedy through sisters Cathleen and Nora who act as the Greek chorus, keening

for the dead brother while they stay close to the home in support of their mother, Maurya. A few pages into the play Cathleen and Nora secretly explore the contents of a bundle they had kept hidden from their mother. Michael, their brother, has been lost to the sea for nine days and they have made many trips to the coast to see whether his body had yet floated to shore. When the sisters eventually get a moment alone they open the bundle to see whether the material hidden in the bundle matches the clothes worn by Michael. The sisters attempt to connect the contents of the bundle to Michael in order to confirm that he has drowned and that then he can be given a proper burial. Synge provides a very descriptive glimpse into the lives of the Aran women here. Since Cathleen and Nora sew the shirts and clothes for themselves and their family members they know exactly what Michael was last wearing. When comparing the flannel scrap to the flannel shirts that hang in the closet, there is conclusive evidence. Cathleen says, “It’s the same stuff, Nora; but if it is itself, aren’t there great rolls of it in shops of Galway, and isn’t it many another man may have a shirt of it as well as Michael himself?” But Nora is picking up the stocking that had washed ashore and says: “It’s Michael, Cathleen, it’s Michael; God spare his soul, and what will herself say when she hears this story...it’s the second one of the third pair I knitted, and I put up three-score stitches, and I dropped four of them” (Harrington, 68). As the sisters confirm that the found garments have connections to their brother Michael, they also feel responsible to hide the information from Maurya in order to spare her from news of another son taken by the sea.

Another feminine insight into the lives of the peasants occurs just before the scene mentioned above when Cathleen and Nora remind their mother that Bartley (the last living brother), had left the house that day without anything to eat. The sisters wrap up

some bread and then convince Maurya to go find Bartley and wish him well. Already the superstitions haunt, direct and prioritize the family's actions. Maurya should have wished Bartley well before he left instead of trying to convince him to stay. Maurya is in a state of mourning when Bartley prepares to leave for the market with his horses so Maurya's pleadings that he not depart represent a desperate attempt to preserve her last living son. Nevertheless, Bartley finds the same fate as his brothers. *Riders to the Sea* reaches its conclusion through a revelation of the strength embodied in Maurya. What makes her such a great tragic heroine of Irish drama is her ability to accept the despair that has become reality for the Irish peasant and the sense of calm she exhibits through the final acceptance of her defeat. "They're all gone now," Maurya says "and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me" (71). In a sense, Maurya frees herself from despair and on a larger scale, frees all women of Ireland from the despair of loss and fate. Maurya's self-proclaimed liberation from what has been fated sets up the future Irish feminine spirit as resilient. *Riders to the Sea* is the most tragic of Synge's plays although the others were much more controversial.

*In the Shadow of the Glen* portrays a woman named Nora Burke who ceased upon an opportunity to leave her tyrannical husband for the freedom of the open road and a Tramp she barely knew: "this dramatization of the conflict between a repressive life and the urge for joy and freedom infuriated many Irishmen, who declared Irish women incapable of adultery" (Brockett, 167). The play was controversial on stage because it was misunderstood as a criticism of Irish peasantry and womanhood (Block, 398). A more accurate interpretation is that it stands as a commentary on the empowerment of women and their ability to make choices. In none of Synge's writings about the Aran

Islands does he portray any lack of respect for the peasant way of life. Synge was a poet first and a playwright second, and he therefore viewed the Aran life through a poetic lens. His intent is evident in his re-location of this Aran folktale to the shepherd's country of County Wicklow, a region adjacent to Dublin itself.

*In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) was Synge's first produced play, its reception regrettably clashed with the pursuits of Yeats' nationalistic revival because it seemed to expose the poverty and immorality of the peasants in County Wicklow, and indeed anywhere in rural Ireland. The *Glen* portrayed another version of female independence of spirit and living against social mores. However, Synge poses the tragic irony in Nora's decision to leave her husband for the tramp since she will be leaving a desperate situation only to face the far more dangerous reality of life on the road. There remains little to no hope for women in Synge's plays, which is reflective of the reality faced on the real islands. Survival is struggle for these poverty-ridden mythical dwellers that are both tied to and caught by nature and nature's control. These are the powerful elements at work in Synge's dramas.

The reasons to discuss Synge's plays are twofold: he was a pioneer in capturing, through his art, lives that were previously lived unrecorded (just like the contributions of Irish women were not recorded in early Irish historical texts) and because, as the recent New York debut of "Druid Synge" reminds us, the women in Synge's plays were the focus of his drama. *Riders to the Sea*, *Playboy of the Western World* and *In the Shadow of the Glen* reveal the female encounter with fundamental aspects of repression that remains entrenched to this day.

This century of repression could have been predicted from the initial public attack on the riots that surrounded *Playboy of the Western World* performances at the Abbey. Audiences at that time were comfortable in yelling and shouting and sometimes breaking into song during theatre performances, but when this occurred during an early *Playboy* performance, Yeats made the mistake of trying to control the crowd by calling the police. “When members of the audience booed the play that night despite Yeat’s admonitions, constables entered the building and arrested individuals causing a disturbance. Police representing an English government arresting Irishmen in the national theater raised the furor of many nationalist protestors” (Trotter, 125). The relevance of this occurrence for the purpose of my thesis is to present a visual explanation of the mood of the times, which was very much preoccupied with social presentation based on Catholic rule and the Irish bearing the weight of the English colonists having reinvented a nationalism that was far from being Irish/Gaelic. The reason it is crucial to revisit Synge’s contributions is to create historical context for the challenges Synge was writing against and how many of those challenges are imbedded deep in the roots of contemporary drama and the main plays discussed in this thesis. But Synge’s sharply reflective mirror was shrouded by his premature death in 1909. The relevancy of his literary contributions lives on in the productions of Ireland’s contemporary stage which include perennial revivals and the reworking of his oeuvre in the “Druid Synge” performances. But it remained for another playwright to bring an examination of Irish women to the cities where the rebellion was centered. For further historical context, I turn the discussion to the very well known plays of dramatist Sean O’Casey.

On March 8, 1925, *The New York Times* drama reviewer stated the following: “It is through the stupidity, the fear, the avarice, the drunkenness of man, that all the woes of the women in these two plays come into being.” The “two plays” referred to are O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Shadow of the Gunman*. In coming to understand the power and relevancy of O’Casey’s early works, it is important to know that he grew up in the tenements of Dublin and spent his life as a laborer. These experiences, above all else, explain how his storytelling invokes a real and painful representation of Dublin tenement life. As the *Times* drama critic describes: “the women in O’Casey’s plays are realists from necessity, the men are dreamers by default. The men are frustrated and gulled by dreams which they are unable and unwilling to convert into realities” (Krause, 505). The sense of being incapable of changing one’s landscape is especially rife in *Juno and the Paycock*. O’Casey’s female characters can see their way out of their desperate situation but whether they are able to take action is a different issue. The men can only remain stuck in old habits and perpetuate the same unhealthy reactions to their situation.

Due, in part, to the creative nurturing from Lady Gregory and the literary influence of his fellow Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, O’Casey was able to have his early plays produced for the stage. Also important to note, Shaw was a socialist and a feminist whose female characters dared to challenge the historical hegemonic framework that sought to limit and confine them. For O’Casey, Shaw exemplified the greatest contribution that writers and their craft could give to society and it was through studying Shaw’s plays that O’Casey crafted his Dublin trilogy with wit and a profound understanding of human tragedy.



Within O'Casey's early dramatic work, Shaw's influence is easily detected. Irish literary critic David Krause's essay, from the Norton *Modern Irish Drama* collection of Irish plays and essays, suggests that "the tragic figure becomes truly tragic when he is able to see his own image; when the women in O'Casey plays finally see themselves and their world clearly they become tragic figures" (506). Juno Boyle, in *Juno and the Paycock*, understands that she must take her daughter and leave the tenements in order to stop living in the continually unhealthy consequences of her husband's decisions (or lack of decision making). But while Juno Boyle expresses this sense of self-awareness and awareness of the reality for herself and her daughter by deciding to leave, her predecessor, Minnie Powell from the *Shadow of the Gunman* (1923), remains lost as a tragic figure. Minnie's life ends when she is shot by the British army just outside her Dublin tenement after getting caught concealing explosives in her flat. Minnie conceals the explosives for a man (Davoren) she is smitten with who disregards her as merely a girl. While Minnie is capable of making a quick and powerful decision, the two male characters, Davoren and Seumus, are incapable. It is not until Minnie is shot in front of their tenement that Davoren realizes what a grave error he has made by underappreciating Minnie and therefore allowing her to die in his place. Davoren is a poet who attempts to remain disconnected from the war raging on outside the tenements. Yet this is one of O'Casey's messages: the fight for Irish freedom affects everyone. But her act of sacrifice and bravery makes Minnie the play's great heroine. Minnie believes that men die for their country but Davoren disagrees: "No man, Minnie, willingly dies for anything" (92). As the second act continues with a heightened sense of impending doom and growing fear of a British raid, it is Minnie who remains calm. Davoren and his

roommate, Seumas, are panic-stricken over getting caught by the British. Not until the final scene do the men realize too late what they have done:

Davoren: Do you realize that she has been shot to save us?

Seumas: Is it my fault; am I to blame?

Davoren: It is your fault and mine, both; oh we're a pair of dastardly cowards to have let her do what she did. (102)

Minnie puts her life in danger to protect the greater cause of Irish nationalism. *Shadow of the Gunman* is a trying out of technique and theme for O'Casey as Minnie clearly overshadows the male protagonists and steps to center stage in the second and final act.

While the characters of *Shadow* all contribute to Minnie's tragic end, the worst enemy to the Boyle family is the father, "Captain" Jack Boyle. The family members represent, in microcosm, the greater community of Irish people repressed by their colonizers and stuck in the Irish tenements in poverty-ridden Dublin. Though the Boyles interact with other tenants, much of *Juno and the Paycock* occurs within the confines of the Boyle's flat. The family tears itself apart in the home rather than out on the streets of Dublin, as is the case with the family unit in O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, where the extended family unit fights internal and external demons. That progression into external conflict surfaces again most fully in post-1990 dramas, as we see in the chapter three review of Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*.

Juno Boyle is a more fully developed and complex character than her forerunner, Minnie Powell. Although Juno Boyle will not come to the same demise as Minnie, the situation they live in is also tragic. Juno's will and ability to see her way out of the chaos her husband keeps the family in makes Juno the heroine of this popular play, *Juno and*

*the Paycock*. Juno defends her family though she is critical of her lazy husband and his manipulative friend, Joxer Daly:

Boyle: [to Joxer, who is still outside]. Come on, come on in, Joxer; she's gone out long ago, man. If there's nothing else to be got we'll furrage out a cup o'tay, anyway. It's the only bit I get in comfort when she's away. 'Tisn't Juno should be her pet name at all, but Deirdre of the Sorras for she's always grousin'...

Joxer: It's a terrible thing to be tied to a woman that's always grousin' I don't know how you stick it – it ud put years on me. It's a good job she has to be so often away. (209)

Clearly the men believe they have the advantage and can easily manipulate Juno when in reality she is privy to her husband's foolish behavior. Juno is exceptionally unique as a female character because of her self-awareness and ability to remain in that relationship in spite of Jack's disrespecting nature. Juno is the earliest significant antecedent in this tradition, and merits a closer reading to see how the woman is forcibly subordinated to the political troubles that dominate the next century of Irish culture, in the North and the Republic. Juno's only son, Johnny, has been involved in the Irish fight for independence where "his arm was blew off in the fight in O'Connell Street" and is now a fragile and paranoid shell of a young man incapable of creating a future.

O'Casey weaves the historically opposing male/female role into the relationship between Juno and Jack. Jack's futile actions show the power-play alive beneath the surface in an Irish male-female relationship. Later, Jack explains to Joxer that he is the man of the house and that if he wants Joxer to visit then Juno has no right to disagree. The following situation reveals Juno's true nature. In act two, the death of Mrs. Tancred's son (a neighbor in the tenement) has begun to affect the occupants as they hear

of the upcoming wake and begin to feel guilty for not giving more support to Mrs. Tancred. Crucial to this thesis is Juno's reaction, which is one of pity for all the Irish, not just the neighbor's son:

Juno: I'd like to know how a body's not to mind these things; look at the way they're afther leavin' the people in this very house. Hasn't the whole house, nearly, been massacred? Sure if it's not our business, I don't know whose business it is. (236)

Juno's stance is that they are all affected by one death, let alone the many deaths the tenements had seen (Johnny will come to an end in much the same way as Mrs. Tancred's son). Jack's stance, however, is that they should mind their own business and that it is no problem of theirs that all these deaths occur. O'Casey's insight into the male/female perspective is profound: Juno, (like Shaw's *Major Barbara*) can imagine a world outside the tenements and is willing to effect change while her husband is buried in the situation, ignorant of any will to change. O'Casey's commentary on the negative effects of capitalism on the Irish poor becomes apparent as the Boyle's are told they will inherit a large sum of money. Unfortunately, Jack spends the money on frivolous items even before receiving any money. Ironically, the inheritance never comes and all the merchandise is repossessed. The tragic moments continue to play out when the family is fooled by Mary's lover, Bentham, who supposedly makes a paperwork error that keeps Jack from receiving any of the money. Bentham disappears to London, leaving behind a pregnant and helpless Mary. It is Juno, the matriarch, who takes Mary to the doctor and then acts as the buffer between daughter and father when she goes and tells Jack about Mary. When told the news about Mary, Jack and Johnny react with aggression, threats of violence, finger pointing, and blame:

Johnny: She should be dhruvhen out o' the house she's brought disgrace on!

Mrs. Boyle: Hush, you Johnny. We needn't let it be bellow'd all over the place; all we've got to do is to leave...when we get the money...

Boyle: Money, what money? (246)

This scene, of Johnny and Jack arguing over the fate of Mary's baby, will be repeated in Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* where Malachy and his son Liam, have the same angry argument over Josie's decision to keep her baby. After this interaction, Jack and Joxer leave for the pub. While the furniture men come to repossess the furniture, two IRA members come to kill Johnny out of blame for getting the Tancred boy killed. Juno is notified that she must come to the police station to identify Johnny's body:

Juno: We'll go. Come, Mary, an' we'll never come back here agen. Let your father furrage for himself now; I've done all I could an' it was all no use – he'll be hopeless till the end of his days. I've got a little room in me sisther's where we'll stop till your throuble is over, an' then we'll work together for the sake of the baby. (252)

Survival, understanding and action are Juno's solutions to the situation. As Krause's essay discussed, women are the true tragic figures because they are capable of fully comprehending the tragedy of their existence. Juno's plan is full of potential and can provide a real future for the three of them:

Mary: My poor little child that'll have no father!

Juno: It'll have what's far better – it'll have two mothers. (253)

Although many critics agree that the best O'Casey dramas are his first three plays, he spent the remainder of his life writing for the theatre and, like Shaw, moved to England and remained there to the end of his days. Through their range of female characters, both

Synge and O'Casey proved an early inspiration for the central playwrights of this thesis, who re-address these issues in new ways after two generations of dramatic silence.

As mentioned in the opening pages of this thesis, one of the ways into the discussion of what informs the female characters in the contemporary plays exists in the cultural structures. Kathryn Conrad, an associate professor at the University of Kansas, wrote *Locked in the Family Cell*, and discusses Michel Foucault's theory on family structure as applied specifically to the Irish experience. Conrad's research, based on that of the French philosopher, (published, 1978, *The History of Sexuality*), described the importance of understanding "the family cell" structure. Basing its origins in eighteenth-century Europe, the family cell was the sexual formation for defining the "husband-wife axis and parents-children axis" (Conrad 4). While Conrad moves into a complete discussion of the paralysis for those living outside the traditional family cell (e.g. the homosexual or transgender cultures), the earlier chapters of her text focus on the Irish family life and the limitations it puts on women – as seen in the plays addressed in this thesis. Because the Irish family cell is such a defined and forceful entity throughout history, having a better understanding of its components makes the later discussion of contemporary Irish life less elusive. Foucault's theory appears as a central point in Conrad's novel on the socio-political outcome of a country like Ireland whose entire history can be linked to the importance, influence and watchful eye of family life. Already seen in Juno's dialogue when she warns the family to keep their issues away from the neighboring tenements. One crucial aspect of society that did not evolve in the post-colonial era was the restricted role of Irish women.

Conrad explains Foucault's theory as having "spheres" within where the genders are contained. What happens as a result of the existence of "spheres" is that they (women and spheres) can be monitored. The men were historically in charge of monitoring women within the family cell and although women grew to expect this constant state of monitoring, they did not completely accept it. The entire social order depended upon the maintenance of the male-masculine-breadwinner-dominator formula, therefore further disregarding woman's entrance into the nineteenth century industrial work force as a real liberation from the binding forces of the social order. Furthering the complexity of this social formation was the British domination over Irish culture, which saw Ireland as her great experiment. The Irish were viewed not only as uncivilized, "disorderly and unstable," but "British and, later, American political cartoons represented the Irish as animalistic and apelike creatures" (Conrad, 8). Though much of this angst targeted the Irish Catholic, respect for the Irish woman was also limited. Although the family cell worked to keep the "uncivilized" Irish in a perpetual state of monitoring, it did not mean the Irish would obey all the rules (the Catholic laws nor the British ones). Instead, the family cell fixated on hiding and covering up its member's transgressions (8).

This pattern becomes the focus of significant drama in the late twentieth century. In the case of Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the Mundy women are self-monitoring and self-regulating. Within their Irish family cell, when social laws are broken, they attempt to hide the transgression from the always watchful eyes of local society; this "concealment of instability" is done to maintain an external appearance (9). The outcome for a culture that reacts from this place of "concealment of identity" is a people who exist in a state caught between public and private distinction. This explanation becomes a

helpful tool when applied to the characters in the contemporary plays described in the next few chapters. Underlying dialogue and action are the “spheres” where the female Irish character struggles.

An early example of the duality between public and private life is captured in Friel’s 1981 play, *Translations*. Set in the fictional town of *Baile Beag* in the north of Ireland, *Translations* is a play based on the confusion of language. But when coupled with the new language of the British colonialists, who came to *Baile Beag* (Anglicized form is Ballybeg) to change the city names for a new map of Northern Ireland that would be used for British consumption, is altogether a different kind of translation. Not a translation that occurs, say, with many literature texts that have been translated over the years as a way to expand the scope of literature over multiple cultures and countries.

The kind of “translation” in Friel’s play remakes history, cultures, and people; its purpose is not to better understand the other’s point of view but to rewrite the native’s point of view. The loss of Gaelic to Irish culture was profound and Friel’s play captures the alienation the Irish began to feel toward their own country and countryside. An explanation of this alienation appears during the scenes where Owen, the son of the hedge schoolmaster, works alongside Yolland, the British government worker hired to translate and edit the maps of the North. Yolland makes an attempt to learn Gaelic, (though he takes part in the process of translating/destroying it) to be a part of the charming community of Ballybeg. Yolland becomes enamored with the landscape of Ireland – her people, drink, language – and becomes smitten with a local Irish woman. But as Yolland grows fond of Ballybeg he simultaneously feels a sense of guilt for taking part in the language and map conversion. In contrast, Owen (who was born and raised in



Ballybeg) shows no remorse for his part in removing Gaelic and replacing it with the language of the colonizers. Even when Yolland pronounces his name incorrectly, Owen purposefully overlooks the error in order to feel himself integrated into the British society he has sought out. The messages are clear, Owen has chosen to leave Ballybeg and his heritage behind while Yolland becomes charmed with Ireland and grows to appreciate the language he is erasing.

The relevancy in discussing *Translations* is to further explain the public vs. private distinction of the Irish who would have to hide even their own language from the British colonists. And to provide a basis for a discussion between the public and private distinctions made by women. The next chapter delves into this topic as seen in Friel's most popular play (which was made into a film in 1998) *Dancing at Lughnasa*. First performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, November 1990, the play follows the Mundy sisters as they navigate love and loss in a rapidly transitioning Ireland.

## Chapter Two, *Dancing at Lughnasa*

As theatre critic Elmer Andrews said of Friel's art, the modern dramatist interested in dealing with overlooked and underappreciated female roles in Irish history seeks to "recentre what is marginal to make the silences speak" (Anderson, 211). Not only do silences speak in Friel's fictional town of Ballybeg, but silences begin to reclaim what is being lost. The Mundy sisters are trapped in a moment of history where the past and the present are converging on their peaceful lives in Ballybeg, (a fictional town located in a non-fictional county in northwest Ireland). Location and time are crucial to the events and characters in the play: "[Friel's] characters are always restless and they move about in strange directions, dreaming of journeys that never take place" (Anderson, 220). Industrialization is moving in on the sister's quiet lives in County Donegal yet they cling to the old traditions like Irish music and dance. Industrialization and dancing vie for the Mundy's attention as does the final return of their aging older brother, Father Jack, whose storyline shows how old myths cannot stand up to invasive Catholic dogma. Dancing cannot be the final answer – not in this society, where "dancing would seem to be the expression of a distinctively female sexual energy which eludes a patriarchal linguistic order" (225). The play explores the relationships of the sisters to one another and unveils the lack of support from the males in their lives. The Mundy sisters are independent and headstrong but not immune to tragedy, loneliness, and loss. Once their individual livelihoods are stripped from them, they lose what is left of their freedom and slip into sadness and obscurity.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* is a play of memoir for Brian Friel. The narrator is Michael Mundy who tells the story of life with his mother and aunts during the summer

of 1936. There is no boy child actor, only the narrator – Friel/Michael – off to one side of the stage who describes the story of this summer. This play, which is based loosely on Friel’s own past, unveils not only the depths of Friel’s understanding of Irish culture but the roots of female neglect in its past. The Mundy sisters are Kate, Maggie, Agnes, Rose and Michael’s mother, Christina. The Mundy home is self-sustained by the women growing much of their food; they have chickens for eggs and pay for their needs from the money that Kate brings in as a school teacher as well as the gloves and socks that Kate and Maggie knit for sale. But the events of the summer that at one time keep the family together are, simultaneously, the same elements that are tearing them apart.

At the center of these events is a time-honored seasonal ritual. The Lughnasa festival is a harvest celebration beginning on the first day of August. *Lugh* was a Celtic God of the Harvest and represents the pagan ancestral connection the Irish have to their land and their culture, an Irish culture before Catholic dominance. The family is trapped within this struggle for dominance. Kate represents piety and Catholic morality, the one who believes the Church is holding the family together. *Lughnasa* presents a dilemma between eternal desires to be free and the crippling world of reality. Embedded in Michael’s memory of that summer is the return of his Uncle Jack, who has been working as a missionary in Uganda for twenty-five years and has returned to Ballybeg with malaria to await his impending death.

Although Jack does not take up a large amount of the dialogue, his presence is of profound impact. The women have become accustomed to taking care of themselves; however, they expect, to a certain extent, that Jack’s return will mean Jack can contribute to the maintenance of the home. Soon the sisters realize that Jack is too sick and too

exhausted to help. They also learn the Catholic Church has banished him to grow old and die outside the realms of the Church. Jack made the clergy in Africa nervous with his pure enjoyment of African culture and lifestyle – a passion that led him to embrace even the darker, pagan aspects of this colonial land. Jack admits he did not cooperate with the Englishmen who headed his charge. As this is not acceptable in the Church, they took away his assignment and sent him out of Africa to return to Ballybeg and die under the care of his sisters. Not only is Jack a disgrace to the family, Kate loses her teaching post as further punishment by the Church. Michael later explains the situation:

Michael: [Kate] was right about Jack. He had been sent home by his superiors, not because his mind was confused but for reasons that became clearer as the summer drew to a close. And she was right about losing her job in the local school. The parish priest didn't take her back when the new term began; although that had more to do with Father Jack than with falling numbers. (41)

Jack is feared by the Catholic diocese because he has gotten too involved in the lives of the Ugandans and too accustomed to African culture and tribal (pagan) beliefs:

Kate: But these aren't Christian ceremonies, Jack, are they?

Jack: Oh, no. The Ryangans have always been faithful to their own beliefs – like these two Festivals I'm telling you about; and they are very special, really magnificent ceremonies. I haven't described those two Festivals to you before, have I? (47)

Clearly Jack is made to pay for this need to act independently by losing his assignment in Africa and this punishment extends all the way to his sisters in Ballybeg. Jack's excommunication and the loss of Kate's income will prove to be the demise of the family and the end to their dancing at Ballybeg.

Not only does memory play tricks with reality, language does as well. For Friel, language has been a longtime interest explored through his creative work. In

*Translations*, it was a loss of the Gaelic language; in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, language is forgotten altogether in the lapses of Uncle Jack's memory. Friel lets the audience decide whether Uncle Jack is going senile from malaria or whether his mind is clear; the Church and his sister Kate, prefer to believe that his mind is ill. For Kate, the realization that her beloved and respected brother has found more clarity in the pagan rituals of African tribes than in those of the Church he represented leaves her defensive and growing more entrenched in Catholic dogma as a means of holding on to stability. In Kate's defense, she is the oldest sister and the main breadwinner. The weight of responsibility falls on Kate, who had taken on that role and assigned herself the guardianship of the Mundy household until Jack's return. The reason Kate grows more stern during this particular summer is because she now knows she cannot rely on Jack's help; once the Church abolishes her teaching position (a punishment also meant to hurt Jack) Kate, more than her sisters, begins to notice the cracks in the foundation of the Mundy family cell. Her reaction is to become more structured in the face of familial disintegration; unfortunately, this attitude fails to hold the family together.

An example of Kate's transformation into a more strict matriarch comes at the end of act one. Gerry Evans comes to visit Chris and their son Michael a few times that summer, Chris is her youngest and most vulnerable sister, and Kate feels most protective of her during Gerry's infrequent visits. But while Kate reacts negatively to his visits, Jack accepts Gerry into the Mundy's home without judgment and even acknowledges Gerry's visit to Ballybeg as temporary. Kate interrupts the following conversation to insert her disapproval and to remind Jack that he is sick and needs to take long walks to clear his mind. Again, the focus is on Jack being sick and therefore saying things he does

not actually mean; language and memory have tricked Jack according to Kate's point of view. He has been misled by Africa and now by his malaria and must spend his energy on "getting better" which is really to say he must stop claiming allegiance to Ryanga's tribal rituals and pagan ceremonies:

Jack: (To Chris) So Michael is a love-child?

Chris: I – yes – I suppose so...

Jack: He's a fine boy.

Chris: He's not a bad boy.

Jack: You're lucky to have him...in Ryanga women are eager to have love-children. The more love-children you have, the more fortunate your household is thought to be. Have you other love-children?

Kate: She certainly has not, Jack; no harm to Ryanga but you're home in Donegal now and much as we cherish love-children here they are not exactly the norm. (40)

As Uncle Jack's return to Ballybeg reformulates the lives of his sisters, so too does the arrival of a wireless radio. The "Marconi" as it is fondly referred to is the source of enjoyment and anger among the Mundy women. Marconi's eponymous invention was known by that name in the household, in spite of the fact that Kate disagreed with naming inanimate objects. Michael observes Kate's personality: "But Aunt Kate – she was a national schoolteacher and a very proper woman – she said it would be sinful to christen an inanimate object with any kind of name, not to talk of a pagan god" (1). The wavering between private versus public presentation is a consistent theme in this play. Much of the action in the household consists of moments where the sisters ebb and flow between self-monitoring and liberation. The other sisters are more optimistic than Kate and yearn to enjoy the music of the Marconi and dance and sing. As Irish social critic Elmer Andrews

discusses in his book *The Art of Brian Friel*: “the character pattern is established: tidal surges of desire welling up within one or other of the sisters which are constantly checked or diffused, sometimes good humouredly or wittily, sometimes bitingly, sometimes sadly” (222). Take, for instance, Michael’s mother Chris, who must juggle the feelings she has for Michael’s father Gerry Evans with the pressure she feels from the sisters (mostly Kate) to not have any emotional connection with him. Gerry’s brief return to the Mundy farm that summer (although this is memory and the audience will not know how often Gerry really visited) demonstrates his lack of responsibility for Chris or Michael. Gerry is just passing through; he has decided to join the forces in the Spanish Civil War. There is an irony in Gerry’s commitment to a war that has nothing to do with his background and his commitment toward Chris or Michael, who both legitimately need him. While Chris and Gerry wile away their time dancing with the sisters secretly watching, Kate once again reminds the family of Chris and Gerry’s disgrace of having an illegitimate child together and the humiliating effect this has on the family:

Kate: They’re not still talking, are they?

Maggie: Laughing. She laughs all the time with him. D’you hear them Aggie?

Agnes: Yes.

Kate: Laughing? Absolutely beyond my comprehension.

Agnes: Like so many things, Kate. (41)

This dialogue not only captures Kate’s disapproval of Gerry Evans, but also the strong difference between the sisters’ beliefs. Agnes and Maggie and the others do not mind Gerry visiting and seeing Chris content in his presence (although Agnes admits she fears Chris falling again into depression once Gerry departs), while Kate’s moral

piety forces her to struggle with the communal knowledge that Chris and Gerry are not married and that Michael is an illegitimate child. She cannot get beyond this because the forces of the family cell are at play. Kate feels even more responsibility to maintain the perceived moral integrity of the Mundy household because Jack (her one hope for a renewed social and moral order in the home and social standing in the community) has returned from Africa – ill, liberal and pagan.

As the Lughnasa festival calls the sisters to dance, Kate grows more close-minded to the idea of participating. When Rose begins to tell the story of the debauchery and fun that Lughnasa ignites, Kate fires back in anger to prevent her sisters from toying with the idea of attending this year's festival:

Kate: (very angry, almost shouting) And they're savages I know those people from the back hills! I've taught them! Savages – that's what they are! And what pagan practices they have are no concern of ours – none whatsoever! It's a sorry day to hear talk like that in a Christian home, a Catholic home! All I can say is that I'm shocked and disappointed to hear you repeating rubbish like that, Rose! (17)

Kate even refers to the Lughnasa traditions as pagan, just as the Catholic community has convinced itself that Jack had to leave Uganda because he believed in the pagan rituals of the Africans. The assumption here is that pagan rituals are bad, dangerous and amoral, although traditional Celtic rituals were of pagan roots. Kate's speech parallels that of the judgments put down on Jack by the Catholic diocese, the reason he was banished from Uganda and why Kate is fired from her teaching job: punishment for not following the Church. Here is the direct connection between Jack's experience in Uganda and the importance of the Lughnasa traditions: both represent the ancestral and historical roots of Irish society. Sadly, Michael explains in the final monologue that Jack dies of a heart



attack just twelve months later, but only after mysteriously recovering from his original illness:

Michael: Father Jack's health improved quickly and he soon recovered his full vocabulary and all his old bounce and vigour. But he didn't say Mass that following Monday. In fact he never said Mass again. But he never lost his determination to return to Uganda and he still talked passionately about his life with the lepers there. (60)

*Dancing at Lughnasa* is Friel's most direct commentary on Ireland's struggle between pagan and Catholic foundations. Audiences had no trouble focusing on the central female dynamic: the story is about the Mundy sisters as they navigate love and loss in a rapidly transitioning Ireland. A knitting factory was in the process of opening up in Donegal that would put the sisters out of working independently. The factory would throw them into the industrialization of Ireland, a world Agnes had no interest in joining. And as Agnes goes, so goes the simple-minded Rose.

The parallel here is the introduction of the Marconi and its ability to join them together in dance and unification, whereas the factory's version of industrialization splits the sisters apart. As the play comes to a close, the audience learns that Agnes and Rose have escaped their future as factory workers and left Ballybeg in the middle of the night. While a significant amount of dialogue is not given to this act of rebellion, it speaks loudly to the underlying theme of a yearning for freedom. Agnes and Rose had both felt the sharp edge of Kate's judgment and piety, and the knowledge that they would also be held prisoners at home and in a factory perhaps explains their need and ability to escape in the middle of the night. They left behind only a brief note: "We are gone for good. This is best for all. Do not try to find us" (60). We learn late in the play, through the device of our external narrator, that although a search was executed the sisters were never

heard from again. Not until Michael discovered Rose in a destitute home some 25 years later and learned that they had fled to London, worked as cleaning women for the Underground (London subway system) then moved on to other temporary jobs but nothing permanent; Agnes had died and Rose was nearly gone.

An interesting point of comparison to note here is the degree of authorial distance from the drama – or rather, the lack of it. Friel does not hide away as playwright but steps all around the play as the compassionate observer, unlike O’Casey, who would remain aloof. As for Maggie and Chris and Kate, all three sisters stayed on living in the house in Ballybeg; Kate took up occasional tutoring jobs but never taught in a schoolhouse again. Chris spent the rest of her work life sweating away in the knitting factory and Maggie, perhaps because of her sense of humor and wonderful imagination, tried to keep what was left of the family together. Maggie’s character is strong-willed, lighthearted and somewhat independent (though not enough to leave Ballybeg). Maggie is seen enjoying her cigarettes no matter what Kate says and she breaks off into song frequently throughout the play. Maggie is not afraid to speak her mind to Kate and she does not play along in Kate’s manipulations of the family:

Kate: 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, Maggie.

Maggie: (Wearily) Nothing’s about to collapse, Kate. (49)

Everything is about to collapse and Kate, for once, is correct. Maggie does not feel the same strangulation from Kate that the other sisters feel, perhaps allowing her to tolerate Kate’s suppressive nature. As mentioned earlier, Maggie is the sister most likely to break off in song or dance when the Marconi plays music. This passion in her influences the

other sisters and gets them to dance along as well; these scenes evoke the feminine power as in Greek tragedy.

The dancing of the Mundy women represents the breaking of social rules in order to adhere to a female freedom of sexuality reminiscent of Euripedes' play, *Bacchae*. This Greek tragedy unveils the Gods punishment of Pentheus' lack of respect for Dionysus and those who worship the Dionysian lifestyle. Pentheus explains in the following excerpt his deep concern and hate over the Bacchae's expression of freedom through dance and song: "I heard about strange new evils throughout the city – that our women have abandoned their homes for the sham revelries of Bacchus frisking about on the dark-shadowed mountains honoring with their dances the latest god, Dionysus...I'll put a stop quickly to their destructive bacchic revelry" (Esposito, 214). Pentheus goes on a rampage against the Bacchae since their sexual freedom threatens the King's attempts at maintaining order. This same element of repression is at work in *Dancing at Lughnasa* where the "debauchery" of the Lughnasa festival upsets the delicate balance of perceived control in the community (represented by Kate's stern request that the sisters do not attend this year's festival). It is only Agnes and Rose who escape Kate's control only to suffer differently in another part of the world that does not respect women of limited means or their right to be free. Michael describes his relief upon turning an age that allows him to move away from Ballybeg as he, too, yearns for freedom from the ever watchful gaze of the family cell.

Interestingly, the audience learns the least about Chris' character. The audience sees her smitten or jealous over Gerry Evans and dancing with him in the garden or riding with him on his motorbike. She is not overtly mothering to Michael and she seems

absent as a mother although Chris (not Gerry) is solely responsible for his upbringing. Michael never describes his mother outside of the relationship with her sisters; she seems to exist because the Mundy sisters exist in Ballybeg, and not in any separate sphere. Perhaps this is partially due to Chris being created in the image of Friel's mother and therefore adding pressure to the playwright to address the difficult topic of one's relationship with their mother. More often, Chris' character is exposed only through her interactions with other characters and through dialogue regarding her depression over Gerry Evans' brief and sporadic visits. Her depression is never seen on stage, only referred to by the sisters' concern for her. Although the dates of Gerry's visits to Ballybeg are unclear, Michael explains to the audience a letter he receives in the mid-1950s from the other son of Gerry Evans, also named Michael Evans:

Michael: He had found my name and address among the belongings of his father, Gerry Evans. He introduced himself as my half-brother and he wanted me to know that the father we shared, had died peacefully in the family home the previous week. Throughout his final illness he was nursed by his wife and his three grown children who all lived and worked in the [south of Wales] village. (61)

Michael explains his struggle with telling his mother but eventually decides to keep the secret; again, family secrets loom in the family cell. What Michael does not mention is whether he ever suspected his mother to have known about Gerry's other family. The audience also never knows what Chris' reaction is to taking the linen factory job.

Kathryn Conrad discusses the industrialization and its effects on women:

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Irish women did move into industrial work, particularly in the mill industries. But as those women moved out of the home, they found themselves still shaped by public discourse about a woman's place and value and still thus ultimately dependent on the family cell. (Conrad, 6)

Kate's staunch need to control the Mundy sisters was out of this same need to protect them because she was well aware of the reality that without Father Jack, the women were lucky to be living as well as they had been.

Returning to Foucault's theory of the family cell, it is crucial to remember the social controls that bound women to a formula for living that was inorganic. Although it could be argued that factory jobs allowed women to work (gave them opportunity) outside the home, these positions too, were regulated by the rules bound by social and political cells. This perception of women and the workplace is portrayed in Frank McGuinness' *The Factory Girls*, first performed in 1982 at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin.

This play offers a useful and more urban variation on the themes encountered in *Lughnasa*. McGuinness' play was inspired by the women in his own life who worked at a shirt factory. "My mother, aunts and grandmother found employment in the local shirt factories and I was brought up to appreciate a beautifully made shirt" (McGuinness, x). Of all the acclaims that can be attributed to Frank McGuinness and his inspiring canon of plays, *The Factory Girls*, gave voice to women in the workforce. The play's focus is on Ellen, Rebecca, Rosemary, Una and Vera, five factory "girls", as Vera explains to Rohan the factory manager: "Excuse me, Mr. Rohan, not factory women, factory girls. Everyone here is a factory girl. Factory girls never grow old and they don't fade away" (32).

While much of the first act is humorous banter between the women, the mood of the drama changes with the introduction of Rohan and Bonner, the two men in charge of the factory. They arrive to explain the reason the factory needs to downsize and inform

Ellen she will lose her position because they are starting with the oldest workers first. The final scenes of the play show the women barricaded inside Bonner's office to protest against the reduction in workforce. The electricity and phone get cut off on the women as they try to maintain their protest. The best laid plans quickly turn against the women as they begin to turn against one another. Their frustration is directed towards Ellen for acting as the ringleader. They become angered over Bonner's threats that they have now lost all their positions at the factory. In the end, they have gained nothing.

Rebecca: I read something once. I didn't know what it meant, but I learned it by heart. It's stayed in my mind, 'I saw a woman sleeping. In her sleep she dreamt Life stood before her and held in each hand a gift – in the one Love, in the other Freedom. And she said to the woman, Choose. And the woman waited long and she said, Freedom.' I heard the woman laugh in her sleep. (89)

McGuinness' portrayal of factory life is rife with Marxist elements. There is a disillusion of the individual and a disillusion of the self. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Agnes refuses to accept that her future would be in a linen factory; Ellen, in *The Factory Girls* refuses to be made redundant when it is all she has (her children had all died of tuberculosis). Although Agnes escapes one kind of prison (the linen factory and Kate's repressive character), she fails to find an opportunity in London that supports her and Rose and is therefore forced to continue to suffer – despite her attempts at trying to be free.

Since finding freedom through dance is one of the strongest elements in *Dancing at Lughnasa* it is crucial to discuss how this human expression of internal emotion plays out in the drama. Andrews translates dancing as "Friel's new expression of the secret life and a central image for a contravention and violation of *normal* reality" (223). Friel's shift away from the focus on language as seen in *Translations*, to a focus on dancing as seen in *Lughnasa* shows the transformation of Friel's interests from the linguistic

expression to the sexual/physical expression of the self. Indeed, the characters in *Lughnasa* are acting under a prescribed law and order and the dancing scenes throw order into disorder, providing room for Friel to tell his story. As important as Irish traditional music and dancing are to the Irish, it is no surprise that the 1930s view of dancing was highly disapproved by the state and the clergy. An Act was passed in 1953 called the Public Dancehalls' Act and it put restraints on dance halls and nearly abolished "open-air" dancing and dancing in homes (Friel, 223). Friel spends nearly two pages writing stage direction for the following scene: the Marconi radio has been turned on to an upbeat Irish song and as the women listen, Maggie makes the first move and hops to her feet and wipes the flour on her hands through her hair then glances at the other four sisters with "a look of defiance, of aggression; a crude mask of happiness" (21). The scene then builds as one by one each sister rises from her seat to join in the dance until even Kate is moving around the room, around her sisters, outside for a moment until the sound dies on the Marconi and Kate stops because she notices it first. Eventually they all notice the music has stopped: "Silence. For some time they stand where they have stopped. There is no sound but their gasping for breath...they look at each other obliquely; avoid looking at each other; half smile in embarrassment; feel and look slightly ashamed and slightly defiant" (22). There is freedom in dance, and critics such as Andrews were quick to pick up on Friel's use of it in *Lughnasa*: "Dancing would seem to be the expression of a distinctively female sexual energy which eludes a patriarchal, linguistic order" (225).

By contrast, through the introduction of Gerry Evans, the portrayal of dance is the more refined and contrived forms often seen in dance halls and movies. Gerry is seen

performing these dances with three of the Mundy sisters – Chris, Maggie and Agnes – at different points in the play. Note here that Agnes’ dancing with Gerry spawns overt jealousy from Chris and although her reaction is never discussed or her feelings addressed, Friel suggests there is understated competition for Gerry’s attention between Agnes and Chris. Also unspoken is whether Agnes fled Ballybeg because of her unrequited love for Gerry Evans.

Gerry’s dancing is formulaic. He explains to Chris that some of his past part-time work was giving dance lessons and always people requested Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers numbers. Far from the primitive, organic dance of the Mundy sisters, Gerry’s dancing is socially acceptable, not the raw expression of female energy seen in the Mundy dancing or the pagan worshipping of Uncle Jack’s Ryangan tribe or the Lughnasa festival in the back hills of Donegal.

While *Dancing at Lughnasa* is memoir-like for Friel, the plight of the women characters and the actions of the men are direct reflections of Irish society. Diarmaid Ferriter discusses the morality and social institutions relevant to *Lughnasa* and 1930s Ireland: “Debates continued to rage about the morality of dance halls and jazz music, and the amount some of the bishops had to say about these issues seemed to indicate not only how seriously the Church took them, but also the degree to which their directives were being ignored” (408). Ferriter does give some positive credit to the Catholic Church when describing the ruling years of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, who was radical but who “demonstrated a concern about poverty and ill health, albeit as long as it was tackled or highlighted on his terms, and he did not want to challenge the basis of the Irish health system” (410). The rise in Irish missionaries in the 1930s represented the zeal and



support between some Irish priests, nuns and the Church rulers. “Those who grew to adulthood in the 1930s and 1940s found both solace and discomfort in their experience of Irish Catholicism” (411). Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh was simultaneously repelled and attached to a form of Catholic dogma that was more represented by the Irish pagan ancestry than Catholicism itself. But Kavanagh addresses his beliefs and changes in his beliefs through his longer poem, *Lough Derg*:

The first evening they prayed till nine o'clock  
Around the gravel rings, a hundred decades  
Of rosaries until they hardly knew what words meant –  
Their own names when they spoke them sounded mysterious.  
They knelt and prayed and rose and prayed  
And circled the crosses and kissed the stones  
Never looking away from the brimstone bitterness  
To the little islands of Pan held in the crooked elbow of the lake.  
They closed their eyes to Donegal and the white houses  
On the slope of the northern hills. (Kavanagh, 51)

Although Kavanagh presents a Church that is repressive and the pleasure that is suppressed in things pagan, the “adherence to the Catholic Church in Ireland remained exceptionally high” (Ferriter, 411). Through art, however, playwrights like Friel are able to recapture some of what was lost in the decades after Yeats, Synge and O’Casey’s literary revolution on stage.

It is relevant to now introduce a northern female Irish playwright, Anne Devlin. Having grown up in Belfast, Devlin portrays the modern Irish struggle with British law as seen through the eyes of a family very involved in the Irish Republican Army. The third chapter discusses her play, *Ourselves Alone*. More overtly political than the other contemporary plays of this research thesis, *Ourselves Alone* is not afraid to speak out about the truth of patriarchal laws that have inhibited Irish women and to reveal the war

that went on inside the Irish homestead. Ferriter also discusses this phenomenon, weaving back into the historical tapestry the record of female participation in Ireland's struggle that had for many years been ignored.

### Chapter Three, *Ourselves Alone*

*Ourselves Alone* had its first performance at the Liverpool Playhouse in October, 1985. Here the setting is largely the more contemporary Catholic districts of Belfast city. *Ourselves Alone* tells a story, from a Northerner's perspective, of what life was like for women who were involved in the military struggle for Ireland during the 1970s and early 1980s. While history has previously overlooked their contributions, women were incredibly important to the completion of tasks that the Irish revolutionaries needed to accomplish on a daily basis. Devlin's play exposes what goes on behind the closed doors of an Irish family involved in the IRA.

Of the three main plays in this thesis, *Ourselves Alone* is the most stark in content and overt in its political commentary. Set in Andersonstown, a west Belfast suburb, the story is based on an Irish Catholic family deeply involved in the aims of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the 1970s. It is a play of the North but works both sides of the border in the years just after the deadly hunger strike among IRA prisoners set off a new wave of anger and bitterness throughout the island. In this chapter, I examine the North's split in dramatic approaches before exploring the playwriting distinctions that Devlin employs to set her work apart from the other plays in this thesis.

To begin a discussion on the Northern Irish dramatic movement some background and definition is required. A crucial text is Imelda Foley's *the girls in the big picture*, a history of theatre in Northern Ireland that describes the early formations of the theatrical movement in the North (Ulster Literary Theatre) and the key players. Though Yeats' literary movement in the Republic influenced the North and focused on reigniting Ireland's heroic nationalist past, the ULT focused on a nationalism that specifically dealt

with “ousting British rule” (Foley, 2). The formation and origin of theatre development in the North was very different from the Republic’s experiences, both before and after the 1916-1922 periods of conflict and partition. For whatever reasons, Yeats was not open to the ULT producing his powerful yet short play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*<sup>3</sup>. But the major ULT pioneers (Sam Hanna Bell, Rutherford Mayne and Margaret McHenry) were adamant in gaining approval to produce that play and did so through the approval of Yeats’ muse, Maud Gonne (Foley, 3). It was at this time that the North and the Republic theatre backers decided to split and create their own plays with their own aims. As Foley explains: “exiled from the ideals of the Irish Revival, both culturally and politically, the ULT was denied the realization of an essentially radical and feminine ideal, radical in its objective of ousting colonial power, feminine in its replacement not by a hegemony based on power but on empowerment” (4). The success of Devlin’s play lies in the achievement of producing a piece for the theatre that delves into both: ousting colonial power and empowering women.

While historians can never know what might have happened had the relationship between Yeats and the ULT been strong, what is important is the evolution of the ULT on through the twentieth century. Inspired, creative plays were produced out of the movement in spite of setbacks caused by the fundamental cultural restrictions that lie at the heart of this thesis. Foley succinctly summarized the challenge in this way: “the traditional role of women has been perceived as mothers and carers, as unseen supporters of father and husbands, keepers of hearth and altar” (Foley, 25). The stronghold of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Cathleen ni Houlihan* sparked revolutionary uprising as it appeared to W.B. Yeats in a dream, the premise is that an old, tired woman (Ireland), convinces a young man (the Irish peasant), on the cusp of his wedding day, to leave his life behind to join the old woman’s cause. After Peter Darcy agrees to abandon his life for this sacrifice, the old woman suddenly looks young and beautiful. Some historians claim the play helped spark the formation of the 1916 Easter Uprising.

patriarchy in Northern Ireland helped to silence many women who may have protested their plight because protesting meant further problems in the home and community. This image is applicable to *Ourselves Alone* and the deep-rooted powers at work under the surface. In many ways, Northern culture was more severe, especially in its attitudes toward women. Indeed, a shift was underway that exposed women's voices throughout many aspects of the culture: women began to create opportunities to speak out, protest and even rebel. On stage, this meant the time for strong female characters had arrived.

From her essay, "Reproducing the Nation: Nationalism, Reproduction, and Paternalism in Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*," critic Ann Rea highlights the scene where the future of Josie's baby is debated between father and brother as the axis on which the rest of the play revolves. The final scene where Josie's pregnancy is disputed between her father, Malachy and brother, Liam portrays the male nationalist control in Irish society, specifically at this point in her history (mid-1980s, post hunger strike). Rea explains the importance of this scene in her introduction:

This dispute between the men acts out the gender politics that structure this group of IRA men and women who live with them and exposes the controls that nationalisms tend to exert over women. This dispute also symbolizes shifts in the IRA leadership both within the movement and in the nation that the men hope to create. (204)

Indeed, the reproduction debate comes into focus as Liam seeks to destroy the offspring of a British-Irish union, whereas Malachy sees his role as protector and preserver of woman and hearth (his daughter and "their" baby). The genderization of politics is the crucial basis for the themes of this play, as Devlin exposes the gender imbalance even within the fight for Irish independence.

It is important to note the cultural differences between the theatre of the North and the Republic. The two traditions took on different pursuits although this discussion on Northern theatre jumps over many centuries of development, two very different theatres evolved. The North emerged as a more satirical and rugged theatre. The Republic sought nationalist themes: return Ireland to her Gaelic roots. Yet both sought to replenish the voices of women who had been marginalized and isolated by society, religion and history. Foley believes this kind of isolation exists behind the characters in Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* as a "loneliness that is the living fear of [her] female characters...the helplessness that pervades their male-dominated lives is a construct of cultural and political socialization, dependent on traditions of love, motherhood and family, that provide power and domestic amnesty to men" (28). Men are strangers in Devlin's play. Not coincidentally, this male absence is a common theme throughout all the plays in this thesis. Their emotional impotence, as well as their lack of physical presence combines to make them strangers to their wives, sisters, mothers and children.

In *Ourselves Alone*, this male absence is apparent through Josie, Frieda and Donna's relationship. Josie is only able to break off with Cathal (already married) once she meets the Englishman Joe Conran, but Joe eventually betrays them all. Frieda's relationship stems from a rebellion against her father's political views. Donna's relationship with Liam was held together while he was in prison but unravels when he is released. When Liam eventually returns from prison he lashes out at Donna in jealous accusations about men he thinks she has been with in his absence:

Donna: I can't do any more. I love you. I have always loved you. I gave away my only son for you. Because he looked like Peter. If you don't believe that I love you – I wish I were dead. I wish I were dead.

Liam: Don't say that, Donna. I just had to find out.

Donna: I won't find anyone else. I promise. You mean everything to me.  
(56)

In spite of Donna's claim to loyalty, Liam betrays her by spending many of his nights with another woman. Later in the play, Donna finds some solace in a musician named Danny McLoughlin because he is responsive to her emotional breakdowns. Male absence and betrayal is also a theme in Friel's *Lughnasa* where Michael discovers his father had another family of his own in Wales. While Donna and the McCoy sisters have common threads through their relationships in *Ourselves Alone*, they differ in the kind of life they yearn for. While the sisters are different in many ways, they all yearn for a freedom from the gender constraints that weigh them down and prevent them from inventing a life on their own terms. The three female characters represent variations on a universally understood situation: the emotionally-charged dynamic of Irish women connected to men in the IRA.

Josie is Malachy's oldest daughter and loyal to the cause; she is, in this crucial dramatic aspect, unlike Frieda who finds politics not worth dying for and prefers to leave Andersonstown and the confines of her father's suppressive nature. Frieda dreams of becoming a singer and likens herself to Marlene Dietrich by dyeing her hair blonde. Josie criticizes Frieda for spending more time being concerned about appearance than about intellectual (and political) pursuits. Frieda lashes back by reminding Josie that though she went to university she is still in Andersonstown – a failure from Frieda's point of view. Frieda is openly displeased with her plight – she lives and works in the politically-charged neighborhoods of Belfast, and wishes above all else to get away from the politics that have dictated her life at every turn:

Josie: I live here because I choose to.

Frieda: I don't believe you anyway.

Josie: Why do you always want to be somebody else?

Frieda: I don't always want to be somebody else. I want to be somebody.

Josie: Be yourself.

Frieda: When did I ever have a chance to be myself? My father was interned before I was born. My brother's in the Kesh for bank robbery. You mention the name McCoy in this neighborhood, people start walking away from you backwards. I'm fed up living here, this place is a hole!  
(21)

It is not that Josie finds working for the IRA fulfilling, it is that she yearns to be a part of the fight for a new way of defining the nation, perhaps a part that allows women to be members of the rebuilding. Her sister holds the opposite view, for Frieda sees no choices for women in this nationalist environment. The political dialogue between sisters shows Devlin's creative control over a complicated topic:

Frieda: I don't know why you're making such a fuss. John McDermot is an old friend. You used to like him yourself when he was Liam's mate.

Josie: Not these days, my girl. The only loyalties you are allowed are ideological.

Frieda: Baloney! Look at [Donna]! She's not living with an ideology. My brother's changed his political line three times at least since 'sixty-nine.

Josie: Liam's always been confused!

Frieda: Wrong answer. Not that he's worth it, but you have to admire her [Donna's] tenacity for sticking with him. That's the only loyalty I know or care about. Loyalty to someone you love, regardless! I'd like to think if I loved someone I'd follow that person to hell! Politics has nothing to do with it!

Josie: One day you will understand, when you come to the limits of what you can do by yourself, that this is not dogma, that there are no personal differences between one person and another that are not political. (23)



The greatest difference between the sisters becomes apparent in this exchange. Frieda sees Donna's kind of sacrifice as a legitimate loyalty while Josie cannot (until she later becomes pregnant and abandoned). Josie's version of loyalty is defined by her loyalty to the IRA. Frieda's view understands the loyalty in Donna's choice to care for the child of Liam's although he does not participate in their lives. The sisters' politics are at odds because Josie has a hard time seeing people for who they are beyond what they stand for politically. People can change and grow in Frieda's eyes, but Josie is very different in her core beliefs. Not until Josie becomes pregnant with Joe Conran's baby can she imagine a different life for herself. She is completely caught up in this world of rebellion and uprising, and it takes a life-changing event of this magnitude to sway her to more natural loyalties. Frieda, however, understands the human dimension of loyalty – she gives Donna recognition for her loyalty to Liam although Liam is incapable of being loyal to Donna. Devlin is concerned with definitions of loyalty because this term is manipulated throughout the play according to what each character demands. For example, Malachy is suddenly loyal to his daughter Josie because he can benefit in making her raise the baby under his roof (and groom the next generation of McCoy's who will follow the cause). But Frieda is an idealist because she seeks escape as the answer to her problems while Josie seems to understand that problems cannot be left behind. This does not mean Frieda fails to understand Josie or her family's full involvement in the IRA:

Donna: We've all got something to sacrifice!

Frieda: You're right! And when there's a tricolour over the City Hall, Donna will still be making coffee for Joe Conran, and Josie will still be keeping house for her daddy, because it doesn't matter a damn whether the British are here or not. (30)

Here is the key statement buried at the core of this play – the English are not to blame for everything in their lives. Though it is easier to blame the English for all that is wrong, Frieda can see a wider picture, free from nationalist agenda, male hegemony and the Catholic Church. Frieda’s failed relationship with the Protestant John McDermot furthers her desire to escape Andersonstown because she feels she does not belong – on any side. When John’s tirades end in violence, Frieda seeks a final departure – from him and Ireland.

The play comes to a close in Donna’s home; Josie has left with her father and Frieda is departing for England the following morning. Donna cries over Frieda’s departure and asks that she stay one more night with her and the two begin to reminisce about the past (and perhaps better days). It is a specific memory from their past that they discuss: the McCoy family on a picnic with Donna and Liam’s childhood friend John McDermot. The three girls snuck off to skinny dip and when caught “lay down in the sandhills and laughed” (90). The coexistence of feminine freedom and the Irish family is Devlin’s final image. Through the tragedy of their lives, the women in Devlin’s play express the frustrations of living on the fringe of the political chaos. But Donna’s situation may be the most tragic of all, for she is more vulnerable than either of the McCoy sisters.

A long time friend of the McCoy family, Donna fell in love with Liam as a young girl. Though Liam is in prison (and never present on stage) the first half of the play, his affect on Donna is profound. Donna struggles to raise their daughter and feels abandoned and lonely. Though she is underappreciated by Liam she is not capable of leaving him:

Donna: I think I may have lost the capacity for happiness...all my life I felt I had to run fast, seek, look, struggle for things or lose them, but as

soon as I felt the child inside me again, the baby quickening, I knew that it was coming and there was nothing I could do. I felt for the first time the course of things, the inevitability. Happiness, sadness, has really nothing to do with it. (89)

Once he returns from prison, he has no interest in helping her with their daughter or remaining loyal to Donna. Liam's return from prison haunts her dreams as he appears as the devil breathing over her home. Donna's home is the central point for much of the action in this play including the invasion of her space by the British soldiers. Characters cannot escape the conflict even within the confines of the perceived safety of home.

Theater critic Ann Rea discusses this point in her essay on Devlin's play:

Not only is the home a metonymic version of the nation, but also the men's ability to control that sphere proves, or disproves, their adequacy as state fathers. In Devlin's play 'state fatherhood' entails the right, and duty to define the nationality of the home, and within that home to regulate female sexuality, "morality," and reproduction. (206-7)

This phenomenon is at the center of the action in Devlin's play. The McCoy sisters are seen coming and going from Donna's home, which acts as a sort of refuge from the violence and loneliness for the women. Place is crucial to this story; Donna's home is where the audience sees these women in a collectively vulnerable context. There is a constant sense that men are policing the women in the play so Devlin attempts to give Donna some domestic authority over the home. "The family home, often mobilized as metonym for the nation in nationalist thinking, becomes a site laden with meaning not only for Republican politics but also for the ways in which women's roles are imagined in the nation" (207). Devlin uses Donna's home and its subsequent violation as metaphor for woman's violation in a broader sense. The setting of the home is not accident for Devlin or Friel, who use the Irish home as metonym for Irish culture.

There is a greater relationship to women and home in these plays, however. In act two, scene five, British soldiers invade Donna's home looking for Liam. When Donna explains that she does not know his whereabouts one of the soldiers threatens to frame her for holding firearms:

Donna: You planted it.

Second soldier: Loose floorboard at the top of the stairs.

First soldier: You could do three years for this.

Donna: How could I do three years? You won't find my prints on them.

First soldier: What about the other address? Maybe she knows where he is.

Second soldier: Must be with Eileen tonight.

Donna: Get out! Get out of my house! (70)

Donna proceeds to threaten to kill herself with pills if they don't leave immediately; only then do the soldiers back down on their interrogation and seem to become sensitive to what they were doing. Donna resists their show of emotion toward her with a "Fuck off!" and the scene ends with her holding the pills in her hand staring at the glass of wine.

Women hold the nation together via their hold on home life. This notion turns the discussion back to Conrad's use of Foucault's theory of the family cell:

It is not coincidental that the family cell bears more than a passing resemblance to the revolutionary cell. In both cases, social, economic and political pressure create a small guarded group committed to self-preservation and self-reliance in the face of an oppressive political and economic structure. (14)

While women are held responsible for the home, anything that happens externally or internally that does not stay within the rules and regulations of Irish society must be hidden from that society at all costs. And much of the time women pay the cost for these

discrepancies. Women are burdened with responsibility but without power. According to Sinn Fein<sup>4</sup> pamphlets, women decide the fate of the nation according to how they run their home and therefore their “power” is confined within the walls: “Woman reigns as an autocrat in the kingdom of her home...the spark struck on the hearthstone will fire the soul of the nation” (Foley, 24-25). Though Donna has a home, she is not impervious to violation by men and therefore this “power” that she is to have over her home is easily diminished. Any control that women have in this society is depleted by the men who are insensitive to their worth. This oversight takes its toll on them all but especially Josie, whose life had been spent standing with the male hegemony in the IRA movement. The years of servitude (without appreciation) eventually cause her to yearn for family and a chance to “reign” in a home of her own. But Josie and Frieda do not have a home of their own. Only Donna has carved out a precarious family dynamic, and her home provides the only domestic scene setting in the play – Josie and Frieda remain transient.

One example of the sister’s transient lifestyle is the following scene when Joe Conran and Josie spend a weekend in Dublin on IRA business. The following dialogue is set in a Dublin hotel room where they discuss Josie’s involvement with the IRA:

Joe: No, I mean why did you plant a bomb?

Josie: I was fed up being a courier...They used women as messengers then. I wanted to show them I could take the same risks as a man. So I planned it, stole the car. And left it outside the law courts. I’m glad it didn’t go off.

Joe: You did this entirely on your own?

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<sup>4</sup> An important aspect to mention is the translation of the title into “Sinn Fein,” which is the name of the political front of the IRA. Here, the connection is made between women being alone and disconnected from the self (Rea, 208). “On another level, the title denotes the isolation in which this larger Republican community exists in political alienation within Northern Irish society” (208). Read in context, the importance of the title cannot be disregarded.

Josie: No. A man I'd have gone to hell for helped me.

Joe: So you wouldn't do it again?

Josie: I've lost the killing instinct. Now, I tend to think the crushing of a fetus is a tragedy. (63)

The importance of this exchange is its looming sense of foreshadowing. Josie has lost the "killing instinct" and will soon have a fetus growing inside her. When Josie learns she is carrying Joe's baby, it changes her perspective, like Donna, she will do anything to care for the baby. She loses interest in fighting for the cause. Joe's position is revealed in the following exchange where it is clear that he is not interested in a permanent relationship with Josie and continues to be unavailable to her. He was all along preparing to gather enough evidence against Cathal O'Donnell and Josie was merely a player in his politics:

Joe: I came to this country because I tried to live the life you seem to want now. I tried it with someone else and it didn't work.

Josie: Rosa. That woman's name haunts me. Did she want children very much? And you didn't?

Joe: I hate tots! Babies! I hate this whole fertility business!

Josie: I don't ask you for anything but to be with me until the birth.

Joe: Of course I'll be with you. But you mustn't depend on me, Rosa – Josie.

Josie: You don't have to worry about me, Joe. I've got two hearts. (79)

Already Josie feels the life that is growing inside her and it gives her a hope she has never before experienced and reconfirms a departure from her IRA work. Later, when Josie tells Donna that she has decided to keep the baby, she explains that Joe was not interested at first but appears to have "come around":

Josie: He's inscrutable. At first he wanted me to have an abortion so I'd be free.

Donna: So that he could be free. (83)

Ironically, Josie joins Donna's world that she previously could not understand: a world separate from politics and bomb making. Donna is accurate in her assessment of Joe. He never wanted ties with Josie because he was in Andersonstown on business. Josie was his accidental victim. Again, the fertility issue is breeched by men and this relationship is based on politics. In contrast, Frieda attempts to live outside the political agenda but learns that it is impossible to escape. As her relationship with John McDermot becomes political play, Frieda is forced to participate in the politics of the North because of the priorities of the society:

McDermot: I think you're taking your rebellion against your father a bit far. Surely you want a united Ireland by democratic consent?

Frieda: No, it's not even that, I just don't care if Ireland is united or not.

McDermot: What do you care about?

Frieda: I just want to sing my own songs. (58)

The play opens with Frieda rehearsing a song with Danny McLoughlin in the pub. She begins singing a nationalist song but is frustrated and stops:

Frieda: I don't want to sing this anymore.

Danny: Why not?

Frieda: Because it's about a man.

Danny: The song's about internment, Frieda.

Frieda: I'm fed up with songs where the women are doormats! (13)

From the opening scene of the play, Frieda's lack of interest in the politics of the North is evident in both words and song. Devlin includes in the stage directions pictures of all thirteen dead hunger strikers hanging on the wall. Frieda is an outcast in her beliefs. But

as Devlin's female characters portray, the hegemonic construct embedded in the system is nearly impossible to undermine, alter or escape. The following scene exemplifies the male control in this environment and the lack of voice that women have. Liam and Malachy now know about the baby and the treachery of its father, and they begin to interrogate their own blood:

Liam: How many months pregnant are you?

Josie: Three.

Liam: Kill it. I want you to kill the child!

Josie: Why?

Liam: The father is a traitor. He did not love you; he used you. It's better that his child should not be born at all.

Josie: But it's my baby – it doesn't matter about anything else.

Liam: It's his child!

Donna: No. It's not, Liam. It's what you never understood. A child doesn't belong to anyone. It's itself.

Liam: Do it. Don't force us! (88)

The possessor of women and their bodies is the male/hegemonic voice of what Rea mentions as "state fatherhood." Donna tries to interject the woman's view of reproduction but is quickly undermined by male dominance as Liam threatens an abortion on his sister. Malachy interrupts his son's diatribe, not with suggestion of amnesty for Josie but with another male dominated "solution:"

Malachy: I'm the father here, son!

Liam: What's wrong with you? She's carrying Conran's baby!

*(Malachy puts his arm around Josie.)*



Malachy: My baby now. (*Pause while he looks around.*) Josie's going to live with me from now on. Isn't that right, love?

Josie: (*Hesitant*) Yes. (88)

Malachy reassigns himself the role of patriarch and allows her to keep the baby but under his terms, under his control. Although she is spared from Liam's claim to abort the baby, she is forced to have it only under Malachy's possessiveness as he takes ownership and forces Josie to move back into his home (his rules). Rea explains this phenomenon:

Thus the family and the family home become bastions of paternalism where the men must enforce their authority, and every father has not only the right, but also the duty to regulate and dominate his home. Malachy assumes the right, not only to designate the family and the home as "Irish," but also to designate the family and the home as nationalist. (207)

Although this scene is set in Donna's flat, the tragedy is Josie's. Though she is allowed to keep her baby, she must do so under the ever-watchful gaze of her father and has now lost the freedom that she briefly possessed. Though she has found a way out of the IRA, she exchanges that "freedom" for an imprisonment under her father's home and must do so in order to keep the baby. This is an ultimately tragic play without renewed hope for the main female characters. Donna's earlier insight is significant again: "Happiness, sadness, has really nothing to do with it." Though the men in Devlin's play are fully involved with the IRA, they maintain an illusive control over their women. Devlin explains in the introduction to her play:

I began this play with two women's voices – one funny and one serious – and then I found I had a third – the voice of a woman listening. And all the women were in some ways living without men. And then the father and a stranger came into the room. And I found myself wondering who the stranger was and what he was doing there. (Intro)

Who are these strangers and why do they successfully control and manipulate the women who are trapped in their chaos? Devlin's play pushes the gender issue to the forefront,

making the audience consider the roles and assumptions that are at work. Devlin's characters come out and say what is buried in Irish society. Earlier in scene four, Frieda refers to the portraits of the thirteen dead hunger strikers and then comments on the woman's plight: "We are the dying. Why are we mourning them?" Devlin asks these kinds of pertinent questions as she pushes social issues to the forefront. Devlin's foray into topics of pregnancy versus abortion and the male manipulation of women's bodies touches on many of Marina Carr's (Chapter Four) themes of reproduction and control.

To discuss Carr's work is complicated because her plays are the most elusive of all the pieces of this thesis (political themes are buried). Although Carr engages with the reproductive elements so prevalent in Irish culture, she also sets up her female characters to have the capacity to destroy what is supposed to be sacred to Irish women – life. Carr's female characters are capable of hating, destroying, murdering and pettiness. Although, it is crucial to mention Carr's other plays, the focal piece of the next chapter is "The Mai."

## Chapter Four, *The Mai*

Marina Carr's matrilineal drama is reminiscent of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* in that it also uses the dramatic format of the family memory play.<sup>5</sup> The achievements of dramatists like Marina Carr have given voice to the historically neglected feminine cultural persona. Historian Dermaid Ferriter discusses this phenomenon by introducing the ignored and sometimes suppressed record of female participation into the weave of Ireland's modern historical tapestry. Brecken Hancock's essay "Diseased Legacy and Mythmaking in Marina Carr's *The Mai*" explores Irish contemporary playwright Marina Carr's work and her place among the great writers of that country and in so doing, establishes her writing as sharp counterpoint to the dominant patriarchal view of Irish history. Carr's plays are quite untraditional in terms of their expression of traditional gender roles; in her plays, the molds have been shattered. I seek to explore Carr's play *The Mai*<sup>6</sup> in relation to the patriarchal rules against which many of her characters struggle.

Most important to note is the vast differences between the women and the generations they represent. Grandma Fraochlán is 100 years old, wild-like, opium-smoking and says whatever she feels. By contrast, her daughters, Julie and Agnes, represent a conservative Ireland of the 1920s/30s (Trotter, 170). "The third generation – Mai and her sisters, Connie and Beck – however, is trapped between their desires for autonomy and fulfillment and the mores and expectations of the previous generation"

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<sup>5</sup> For further explanation of this comparison, see Trotter's *Translating Women* chapter that delves into the difference and importance of Carr's use of this dramatic and historically relevant format.

<sup>6</sup> "The other characters in the play call her 'the Mai,' adapting the Irish tradition of adding 'the' before the last name of the (male) head of a clan" (Trotter, 168).

(171). Although the characters are not political in the same vein as Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*, Carr's themes are embedded in the political mire of Ireland's struggles.

Marina Carr has lived in Dublin since she was 18 and graduated from University College Dublin in 1987. Carr was born in 1964, raised in decidedly rural County Offaly and had her first play produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1989; her relationship with the Abbey became that of a writer-in-residence until 2005. Her early work with absurd theatre, *Low in the Dark*, won recognition in the British Isles but Carr's first play produced in the United States was *The Mai*. *Low in the Dark* has a small cast of five characters and is dark, humorous and deceptively complex. A brief grounding in Carr's absurdist origins provides useful background for evaluating Carr's shift to more mystical and subtle political commentary in *The Mai*.

The set for *Low in the Dark* is very minimal, relying only on an unfinished wall, tires, "the men's space" on stage right and a bathroom on stage left. Bender (50s) is Binder's (mid-20's) mother, Curtains is a woman hidden completely behind curtains and the male figures are Baxter (mid-30's), who is Curtain's lover while Bone (late 20's) is Binder's. In the absurdist tradition, there is not a clear storyline as much as a series of different moments strung together for the audience to decipher and interpret. Gender roles are blurred as in the scenes with Binder and Bender's babies never having a distinction between their sexes. Baxter and Bone role-play as a woman knitting or as a mother and wife and the two men have make-believe conversations while in these gendered role-reversals. To further blur traditional gender roles, Carr makes it difficult to differentiate between Bender and Binder. Even the linguistic word play confuses and disturbs: Bender = "Bend her" and Binder = "Bind her," both derogatory references about

the objectification of women. There is no distinct ownership to the babies seen on stage either, any woman that happens to be present seems capable of feeding them and the only baby mentioned specifically is one they call *The Pope* (which carries its own sense of irony):

*Binder goes to the shower, throws three babies on Bender and sits with two, both breast-feeding. Curtains gets up and goes over to the shower. She grabs an armful of babies, and orchestrates the feeding of the babies. Soundtrack of babies gurgling and crying comes over.*

Curtains: One day the woman turned to the man and said, 'It's time you had a baby.'

Binder: (to Bender) It's time you stopped having them!

*Curtains distributes babies by the armful to Bender and Binder, and also grabs babies back at random from them.*

Curtains: 'Have one yourself,' the man said to the woman.

Binder: I think you should go on the pill.

Bender: After this one I'll go on it.

Curtains: 'Babies are for women,' the man said to the woman.

*Curtains throws a yellow baby at Bender, and throws a pink one at Binder.*

Bender: (*throws baby at Curtains*) He's all done! (*to the yellow baby*) My baby, my poor little unloved, unwanted helpless thing. I wish to God your fathers would come home. (51-53)

Although a humorous scene on one level with the women throwing their babies at one another, the moment carries heavier social commentary. Here, as in almost all of Samuel Beckett's plays, absurdity allows a freedom for social criticism that is free of the formal constraints of realistic presentation. Although staged in a broken, confused format, the political statements are quite clear. This strategy communicates a criticism of the

excessive number of births in Ireland by young women where there is no father in the home. The frantic exchange of babies and the absurd dialog convey a clear sense that the State is out of control. This play breaks down gender roles so that it becomes possible for men to be pregnant. Men are deconstructed – bricklayer or biscuit maker, knitter or mother. While the men reenact these roles they have little confidence, are very insecure and even fear being left alone to raise the children themselves. In contrast to the male egoism and control in Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*, this view of the Irish male as defenseless is novel. Carr takes women's topics that have no public voice in the patriarchy (e.g. pregnancy out of wedlock) and projects these scenarios onto her male characters. While Carr has not revisited absurdism to this level in her other work, she continues to weave a sense of nihilism into her female characters. This nihilistic underlayment is just below the surface of the women characters of *The Mai*.

Theatre critic James Clarity's 1994 New York Times article describes the popularity of *The Mai* for Irish, Scottish and British audiences: "it portrays four generations of women in one family, discussing, sometimes ranting about, the way they love and hurt one another and their men." As is the case with all of Carr's work set in rural, lonely environments, the setting is the midlands near the fictitious Owl Lake. The name, the Mai, is taken from an Irish myth of a woman who destroyed her young; this is no accident, as the basis of the tragedy of this play is that women destroy their children by being more interested in the men that give them heartbreak over the love and happiness of the offspring. Contrary to the role that women traditionally play in Irish stories, women destroy one another in Carr's world. Visible in Carr's plays is her emphasis on matriarchy, matriarchal relationships and female points of perspective. The

basic story line is about the Mai, a forty year-old woman abandoned by her husband, Robert, who, five years before, “got into his car with his cello and drove away” (110). “Men are important to the women for physical and emotional love and for the purposes of begetting children, not to uphold a moral code or to fulfill an economic need” (Trotter, 169). The Mai was left with the burden of figuring things out for herself and her children. She purchased a beautiful old home on Owl Lake in order to woo Robert back into her life despite the harm he had caused.

Sixteen year-old Millie provides a storyteller’s role reminiscent of Michael in Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Both character-narrators are present on stage throughout the play while also portraying themselves at various ages as they tell their stories directly to the audience though Millie’s character is more integrated – unlike Friel’s Michael, Carr’s Millie actually interacts with the other characters. The opening scene merges the play into the thematic landscape of the thesis by portraying familiar patriarchal traditions of male absenteeism in the lives of the wives (or common law wives such as Donna in Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone*) who remain alone to provide for the children. Robert has returned to his wife after a long, unexplained absence and is playing his cello as the Mai enters. Music is a central theme in their relationship but ironically (though the act may have been meant in flirtation) Robert “plays” his wife with his bow, acting out how he plays with her in life. Her reaction is passive, for she accepts his ways within the context of her unconditional love. Ironically, Millie confronts Robert about his absence in the following dialogue while her mother does not challenge him:

Millie: Where were you?

Robert: Here – there –

Millie: Everywhere. We were here all the time and in the old house.

Robert: I know you were. (109)

Robert does not think he needs to provide any explanation for leaving the Mai and her children and is bold enough to avoid his daughter's questioning. His denial disregards the women's feelings and in his mind, removes him from any share of blame. After the Mai and Robert exit hand-in-hand to the bedroom, Millie turns to the audience to begin the first of many monologues explaining the family's back story. Millie remembers when she was eleven and Robert abandoned them: "No explanations, no goodbyes, he just got into his car with his cello and drove away" (110). She continues the memory with the painful scene of the Mai drinking to repress the pain and makes failed attempts to reassure them both: "Don't you worry about a thing, Millie, your Dad'll come back and we will have the best of lives" (110). The past and present converge in this one moment at the beginning of the play, but the reunion seems to be symbolic of husband-wife relationships in general – based solely on deceit. Although Robert has returned, it is never revealed why he left. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear there is no chance for these characters to heal because Robert's return is deceitful to the Mai because the act of his return is not a sign of any commitment. In fact, Carr's characters never find forgiveness or redemption with each other – the repercussions of one's actions remain forever. Yet the sad telling of the past is interrupted by the arrival of the Mai's aunt, Aunt Connie and the Mai's grandmother, Grandma Fraochlán, who have come to stay at Owl Lake. Although provided with brief details, the Mai's mother died when the Mai was a baby. Another crucial theme in this play is the repetition of history and what is passed from one generation to the next. Millie is the fourth generation who leaves



Ireland (a familiar theme by now) for New York and has an illegitimate son. She continues in the tradition of her lineage by creating a story to tell about his father thus proving again that “history repeats and repeats...” (123).

Within this lineage is Grandma Fraochlán’s strong influence and impact on all the women around her. Unlike the loyalty shared by the Mundy sisters, Carr’s women would betray one another for their personal gain. Grandma Fraochlán is a unique character in that she shocks the audience with her nontraditional viewpoints:

Grandma Fraochlán: There’s two types of women in this world from what I can make out: them that puts their children first and them that puts their lover first. And for what it is worth, the nine-fingered fisherman belongs to the latter of these. I would gladly have hurled all seven of you down the slopes of hell for one more night with the nine-fingered fisherman and I may rot eternally for such unmotherly feeling. (182)

Grandma poses an unfamiliar choice in Irish history. Traditionally, women have been left with the responsibility of child-rearing though it may not have been the result of their choosing, and an assumption is made that they would always choose the child over the man. However, having any choice is the element lacking for women in Irish history. As seen in the plays of this thesis, women cannot often choose to remain with their men because the men abandon the woman, the child and any responsibility. In *Juno and the Paycock*, Captain Boyle is too busy avoiding work and searching for the next pint. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Gerry Evans only visits Chris and Michael at brief and inconsistent intervals. In *Ourselves Alone*, the male priority is politics and they view family as something to control. Grandma Fraochlán makes her unique claim on women’s choices because she is quick to admit she would have traded the love of the fisherman for that of her children. Compared to the other characters discussed in this thesis, she is a radical example for the Irish female.

Grandma Fraochlán and the other female characters in *The Mai* are not motivated by the same social constraints as the Mundy sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Nor do these women seem concerned with concealing their secrets from society. Grandma Fraochlán lives in a separate world from the others in this play and exists in a dream-like state that is centered on the past. As expressed in the above quotation, Grandma Fraochlán never apologizes for her yearning for the man she lost over the raising of her children. Just as she never apologizes for her addiction to opium or alcohol. Drink is a distinct part of her character as Millie observes: “Grandma Fraochlán became a little sentimental after a few glasses of mulberry wine, and after a few more she began to call up ghosts and would wrestle with them until sleep overtook her” (120). Because history is ever entwined in the present, the characters at Owl Lake are wrestling with ghosts of the past. But these are not pagan spirits as in *Lughnasa* but memory ghosts rooted in this family’s decisions. There exists little Catholic piety and control in this play compared to the other plays in this thesis, but the daughters of Grandma Fraochlán arrive to “save” the Mai’s sister, Beck, from divorce and thereby ending up in hell. The consciousness of the four generations of women who gather at Owl Lake are not haunted by guilt based in dogma, but guilt based on the decisions made in their past. Carr explains:

My starting premise in [this play] assumes that God is there, whereas the absurdist always questions the certitude. Personally, I have a lazy attitude toward God, I take it for granted, the assumption that God is there and that He shapes your life, that your life is minutiae honed down, laid out before you. The whole reason for being alive is to find out what those minutiae are, what that pattern is. (NYT, 27)

The pattern is difficult to discern and perhaps this is intentional on Carr’s part. Within the void of any discernible pattern is Carr’s commentary on the contemporary Irish female. In her world it *is* possible to not yearn for hearth and home and to not care for

raising children. This freedom from rules makes the eldest Mundy sister, Kate, nervous because she is left with the responsibility to keep her sister's lives in control and monitored – while the pagan forces of dance, drink and song tempt them to be free. But it is not the pagan rituals which should be feared but the unspoken constraints of male hegemonic control.

The past and present are at odds in all the plays in this thesis, but the difference in *The Mai* centers on the way that the past haunts the characters like ghosts. The first words Grandma Fraochlán says to Robert are: “I only think you came back because ya couldn't find anythin' better elsewhere and you'll be gone as soon as ya think you've found somethin' better. People don't change, Robert, they don't change” (122). She tells of his own father's similar behavior and suggests the reason is because we cannot escape our history: “We repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same” (123). Making her argument that people have no power against the inevitability of the past, Grandma Fraochlán sees no redeeming value in Robert's return.

Grandma Fraochlán's accusations are later confirmed when Robert's affair with a local woman is exposed. The Mai answers her devastation at this news by drowning herself in Owl Lake, the locale that epitomized Robert's return to her. Some critics believe the Mai's death was not a tragedy but a senseless and selfish act. Though I do not endorse her choice, I can see it rationalized within the dramatic framework. Though the audience would hope Millie could be spared the sadness her mother experienced, Carr does not spare her characters from a tragic ending. In Brecken Hancock's essay on *The Mai*, she describes the power of myth in Carr's plays and does not veer from the pain and sadness evoked by the Mai's story. These portrayals of Irish female identity challenge

the norms and therefore bring into play the very questions that need to be asked to incite change. Historically, Ireland's women have had the "nationalist personification" of an idealized woman, like Mother Ireland, or a "degraded seductress" (Hancock, 377). "For female writers in Ireland, the tradition of portraying Ireland as a woman has meant that: the very act of writing challenges patriarchal practices of the state precisely by representing national identity...as other than male" (Hancock, 2).

By creating stories entrenched in female issues and situations outside the norm, Carr asks the same questions of this male dominated life but applies them to a woman's world. "Carr privileges female narrative and experience in all of her plays," (Hancock, 5) which is fulfilling a void within the Irish canon on one level by capturing new identities previously overlooked. Carr's support from The Abbey theatre furthered her acceptance into the mainstream (male) world of the Irish stage:

Part of Carr's...success and acceptance within mainstream Irish theatre practice stems from [her] keen ability to translate within both the textual language of the Irish tradition and the semiotic languages of the realist stage taking those traditionally patriarchal discourses and re-membering them to make room for Irish women's lives. (Trotter, 168)

Placing her complex and multifaceted female characters within traditional Irish storytelling contexts, Carr makes peace with her past and then crushes old constraints.

Through the range of generations represented in *The Mai*, Carr's female characters represent a distinct side of each generation. Therefore, the multi-generational storyline presents an important evolutionary stage of the Irish woman. A century old, smoking opium and cursing away, Grandma Froachlán provides some of the most profound insights into the historically silenced female. During a conversation with her granddaughter Beck, Grandma describes her own mother. The memory consists of her

not being able to refer to her as “Mother”, but as “The Duchess.” The Duchess deceived her daughter by remaining steadfast to the idea that every summer her husband would return to take them both away. Years later, Grandma is haunted by this make-believe story and admits, “I’m not over the dismantlin’ of that dream yet...even still, every summer, I expect somethin’ momentous to happen” (169). As is revealed early in the play, Grandma perpetuates her own make-believe dream of waiting for the nine-fingered fisherman, proving the adage: “we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same.”

That same sense of expectation gone unfulfilled is alive for Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Because his father returns with such an interest in his mother and himself, Michael is fully content to believe he will receive the bike that has been so adamantly promised to him. But the dream that he will later have to dismantle is that he never received that bike and in fact, his father had a dual life that included another wife and son in England. A similar childhood deception is what Grandma Froachlán finds nearly impossible to overcome but this memory is part of a larger cultural deception – the repetition of generations that endure the lack of male presence. At the forefront of Grandma Froachlán’s ghosts is the ghost of her mysterious Spanish father followed by that of her own husband, who drowned at sea. Beck is a younger version of her grandmother because she finds it amusing to supply her with pipe and opium. The play’s main character is the Mai but much of the dialogue is with Grandma Froachlán because of her importance in the lineage of the generations.

Carr presents no positive motivation for Robert’s return to Owl Lake. He is not returning to seek forgiveness for leaving, nor has he found that his love for the Mai is too

strong to stay away. As he describes to the Mai: “I dreamt that you were dead and my cello case was your coffin and a carriage drawn by two black swans takes you away from me over a dark expanse of water and I ran after this strange hearse shouting, “Mai, Mai” (125). But in reality, he loses sight of the hearse and then packs his bags and leaves on the next plane. Robert is a musician first and a wanderer second and the father of Millie last. He does not share in a great passion for the Mai, yet he does not know enough to stay away from her. The last few pages of the play show the Mai’s incessant desire to hold on to the illusion that Robert loves her, even though he has once again left her (this time on Christmas Day) to be with another woman: “he loves me in his own high damaged way. Maybe it’s just a phase he’s going through and in a few years he’ll come back to me” (185). Millie tells the audience in a prior monologue that she does not remember back to Owl Lake because it never seems to leave her alone in the first place. All of those years her mother waited for something that was never going to happen seemed to drown them all. The sadness of these memories haunts her current life as she explains:

Millie: The Mai at the window, Grandma Fraochlán’s oar, The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again, and it goes on and on till I succumb and linger among them there in the dead silent world that tore our hearts out for a song. (184)

Millie remembers her mother holding on to the illusion (just like Grandma Fraochlán and The Duchess) that Robert would return:

The Mai: Robert is mine and I am his - People think I’ve no pride, no dignity, to stay in a situation like this, but I can’t think of one reason for going on without him.

Millie: Mom, you’ve never tried. (185)

The Mai's response to her own self-imposed imprisonment is to drown herself in Owl Lake. This corresponds with Robert's earlier explanation of dreaming her death. What Robert does not realize is by returning to the Mai he becomes the cause of her death by perpetuating her false hope for a future with him and then cruelly shattering it one more time. It is a future for which all of these generations of women have yearned.

Another generation of important female relationships in this play is manifested by the two daughters of Grandma Froachlán – Julie and Agnes. These women arrive armed to save Beck from burning in eternal hell because she is getting a divorce. What is revealed upon their arrival at Owl Lake is the frustration they feel toward their mother (especially Julie). Julie describes the horrible mother that Grandma Froachlán was and the life-long affect this had on her daughters: “she doesn't realize the influence she has over us, I'm seventy-five years of age, Mai, and I'm still not over my childhood” (146). For her daughters, Grandma Froachlán's love for her deceased husband became a sort of affliction and she now drowns her sorrows in opium and longing. It is revealed that Grandma Froachlán made her children suffer for her loss of the fisherman, thus setting in motion that history would bring with it suffering. The inclusion of Julie and Agnes (and the mention of the Mai's deceased mother, their sister) in the play provides a wider view of the history and impact the past has had on the future generations. Julie is not concerned with keeping the peace between herself and her mother while Agnes refrains from confrontation and verbal abuse. In a sense these aunts offer negative role models for the Mai, Beck and Connie, thereby documenting generations of repression that put off any chance of healing.

The Mai's generation is represented by her sisters, Beck and Connie. The most common thread of these sisters is that they all sought, at least on some level, their own form of happiness through independence and/or education, but got lost somewhere along the way. They are similar in their struggles because none of their relationships have been successful:

The Mai: Anyway it's great to see you again – reminds me of – the old days.

Connie: Way back before we discovered men. You know I spent my twenties thinkin' I have to get a man, I have to get a man –

The Mai: So did I.

Connie: Now that I have one, what's the big deal I'd like to know. Sometimes I'd love to be on my own again.

Beck: Ara go on outa that. You wouldn't last a day. You've never been without a man as long as I can remember.

The Mai: Four engagements before Derek.

Connie: And I never slept with any of them. If I could turn the clock back.

Beck: Don't be ridiculous. Sex for the sake of it is just sex for the sake of it...

The Mai: Have you slept with a lot of men, Beck?

Beck: Put it this way, I've lost count...the pair of ye don't know how lucky ye are. (159-160)

The conversation between the three sisters continues with the Mai's open acknowledgement of Robert's infidelity though she appears outwardly untouched by his actions. Her sisters both disapprove of how Robert humiliates the Mai in front of the entire town:

Connie: It's not much to be proud of, Mai.



The Mai: Think what you like.

Connie: You're being very stubborn. You just won't admit to yourself how terrible all this is. (161)

But the Mai does know, on some level, how Robert has disgraced her and this denial of reality will help contribute to her suicide. As history haunts every generation, these women repeat the theme of meeting a man, having his child and then being abandoned in different ways. The final character in Carr's generational tragedy is the Mai's daughter Millie.

The lone representative of the fourth generation is on stage throughout the entire play. Millie's character appears aloof while explaining her emotional connection with the Mai, although she has an emotional reaction to her mother's drowning which surfaces as an angry quarrel with her father, Robert. Millie's character seems to be the most underdeveloped due to her voyeuristic role as narrator throughout the play. The audience receives only brief exposure to her feelings while she explains the Mai's emotional reactions to situations – but not her own. The historical sadness and longing that is within the Mai is passed on to Millie and she cannot escape this matriarchal lineage:

Millie: None of The Mai and Robert's children are very strong. We teeter along the fringe of the world with halting gait, reeking of Owl Lake at every turn. I dream of water all the time. I'm floundering off the shore, or bursting toward the surface for air, or wrestling with a black swan trying to drag me under. I have not yet emerged triumphant from those lakes of the night...and on a confident day when I am considering a first shaky step towards something within my grasp, the caul constricts and I am back at Owl Lake again. (184)

The summation of all the generations' sadness and loss culminates in Beck's poignant statement: "That house of proud mad women." And so it is. Carr tells a tale of four generations of women who live without the love from their men that they deserved and

who are haunted by the ghosts of the past that no one can seem to shake. Because of a history of male hegemony that keeps women from living their awakened fantasies (like their male counterparts), they are stuck in a repetitious cycle. These are not the Maurya's of Synge's Ireland, but the offspring of generations who were defined by roles they did not want to fit and were therefore confined by this lack of possibility.

Unlike *Dancing at Lughnasa* where life is changing too quickly for the Mundy sisters, the women's lives at Owl Lake seem repetitious and stagnant. Although the Mai's death is shocking, it is not surprising because the audience is alerted to her drowning at the end of act one and again through Robert's dreams. The home at Owl Lake represents the culmination of all the Mai's energies spent trying to regain the love of a man who would never truly love her back. Owl Lake itself is like a cemetery for this family that appears to be the living dead. As mentioned earlier, Carr's characters do not find any reaffirmation or healing from their past. The thread of madness and disaster is weaved into the next generation. Like the rituals in the *Lughnasa* festival that call the Mundy sisters to participate in the dance, the myth of Owl Lake<sup>7</sup> haunts each generation throughout their lives. Though Carr does not offer Millie a happy ending, she does offer Millie a history and this counts as something because there is the slightest possibility that she can someday "emerge triumphant from those lakes." It is not Carr's quest to offer women solutions to their past but to present, through the drama, various truths that women experience. Oftentimes, these are muddled realities that are rife with sadness and

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<sup>7</sup> Millie explains that the name Owl Lake came from *loch cailleach oiche* or "Pool of the Dark Witch". The story is about two lovers – Coillte and Bloom – who are kept from each other by the Dark Witch who trapped Bloom in her lair. When Coillte learns where her love is being kept she cries a lake of tears. The Dark Witch pushes Coillte into Owl Lake and then Bloom escapes from the witch's lair and learns that Coillte disappeared into the water forever. Parallel to Carr's characters in the play, the myth that haunts the lake haunts the lives of Robert and the Mai to the bitter end.

anger. Yet the ability of Carr's women to be bold and even grotesque is a center-stage triumph that brings the long-repressed women's point of view out from the darkened wings of Irish theatre. This is a fresh approach for Irish women and for Irish drama. By presenting the cruel realities of life, women's suppression into silence comes to the forefront; as this thesis has sought to address, the issues and the women are no longer silenced. In retrospect, Irish theatre has had a direct impact on Irish culture. This small island nation has used drama and historical celebrations not only to renew but to re-evaluate the traditions of the land.

## Chapter Five, Curtain Call

In the final analysis, there is a real challenge in capturing the essence of the feminine Irish stage protagonist with as much accuracy and definition as the topic deserves. The background to this thesis rests with the imaginative nature of Irish dramatists and the extraordinary talent imbedded in the Irish imagination. The first “act” of this thesis centers on the talented writers of the Irish Renaissance who set the landscape for more defined and significant women characters on the contemporary stage. The three central “acts” at the heart of this thesis trace the independent development of feminine family units by playwrights determined to break the male-dominated hegemony that has governed the Irish stage (always a mirror of Irish culture itself) for much of the past century. My discussion of the lack of representation of Ireland's feminine voice finds its roots in a multitude of essayists, critics and academics who have previously written about this issue of under-representation. Though I began my interest in Irish drama from a limited perspective and a pedestrian point of view, I have since been exposed to some of the greatest characters and language of the modern stage. This thesis, therefore, has been a discovery of and tribute to the talented dramatists – past and present.

An important observation about this thesis is that its focus centers on a culture that has been seeking social, religious and political freedom from its colonizers; at the same time, a vital subculture (the Irish female) has also been pursuing the very same struggle from within. John Harrington, in his preface to the *Norton Anthology of Modern Irish Drama*, discusses the relationship between nationalism and the theatre: “drama helps articulate both arguments and counterarguments” (x). For nearly a century, drama

has allowed Ireland to define itself outside the constraints of the English influence. Shaw eloquently explains this position in his 1913 essay on nationalism:

The modern Irish theatre began with *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* of Mr. Yeats and Lady Gregory's *Rising of the Moon*, in which the old patriotism stirred and wrung its victims; but when the theatre thus established called on Young Ireland to write plays and found a national school of drama, the immediate result was a string of plays of Irish life – and very true to life they were – in which heroines proclaimed that they were sick of Ireland and [be]rated their Nationalist husbands for sacrificing all the realities of life to senseless Fenian maunderings. (x)

Shaw's generalization illuminates a cultural irony central to this thesis: as the process of defining Irish nationalism went one way in the paternalistic social and political institutions, it sometimes went another direction on stage. The feminine family units in the subject plays of this thesis express a generations-long perspective on the effect of "sacrificing all the realities of life" through a century of social stagnation.

Another means of gaining a sense of identity is viewing one society through a cultural and historical lens and, for Ireland and other colonized societies, postcolonialism is an effective approach. I must acknowledge, then, the body of academic writing on Ireland from a postcolonial perspective. Although I did not choose this theory as one of my focal points, I agree that a postcolonial reading of the plays in this thesis would have many advantages. Indeed, it is difficult to approach Irish literature free from the discriminating eye of postcolonial theory and not difficult to wonder what elements of Irish society could have been so different without the invasion/influence of the English. But, what is more important in this thesis is the comparison of the three contemporary plays in terms of their women "groups" and what they reveal about social dynamics in a distinctly Irish context.

As discussed earlier, the contemporary dramatist seeking to create new female voices must do so from new perspectives and novel points of view. That is to say, they cannot all be Kate Mundys. The new faces of Irish characters are ones who can disobey the old orders and disregard customs. This is not to say there is no place for the Kate Mundys who respect family life and the Catholic Church and regional loyalty, but the playwrights in this thesis have all provided new possibilities: “what joins all these plays is not the birthplace of the authors but their collective contemplation of Ireland’s identity” (Harrington, xiv). This is a very important statement because through the efforts of all the dramatists discussed in this thesis, the Irish stage (on both sides of the border) has opened the door to establishing a realistic and progressive role for women in Irish society. The new possibilities or perspectives alluded to in the previous paragraph are undoubtedly crucial to the collective impact of this group of plays.

For Friel’s *Lughnasa* the new perspective is expressed through the sporadic memories of Jack’s experiences in Africa. Jack’s return to Ireland is crucial to the story on one level but his state of transition illustrates an even more important and exotic form of adaptation. Jack is the “magnificent hero” of Michael’s childhood (Friel, 8), but with a twist. Jack left Ireland a Catholic priest and returned a devout pagan open to a diverse range of possibilities for social adaptation that he gained while living among the Ryangan tribe. One fresh perspective was viewing Michael as a “love child” instead of the living proof of Christina’s shame for bearing a child out of wedlock:

Jack: In Ryanga women are eager to have love-children. The more love-children you have, the more fortunate your household is thought to be.  
(41)

For the Ryangans, not only is there no shame for women who bear children out of wedlock, these women are not disgraced by society but embraced. Friel sets up Jack's overt liberalism against Kate's staunch conservatism and intolerance and in so doing, Friel offers women a more tolerant and forgiving approach than the strict adherence to rule found in Irish culture.

An obvious but important element in *Lughnasa* is the freedom in dance. When Friel joins all the sisters together in their kitchen and the music quickly takes them over: "with this too loud music, this pounding beat, this shouting – calling – singing the parodic reel, there is a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously crudely caricaturing themselves" (22). I like to consider that this scene presents the sisters fully vulnerable and open with one another, providing a moment where they are allowed to exist outside the family cell and its social and religious constraints. It is important to see this scene as an alternative for Irish women from the daily responsibilities that weigh heavily and sadly. Another moment of freedom expressed through dance occurs when Gerry Evans returns to Ballybeg to visit Michael and Chris:

Michael: And although my mother and he didn't go through a conventional form of marriage, once more they danced together, witnessed by the unseen sisters. And this time it was a dance without music; just them, in ritual circles round and round that square...my mother with her head thrown back, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open. (42)

The new possibilities of freedom expressed in this play extend from Chris's deeply personal dance of union with Gerry to the dance of communal identity enjoyed by all the Mundy sisters. Their collective empathy extends most poignantly to the pagan influence

that Jack acquired in Africa, for they allow his alternative subculture to become a stranger in the room as long as he lives with them.

For Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*, the glimpse of a new perspective is expressed through the characters of Josie and Frieda. Devlin places Josie directly within the IRA and its male-dominated organization. Josie's family is immersed in the Irish fight for independence, which is not unusual, but the fact that Josie chose to be involved is the new approach. Although it is not as historically documented, women were very active in many aspects of the Northern Irish fight for independence. The interesting twist that Devlin delivers, however, centers on Josie's unexpected shift in loyalty – with a new life growing inside of her, she chooses to walk away from a lifetime of devotion to the IRA in order to raise the child. Devlin sets up a markedly different plight for Josie's sister Frieda in order to show the contrast between their choices. Under the portraits of the hunger strikers in the local pub in Andersonstown, Frieda rebels against the male hegemony by protesting against singing the songs “where the women are doormats” (Devlin, 13). Frieda offers up her own original songs to perform with the musician, Danny, but he argues that the public wants to hear only the “Republican classics.” Frieda's spirit is more publicly defiant than Josie's, and her lifelong resistance to “fitting in” provides a more traditional counterpoint for achieving independence. As seen in *Lughnasa* with Agnes and Rose Mundy, Frieda plans to flee Ireland for England in hopes of regaining something that is forever beyond arm's reach. Josie's far more risky gambit, taken under the watchful eyes of her IRA father and brother, offers the more innovative choice for the future.



The new possibilities presented for women in Carr's *The Mai* are not as overt but the message is there. Because of Carr's twist on the historically male-dominated generational story, the play presents four generations of women and their unique and painful strides. The Mai herself portrays a woman who gave all she could to own a home of her own with the intent of calling her husband back to her. This setting has almost mythological dimensions of safety and serenity that together represent a safe haven that draws all four generations together to witness the Mai's tragic self-sacrifice. The magnitude of the Mai's achievement in creating a safe haven, as ephemeral as it is, offers the possibility that matriarchal traditions can have meaning, strength and duration if they are allowed to grow freely alongside the established patriarchal traditions of the Irish nation.

I would like to close by contemplating on this project as a whole, in order to pay my final respects to the greats of the past, like Synge and O'Casey and to re-iterate the connection to this past that Ireland's contemporary talent, like Devlin and Carr, bring to the modern stage. I acknowledge that, although Brian Friel writes Irish women into his plays with accurate portrayal, his stories are more about male experience. However, I chose to use Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* because I find the Mundy sisters unique, individualized and trying to live against the male (Irish) traditions that limit them. That being said, Devlin and Carr write about women's experience "outside" of that history:

To write women into Irish theatre history, women playwrights write outside of Irish theatre history, finding new subjects (real Irish women) and alternative forms (street performance, cross gender casting, contiguous narratives) to break out of the male-centered traditions of Irish drama and to develop Ireland's increasingly heterogenous theater scene. (Trotter, 164)

It is “outside” of the sphere where women have existed for many years and through writers like Carr and Devlin, it seems they have returned from the margins. By approaching various forms of art from various points of view, Irish women have claimed an identity that had gone ignored.

Though I have leapt over many important contributors, I return to 1988, in the city of Dublin. This was the year that Ireland declared its one-thousandth year history through a celebration called “Dublin Millennium” (Mullin, 29). The official poster circulated for the event depicted major historical people in Irish history – but only male faces. An alternate poster was created by a Ms. Cathleen O’Neill, from Kibarrack, “The Spirit of Woman” poster showed all women’s faces, all pertinent to Irish history with a decorative border of *sheela-na-gigs*, a medieval fertility symbol depicting women showing genitals (Mullin). Shopkeepers refused to sell and dispense O’Neill’s poster on the basis that these “sheelas” were obscene. The symbolism and the censorship implicit within this news story highlights a crucial factor to the discussion of cultural nationalism and female identity. O’Neill’s poster not only challenges the hegemonic norm by second-guessing the representation of Irish history as being led solely by men, but also adds a more complicated level of meaning to its rebuttal – that of the visual use of the *sheelas*. At the base of O’Neill’s poster are symbols of female power, symbols representing fertility. What better gift to bring to Ireland’s birthday party than a poster showing her greatest women all connected by a unifying identity, but not a limited one.

While this thesis expanded over a century (Yeats, Synge, O’Casey, Friel, Devlin, Carr) from the “Irish Renaissance” to the modern stage, female Irish dramatists writing today do not disregard the history that precludes them. In Kim McMullen’s 1996 article

about the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Drama*'s lack of feminine inclusion, she reminds Irish scholars that once again, women are not re-membered in the history of Ireland's literary landscape. McMullen goes on to explain the relevance of a postcolonial, feminist reinterpretation of Ireland's nationalism that stands to reapportion women's positioning throughout and within history:

Irish feminists have been slow to turn to the more broadly theoretical project of critiquing decolonizing discourse or even the patriarchal ideology of the colonial and state regimes. Ailbhe Smyth suggests that the "early years" of the Irish women's movement were preoccupied with struggles over housing, reproductive rights, employment, and other "practical, tangible, survival issues," so that the "ideological superstructure" of the patriarchal state has not until recently, been extensively challenged. (Notes, 43)

As Josie McCoy claimed in Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*, it is fairly impossible to separate politics from any discussion of Irish culture.

For the dramatist looking at characters who continue to challenge old constraints, the future is wide open. Through a socio-cultural approach, this thesis discussed the question of what informs the creation of these female character groups and their cultural significance. Politics, myth, religion and male hegemony all influenced the formation of the female characters discussed in this thesis and the dramatists of the past century have succeeded in inciting a social dialogue which illuminates women's identity. These particular Irish dramatists have inspired audiences and readers alike to reconsider Ireland's nationalist identity as well as the identity of Ireland's women. In order to influence the thinking of the Irish culture, the dramatists presented in this thesis developed female characters who voiced their opinions and chose to resist the traditional expectations placed upon them by the dogmatic controls of Church and State.

Though the Irish female may still be seen historically as the stranger in the room, there has evolved, from such plays as those discussed in this thesis, a revision of Ireland's nationalistic viewpoints that expands to acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of women. Devlin appropriates the meaning of *Sinn Fein* ("ourselves alone") from Ireland's nationalistic fight to oust English control and uses it to describe both the plight of Irish women and the comfort they derive from supporting each other. This is a bold maneuver, to say the least. Devlin takes back "Ourselves Alone" and applies it directly to women and their ignored voices of loss and loneliness, yet in the very same action she offers them the possibility of working and protecting each other as "ourselves alone." Although this possibility is never fulfilled in the feminine family units created by Devlin, Carr and Friel, the new perspectives they illuminate on stage offer a call to action for generations to come.

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MA English            Indiana University, Indianapolis, IN (June, 2007)

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### PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

**Stark Neurosciences Research Institute** Indianapolis, IN June 2003 – present  
**Administrative Services Coordinator**

- Implement graduate program including recruitment and student recordkeeping.
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- Work effectively with the Executive Director to achieve the Institute goals.
- Maintain updates for website.
- Facilitate critical operational communication between the Stark and its parent department, Pharmacology.
- Manage all facility issues for Institute including security access.

**International School of Indiana** Indianapolis, IN            June 2002 – June 2003  
**Administrative Assistant**

- Communication liaison for recruiting and retention.
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**Purdue University** West Lafayette, IN 1999 – December 2001  
**Director, English as a Foreign Language School**

- Organized fund-raising events, developed new curriculum, planned social events on and off campus for students and their families.
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**ESL Teacher**

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