

“A Language Without Words”



Ireland Reimagined in the Plays of Brian Friel

Tyler Van Riper

Washington and Lee University

May 2014

“A Language Without Words”
Ireland Reimagined in the Plays of Brian Friel

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Department of English
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English

Tyler Hope Van Riper

Washington and Lee University
Lexington, Virginia
May 2014

“On my honor, I have neither given nor received any
unacknowledged aid on this thesis.”

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	1
PROLOGUE.....	3
CHAPTER 1.....	7
“A Language That Isn’t Our Own”: The Transformation of Culture in <i>Translations</i>	
CHAPTER 2.....	31
“A Surrogate for Language”: The Ambivalence of Belief in <i>Dancing at Lughnasa</i>	
WORKS CITED.....	57

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis project focuses on the significance of language, and the following pages truly embody my passion for the English language. Not only is this project the culmination of over a year of research, revision, and long nights in my Leyburn locked study, but it also symbolizes the four undergraduate years that I have spent at Washington and Lee, the amazing experiences that I have had, and the friends and mentors who have guided me along the way. First, I have been incredibly blessed to visit Ireland not one, but two times since coming to W&L, and I have had the most kindhearted, enthusiastic guides along the way. For being our group's fearless leader, taking us up the difficult side of the mountain, and truly making us feel like we were a part of Dingle town, I thank Sean Pol O'Connor. For finding a place for me at Trinity, making sure I saw all of the theatre must-sees in Dublin, and taking time for the occasional cup of tea, I thank Seona MacReamoinn. To Driver John, Donncha, Brother John, the other Sean O'Conner, Lenka, everyone at the Dísheart—thanks for making Ireland truly feel like home.

I cannot thank the English department enough for being encouraging, challenging, entertaining... the list goes on! I will always think fondly of every Shannon-Clark retreat, each Studio 11 reading, the *Shenandoah* office at 17 Courthouse Square, and the armchairs on the second floor of Payne Hall. I have had the best professors and mentors during my time with the department who have constantly believed in my abilities and endeavored to help me succeed in every possible way. Thank you to Holly Pickett for being my second reader during this project and for diving into Irish drama headfirst with me. Thank you to Suzanne Keen for being my academic advisor and for teaching “Schools of Magic,” the class that rekindled my love for English. Thank you to Theresa Braunschneider for being so approachable and open with your

students and for assigning the most creative final projects. Thank you to Rod Smith for letting me be your right hand woman for a semester and for all of the long office hour chats. Thank you to Jim Warren for your pointed suggestion that I take English 299 and your unwavering confidence in me. To Edward Adams, Laura Brodie, Chris Gavalier, Genelle Gertz, and Deborah Miranda—thank you for making Payne Hall an inviting and enriching place to which I was eager to return every day. Finally, thank you to Mrs. O’Connell for your kind words and reassuring smile that brightened my day more times than I can count.

I would especially like to thank Marc Conner who guided me from an enthusiastic applicant for the English department’s Spring Term Abroad in Ireland to an honors thesis student in Irish drama. From being the most enthusiastic guide across the Irish countryside to helping me compile a thesis plan and a grant proposal while acting as department chair to reading countless drafts and holding weekly meetings with me in addition to your responsibilities as Associate Provost, you have completely exceeded any and all expectations that I had for faculty members when I chose to attend Washington and Lee. More than anything, your positive demeanor and genuine interest in my life outside of academics is why the administration was smart enough to steal you from the English department when it had a chance! Thank you for all of your work as my thesis advisor; it has been such a rewarding experience.

Finally, thank you to all of the friends who endured months of hearing the words “my thesis” in every conversation and never complained. Thank you to Spencer for accepting the moments when I have to “geek out” over Ireland and for understanding my compulsion to visit again and again. A huge thank you to my family for the constant support, the steadfast love, and all of the laughs. I couldn’t have done this without all of you behind me, and I sincerely appreciate it!

PROLOGUE

*“It is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us,
but images of the past embodied in language.”*

BRIAN FRIEL, *Translations*

I first read these lines in February of 2012 as part of Professor Conner’s English 384 course, the twelve-week prerequisite that was designed to fully immerse us in Irish literature, history, and culture before our month-long Spring Term Abroad experience in the West of Ireland. During that winter term, we studied the history of Ireland from the pre-Celtic Stone Age to the twentieth-century “troubles” of Northern Ireland, read poems by William Butler Yeats, short stories by Roddy Doyle, and fiction by Edna O’Brien, and attended viewings of some of the country’s most poignant films about its vast history. We were inundated with all things Ireland, yet Brian Friel’s play *Translations* (1980) stuck with me, and the depiction of the loss of the Irish Gaelic language influenced my perceptions of the country when we finally crossed the pond that April. Those four weeks living on the Dingle peninsula were among the most rewarding of my life, and my foundation in the events of the early nineteenth century through *Translations* made me appreciate the country’s constant struggle to maintain both its rich Celtic past and its status as a modern nation. I left Ireland with two semesters of the island’s history, literature, and culture on my transcript and the desire to learn even more about the Emerald Isle.

From the moment that I decided to be an English major, I knew I would write a senior honors thesis. My over-achiever personality combined with a real love for the English language made it inevitable, but I struggled for a while over what topic I would choose to explore for the better part of a year. However, my amazing experience in Ireland coupled with a fall term the

following year that included studying modern British and American drama with Professor Pickett and writing my own one-act plays with Professor Gavalier quickly made it apparent: Irish drama. With Professor Conner onboard as my thesis advisor, and the proposal approved by members of the English department, I began working with Professor Conner to apply for an opportunity that would ultimately determine the specific subject of my thesis: a Student Summer Independent Research (SSIR) grant.

The SSIR grant that I received from the Dean of the College allowed me to travel to Dublin, experience Ireland's theatre culture, explore significant historical landmarks, and complete preliminary research for my thesis in libraries and museums throughout the city. I was able to send postcards to my friends and family from the iconic General Post Office, participate in Dublin's famous Literary Pub Crawl, stay in a dorm room at Trinity College Dublin, and attend nine different performances in just under two weeks. These included lunch-and-a-show performances, a very modern one-man act, sketches from Trinity College Dublin's Shakespeare Festival, and the first premiere night of Elaine Murphy's new play *Shush* at the Abbey Theatre. However, the most powerful performances were the two that I traveled nearly three hours west of Dublin to see. I was lucky enough to see two plays by well-known Irish playwright Tom Murphy, *Conversations on a Homecoming* and *A Whistle in the Dark*, which were performed by Galway's Druid Theatre Company at the Backstage Theatre in Longford. Murphy's unique way of exploring the past within his plays, especially *Famine*, brought to mind the work that I had already studied of Brian Friel, and I suddenly felt confident in my plans for narrowing down my thesis topic.

Although Tom Murphy and his drama no longer make an appearance in this thesis, his plays were significant in helping to shape my initial ideas regarding the specific area of Irish

drama that I wanted to study. About his own drama, Murphy has said, “In recent times I noticed that the recurring theme seems to be the search for home. What that ‘home’ means, I am not sure. It used to appear in the plays in the literal, geographical way that we understand the term. Now, I see it more as a search for the self, for peace, for harmony” (Kurdi 234). I believe that Brian Friel incorporates a similar idea within his own plays, and this concept of “home” is heavily influenced by the physical space in which he spent his childhood. Born in 1929 near Omagh in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, Friel “later moved just across the border into County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland” (Whelan 7). He became part of a generation that was “abandoned by both the British and Irish states” (Whelan 8), and this experience as well as the following decades of conflict between opposing political and religious groups no doubt shaped his perceptions of these two Irelands: the Republic and Northern Ireland.

Brian Friel is one of a number of dramatists who “have turned to particular spots of time past for analogues, metaphors, of the present violence, some situation prefiguring its future” (Maxwell 2). In both *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), the plays that I will discuss in depth throughout this thesis, Friel sets the drama’s action entirely in the past. By working within a different time period than his own, the playwright is able to comment on past situations while subtly expressing the ways in which many of these same issues continue to pervade Irish culture. While writing *Translations*, in particular, the politically and religiously charged “troubles” within Northern Ireland were at an all-time high. “The foundational play of the Field Day Theatre Company,” *Translations* “can be read as both a parable about, and a diagnosis of, the conditions of the post-partition Catholic community in Northern Ireland” (Whelan 8). Looking to the past gave Friel and his audience members a unique lens for viewing the political, social, and religious concerns of their present day Irish culture. In the following chapters, I will

introduce two of Brian Friel's most beloved plays, *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, focusing particularly on the playwright's use of different "languages" and his emphasis on the dichotomy between tradition and modernity as a means of exploring the playwright's ambivalence toward his subjects.

CHAPTER 1

“A Language That Isn’t Our Own”: The Transformation of Culture in *Translations*

Before a single line of dialogue is uttered onstage, the title of Brian Friel’s well-known play *Translations* alerts the audience to its main focus: language. Variations in Friel’s use of language demonstrate the significance of the time period and emphasize the opposition between England the colonizer and Ireland the colonized. Set in 1833 yet written nearly one hundred and fifty years later, his play focuses greatly on changes that occur in Ireland between these two dates, drawing on elements of the past, the onstage present, and the very present future during which the audience views the play. The linguistic interplay between English and its dialects, Irish Gaelic, and classical languages points toward Friel’s ultimate ambivalence regarding the loss of the Irish language and the resulting cultural change. As Christopher Murray describes, *Translations* takes place in an Ireland that is mere moments from complete transformation: the play opens with a community “balanced on a knife-edge. A major shift, a revolution indeed, is about to take place whereby an old world, a world of traditional modes of education and of communication, will yield to a new world, let us call it modernity. The basic conflict in the play is between tradition and modernity” (“Palimpsest” 87). Friel demonstrates this dichotomy throughout *Translations*, relying on language and the manner in which characters express themselves to exhibit these changes to Irish culture and society that are brought about by Great Britain’s occupation of the country.

Throughout *Translations*, Friel shows the ways through which England, the colonizer, asserts its dominance over Ireland and the island’s culture, a dominance that eventually led to linguistic dissonance between the countries and a landscape with names that were foreign to its

native inhabitants. Having always viewed the Irish language as an identifying element of the country's national character, Friel's Irish characters have mixed feelings toward the English Ordnance Survey and the Anglicization of place names that its soldiers have come to implement across the country. This language debate successfully introduces the "tradition versus modernity" dichotomy of which Murray wrote. Some residents of Baile Beag view English as the language of a future life in America, including Maire Chatach who believes the hedge-school students "should all be learning to speak English ... the sooner we all learn to speak English the better" (Friel 399). Others like Jimmy Jack Cassie would rather look to the past, seeking out myth from classic Greek and Roman culture for guidance regarding the future. Since Maire views modern life as a boat ticket to the New World, and Jimmy Jack lives in a fantasy world where marrying the goddess Athena is within his reach, neither of these characters is conscious of the implications of the officers' changes to their Irish place names. Unfortunately for the Irish people and their distinct language and culture, these changes came about more drastically than anyone could have imagined, and the results of this cultural shift last through to the present day.

To further drive home the implications of this linguistic shift away from Irish Gaelic, the program used by the Field Day Theatre Company for the first staging of *Translations* included this fact: "at the beginning of the nineteenth century about one and a half million people spoke only Irish, out of a population of under eight million, while over two million people commonly used the Irish language" (Murray, "Palimpsest" 88). These figures seem particularly tragic when one recognizes that "the number of people using the Irish language daily was only 4% of the population of 3.5 million" during the period just after the play's premiere (Murray, "Palimpsest" 88). Dehoratius identifies multiple factors behind this decline in the use of Irish; in Friel's play alone it becomes apparent that "hedge schools will be replaced by the National Schools; the

famine, which will wipe out two-thirds of Ireland's Irish-speaking population and which is repeatedly foreshadowed with mention of the 'sweet smell' of the blight, looms on the historical horizon; and the supposedly harmless presence of the English in Baile Beag ends in disaster for the town” (376).

According to multiple scholars of Irish history, the English were directly to blame for the tragedies that took place in Ireland during the Great Famine, which assisted in the destruction of the Irish language. Friel perpetuates this idea by first introducing the potato blight’s existence in conjunction with the British soldiers’ arrival: “as soon as he crossed over the gap at Cnoc na Mona – just beyond where the soldiers are making the maps – the sweet smell was everywhere” (Friel 394). Friel fully attributes Ireland’s being thrust into modernity to the English, and the ascription of blame regarding the famine is not unfounded since it was “England’s unfair protection laws which made Ireland dependent only on English trade ... [and] almost wholly subsistent on a single crop, the potato” (Conner 5). During the famine, the English insisted on following a *laissez-faire* approach to the incident; “indeed, the government refused to place an embargo on the export of grain from Ireland,” which meant “during the famine parts of Ireland were actually exporting food” (Conner 5). Through its objective of Anglicizing its neighboring colony, and by refusing to aid the roughly 1 million Irish who died during the Great Famine, England paved the way for the complete transformation of Irish culture that occurred throughout the nineteenth century.

Friel exhibits the beginning of this cultural shift through the confusion and frustration of the nineteenth-century Irish characters in *Translations* who struggle to understand the Anglicized place names that the Ordnance Survey applies in lieu of Irish titles. This confusion would parallel a twentieth-century audience’s feelings had Friel written his play in the Gaelic language

that the characters are meant to speak, a language that most of the audience would not have the ability to translate. Due to the time period and rural location in which Friel sets his play, it is inferred that the Irish characters speak Irish Gaelic, the major language in Ireland at the time that all children would have learned both at home and at school. However, by the time Friel writes *Translations*, generations of Irish people have been born into a modern, post-Anglicization Ireland in which Irish Gaelic came second to English. As Friel explains, “The sad irony, of course, is that the whole play is written in English. It ought to be written in Irish” (Carty 140). The playwright must therefore take conventions from this present, a time that has already dealt with the historical implications of the play’s events, in order to represent the imagined past of 1833 in a way that his audience can fully grasp. He must translate traditional Irish culture for the modern descendants of his characters. W.B. Worthen’s essay “Homeless Words: Field Day and the Politics of Translation” explains that, in order to immerse the audience in the specific cultural and political climate of the mid-nineteenth century, Friel uses all three of the play’s “language-realms – classical (Greek and Latin), colonized (Irish), and imperial (English)” (31).

Translations is written almost entirely in English with some phrases included from Latin and Greek. The classical languages are only attributed to Irish characters associated with a hedge-school education, and these instances “link the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome to the contemporary Irish culture of Baile Beag and replace the Irish of *Translations*' Irish characters” (Dehoratius 368). As a result, the audience still gets a glimpse of the Irish culture’s adherence to the classics and ancient culture through the hedge-school scenes; however, viewers do not require a program full of Gaelic to English translations, which would be necessary had Friel chosen to write half of the dialogue in a language that is rarely spoken outside of Ireland’s Gaeltacht regions. For the Irish characters, Friel instead writes lines in Irish English, a unique

dialect of English that began to take shape during the very time period explored in *Translations* and the current language of the modern Irish nation. As a playwright familiar with the cultural and political implications of the English presence in Ireland throughout the nineteenth century, Friel was aware that twentieth-century Irish identity is “inextricably bound to the languages of Ireland (Gaelic, English, Irish English)” (Worthen 24). This third “language,” Irish English, is a direct example of how Irishmen and women dealt with the loss of their own language following the events imagined in *Translations*. By taking the language forced upon them by the oppressive colonizer and making it their own, the Irish people who lived after the Ordnance Survey and were therefore educated outside of the hedge-school culture created a dialect of English that is unique to the island. Friel’s adherence to Irish English instead of the traditional Irish Gaelic when writing the dialogue of his Irish characters asserts his ambivalence toward the events of the mid-nineteenth century; as a contributor to this new Irish literary tradition himself, the playwright recognizes this dialect of the colonizer’s language as an instrument of the Irish Literary Revival, the language of William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge among others.

The Irish English dialect allows Friel to write the majority of his play in English while skillfully maintaining a sense of division between the language of the Irish characters and the Standard English of the English officers. Through differences in diction, syntax, and colloquial expression, Irish English assists in the illusion that the Irish characters speak Gaelic onstage, a completely foreign language to the English-speaking officers. Every sentence spoken in the Standard English of the officers is meant to contrast with the foreign-sounding phrases produced by the “Irish” speakers. Examples of odd syntax, shown in Maire’s phrase “Come here till you see” (Friel 437), and strange diction, such as that found in “Cripes, you’re missing the crack!”

and other exclamations by Doalty (Friel 434), perpetuate the illusion that these characters speak a language native to the island and completely unlike the English of their colonizers. Through the foreign quality of Irish English to English-speaking audiences, Friel's use of Irish English gives the impression that the Irish characters speak Irish Gaelic while the English characters speak English. Friel further exploits Irish English as a means for keeping the play's primary language "'other' to audiences whose English isn't Irish" (Worthen 32). This distinction between the dialects is important to Friel's tradition versus modernity dichotomy; the English-speaking audience must hear a difference in the manner of speaking between the Irish natives and the English soldiers in order to recognize the magnitude of the cultural upheaval that took place during the nineteenth century.

Along with the distinction made through dialects, Friel fully develops a very traditional Irish space onstage, which helps to further emphasize the differences between pre-Anglicization Ireland and the modern British nation. In the opening act of *Translations*, the audience is introduced to a typical day in the hedge-school of Baile Beag. Hedge-schools were common in a time "when education for Catholics was offered in barns and even out-of-doors" due to religious persecution and when the Irish language was being completely disregarded by "the British-imposed National School system" (Brown 41). Friel intentionally decides to set his play in a "disused barn or hay-shed or byre" with "broken and forgotten implements," such as "lobster-pots" and "farming tools" (Friel 383), bringing to life the traditional Irish sphere for his audience and suggesting the traditional in the tradition-modernity dichotomy that runs throughout the play. To this recognizable space of nineteenth-century Irish culture, students arrive from various locations and occupations: Maire has spent the day in the fields harvesting hay (Friel 388);

Doalty has been following, and upsetting the calculations of, English land-surveyors (Friel 390); and Hugh, the schoolmaster, has come from the pub following a baby's christening (Friel 397).

The class passes as usual in a combination of Latin, Greek, and "Irish," until Owen, Hugh's younger son, enters and introduces the play's English characters into the scene. Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland express more discomfort at this meeting than anything, and this tentativeness directly contrasts the final act in which the English presence is dictatorial and shows no sympathetic feelings for the Irish people. Captain Lancey's formal speech to the Irish students, and Owen's less-than-accurate translation, also assert the hedge-school as a safe space for the Irish people. Protected by the walls of tradition, the Irish possess the upper hand, which results in a comic scene with Lancey as the butt of the joke. His initial attempts to speak to the group of students end poorly as first Doalty, then Bridget, and even Sarah, the sweet girl who is mute, snigger at his communication skills (Friel 406). Although Owen's interference is meant to ease the tension between the two groups, his refusal to accurately report Captain Lancey's words only furthers the Irish culture's dominant position over the interaction.

Even before the Irish characters show little respect for Captain Lancey's position and laugh at his attempts to communicate, the captain's disdain for the Irish people and their language becomes apparent during this meeting in which Friel particularly stresses the differences in English dialects. Owen introduces Captain Lancey to his father, hedge-school master Hugh, who immediately switches from the mixture of "Irish," Latin, and Greek with which he has been teaching his students to a very formal Standard English. Described as becoming "*expansive, almost courtly*" (Friel 405), Hugh matches the tone of his visitors' greetings effortlessly. He responds to Lancey's "Good evening" with the phrase "You and I have already met, sir" (Friel 405), which exhibits his firm grasp of both the mechanics and

formality of Standard English. For a brief seven lines, Friel exhibits the ability and ease with which these groups can communicate. Nevertheless, as Hugh slips back into his familiar mixture of languages, the Englishmen no longer understand his meaning. When he welcomes the officers in Latin, saying “Gaudeo vos hic adesse” (Friel 405), the men simply ignore him. However, Lancey is forced to express his confusion at the schoolmaster’s address when Hugh asks him directly “What about a drop, sir?” (Friel 405), a question with colloquial Irish English composition. Although Lancey understands the English words, the “dialect locutions of Irish English” that Hugh exhibits are unfamiliar to the captain (Worthen 32). Hugh again tries to offer a beverage to the officer with the more familiar phrase “Perhaps a modest refreshment?” (Friel 405). Unfortunately, the schoolmaster seems unable to maintain the Standard English of his guests and uses the Latin phrase “aqua vitae” to further describe the available beverage. Despite being a popular identifier for “ardent spirits or unrectified alcohol” that had been in use since 1471 (OED), the Latin phrase immediately puts Lancey off; Hugh’s introduction of a language besides English shuts down the conversation completely. As in many scenes throughout *Translations*, a great deal of power is ascribed to language. Lancey asserts his own power over this situation by refusing to acknowledge any language apart from English. By limiting himself to a single-language interaction, Friel’s English character emphasizes the superiority of the Irish hedge-school culture, which includes the study of classical language as well as Irish Gaelic.

The captain has a similar reaction when he first attempts to speak to the group of Irish hedge-school students. Unsure of how to communicate with them, Lancey repeats almost every word in just two sentences of dialogue and speaks in a broken manner that questions more than affirms his authority. Upon recognizing the difficulty the officer has in addressing the classroom, Jimmy Jack Cassie attempts to help, asking “Nonne Latine loquitar?” (Friel 405).

Without asking Owen for a translation of the man's words, Lancey quickly stops him from any further interruption with the succinct phrase, "I do not speak any Gaelic, sir" (Friel 405). It would seem that the captain does not, in fact, speak Latin. This mistake on Lancey's part endorses a reading of the Irish as well-informed and more worldly than the English despite the British Empire's status as great colonizers throughout the world. In this opening act, the culturally superior Irish maintain a sense of dominance over the interaction between the two cultures. Lancey's lack of knowledge of the classical languages also foreshadows their eventual loss within Irish culture that occurs alongside the people's loss of Irish Gaelic. Without the curriculum taught through the hedge-schools, classical languages as well as the unique mythology will have a greatly diminished role in the classroom as compared to English. With this idea in mind, English colonization is not just the end of Irish Gaelic in the world; these cultural changes also signify the diminished status of classical languages, such as Latin and Greek.

Nevertheless, the second act of *Translations* presents an image of hope for Irish Gaelic, the classical languages, and the hedge-school culture in general. Situated between the play's opening and closing acts, which display the miscommunication that can occur when two cultures are forced into contact, this second act presents a "middle ground" between Ireland and England, an idea of the mutual benefits that could result from an interaction between the two cultures. As Declan Kiberd explains in his book *Reinventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation*, "a true translation, true to the genius of both traditions, appears to Friel as the least of all evils in the negotiation between tradition and modernity. The problem is that a translator is often a traducer, especially when working out of a minor and into a major imperial language" (619). The Oxford English Dictionary defines "trader" as "a defamer, slanderer, calumniator," which stresses the

negative implications that result from an interpreter giving a one-sided and not strictly true translation. Although the men are employed by the empire to translate into a “major imperial language,” Owen and Yolland seem intent on doing a fair job by both colonizer and colonized. Strangely enough, the Englishman, who should represent the colonizing empire, is more worried about maintaining the Irish language and culture, while his Irish counterpart sees nothing wrong with the proposed country-wide changes. This relationship suggests a system of checks within the English Ordnance Survey itself whose members will work toward a common goal of more effective, mutual communication between the two countries. Yolland, feeling sentimental toward the Irish people and their unique language, requests not changing certain names at all. He wants to leave every name alone that does not have an “English equivalent” (Friel 410), while Owen works precisely to Anglicize the names correctly, checking the English record-keeping books for ways to standardize every “Cnoc,” “Lis,” and “Druim.” While each man feels differently about the significance of their new place names, they work together to create a list of names, not quite English yet not quite Irish, that will serve as “true translations” to their locations.

Throughout the first scene of Act II, each side of the linguistic divide has a member of the English Ordnance Survey looking out for its best interests, and this collaboration presents the idea of an idealized middle ground between colonizer and colonized. While it would be difficult for an audience member to catch while watching the play performed onstage, the language spoken throughout the first scene of Act II emphasizes the ability of Englishmen and Irishmen to effectively communicate. For once, the majority of the language spoken by the characters onstage is what the audience actually hears: English. Instead of Irish English understood to be Gaelic or Latin meant to symbolize a foreign, traditional culture, Friel includes a scene

composed of mostly English that is nothing more than run-of-the-mill Standard English. Manus, who interrupts the conversation between Owen and Yolland twice, is the only reminder in this scene that other languages are being spoken throughout the play. Although his elder brother insists on speaking Irish in Yolland's presence, Owen entreats Manus, "Can't you speak English?" (Friel 413). Despite the character's lack of cooperation, Friel incorporates a moment in which it is impossible to tell whether the assistant schoolmaster and the lieutenant speak English or Irish to one another. Speaking directly to Yolland, Manus asks "How's the work going?" (Friel 412). Based on his earlier assertion, Manus should be speaking Irish; however, Yolland seems able to understand, answering "The work?—the work? Oh, it's—it's staggering along—I think" (Friel 412). There are no signifying pieces of diction or syntax within the interaction to help the reader determine whether Irish English or Standard English is being used, which leaves the audience wondering which language has brought the two characters together in conversation. Has Manus relented and used English to make Yolland more comfortable, or has Yolland studied enough of the Irish Gaelic language to piece together bits of Manus's question? In either circumstance, the interaction highlights the ability of Irish and English characters to work together if even just one party is willing to cooperate. Scene I of Act II exhibits the possibility of successful interaction and even collaboration between colonizer and colonized, a moment of idealized "true translation" before Friel returns to his tone of ambivalence in the third and final act.

However, before yielding completely to the idea that these two countries will never be able to cooperate, Friel incorporates one final scene that symbolizes the mutually beneficial relationship that could occur between colonizer and colonized in spite of their differences in language. Perhaps the most poignant moment from *Translations*, the second scene of Act I takes

place outside of the Irish hedge-school in a more liminal space that stands apart from the boundaries put in place by either culture. In this scene, Lieutenant Yolland and Maire Chatach leave the town dance together and find themselves alone with no one to translate for them. Although Yolland speaks only English, and Maire speaks only Irish Gaelic, Friel writes both characters' lines in English, which allows the audience to understand the communication that takes place between them in an instance of dramatic irony. When they enter the field where the scene takes place, Maire says, "The grass must be wet. My feet are soaking" (Friel 426). The line that immediately follows belongs to Yolland: "Your feet must be wet. The grass is soaking" (Friel 426). Neither character recognizes the similarity in their thoughts, but the audience is privy to their successful communication.

While Friel imagines a few of these moments between the potential lovers, the most powerful instances occur when no comprehensible words are used. Many times the characters simply repeat each other's names, relying on emotion, inflection, and body language to convey their thoughts (Friel 427). Near the end of the scene, as Maire begins to leave after having embarrassed herself with the one nonsensical English phrase that she can recite, Yolland calls her back with the only Irish words that he knows: "Bun na hAbhann," "Druim Dubh," "Poll na gCaorach," the place names that he and Owen have replaced with Anglicized versions (Friel 428-29). She responds in turn, naming other towns and lakes along with him, and the characters "*are now facing toward each other and begin moving – almost imperceptibly – towards one another*" (Friel 429). Through the voice of the English lieutenant, Maire, an Irish woman who earlier in the play valued the English language over her own native tongue, becomes re-enchanted with the Irish traditional culture and gains a new sense of its significance and potential. Although Act II can be read as a metaphor for the mutually beneficial relationship that

could have occurred, this second scene adheres greatly to Friel's ambivalence toward the linguistic changes that take place as a result of the English Ordnance Survey. Just as Yolland helps Maire find new meaning in a language that she viewed as useless, the British Empire's introduction of English and the Irish people's reworking of it into their own dialect led to a revitalization of Irish culture and its reinvention through the Irish Literary Revival.

The playwright's ambivalence toward the imagined historical events of 1833 and their repercussions does not mean that he portrays his Irish characters as accepting of these significant changes. Friel introduces Owen as the point of translation between the Irish and English communities, both directly and through his role in England's mapping of the country. However, not even his position working for the English Ordnance Survey allows him to fully grasp what these changes to the Irish language will have over his native culture. He does not recognize the lasting harm in renaming the landscape until the beginning of Act III when miles of Irish land have already been Anglicized. Before this point in the play, he refuses to acknowledge, or simply does not realize, the real significance behind his job for the English officers. Yolland, the young English lieutenant who is quickly falling in love with Ireland, is portrayed as more her ally than her own countryman. When the Englishman describes their work as "an eviction of sorts" (Friel 420), Owen is quick to belittle it as a simple exercise in mapping: "We're making a six-inch map of the country. Is there something sinister in that?" (Friel 420). Despite Owen's nonchalance, Yolland understands the implications behind renaming the entire country; while the English may not be physically evicting Irishmen and women from their homes, they are stripping them of their language and their connection to the area in which they live. The landscape has not been changed, but Yolland is correct that "something is being eroded" (Friel 420), and this "something" seems to be the Irish people's sense of place. Changing the name of a location does

not damage it physically but alters its inhabitants' perceptions of the geographic space. As Scott Boltwood explains, "what is thrown into uncertainty through the mapping exercise is the individuals' ability to position themselves as they undergo translation from their own linguistic and cultural origins," which throws the community into a "new world of otherness" like "being exiled" (89). Due to the relationship between language, location, and culture in general, Owen and Yolland's work has greater implications than either initially realizes, subverting the traditional and prematurely forcing Ireland into modern times.

This relatively quick transition from one extreme end of the tradition versus modernity dichotomy to the other is given a positive spin by the British Empire, and the Anglicization of place names is explained as a service being implemented to aid the people of Ireland. On just one page of the script of *Translations*, Friel includes six different words for the same physical location: "Bun na hAbhann"; "Banowen"; "Owenmore"; "Binhone"; "Bunowen"; and "Burnfoot" (Friel 410). The dramatic differences between these place names seem to support Owen's claims in favor of the English Ordnance Survey and its work "taking place-names that are riddled with confusion and ... standardizing those names as accurately and as sensitively" as possible (Friel 420). Following the men's dialogue, however, it becomes apparent that this variety of naming is due to errors by entities of the colonizing government, including the bodies that compile "the list of freeholders" for voting and "the grand jury lists" (Friel 410). It seems that the answer to Yolland's question, "Are the people confused?" (Friel 410), is no. Instead, the British Empire is confused, and it cannot effectively assert its dominance over Ireland while in this situation. Yolland, an Englishman who knows how colonization works both from his own experience and stories from his father, understands what is taking place in Ireland, while Owen remains blind to the implications of renaming every location on the island.

The series of place names that Owen recites for his father in Act II is very telling of the magnitude of the English Ordnance Survey. While altering one place name, changing “Bun na hAbhann” to “Burnfoot” for instance (Friel 410), seems insignificant, Anglicizing the locations of the entire Irish countryside renders it unrecognizable and foreign to its native inhabitants. Brian Arkins explains that “the making of a new map of an area—here, the townland of Baile Beag/Ballybeg in County Donegal—renders obsolete an existing representation—the way the inhabitants had previously perceived their geographical space—and imposes a new representation which changes how they perceive that space” (202). Through a seemingly innocent course of action, the English Ordnance Survey has implemented a large linguistic shift, leaving the Irish characters lost in their own country.

By the middle of Act II, Owen has finally begun to realize that these enforced changes could have detrimental effects on Irish culture. To emphasize his point, Owen asks his father, “Do you know where the priest lives?” (Friel 418). As the school master begins to answer, using the familiar Irish names of locations and landmarks, Owen interrupts with an example of the changes that he and the English Ordnance Survey have made to the landscape: “No, he doesn’t. Lis na Muc, the Fort of Pigs, has become Swinefort. And to get to Swinefort, you pass through Greencastle and Fair Head and Strandhill and Gort and Whiteplains. And the new school isn’t at Poll na gCaorach – it’s at Sheepsrock. Will you be able to find your way?” (Friel 418). This essential question encompasses more than Hugh’s ability to physically find the priest’s home; instead it presents questions about the cultural place of Irish people when their country no longer resembles itself and about their ability to navigate within this new colonized society, both physically and linguistically. Friel directly comments on this idea and its continued importance

to contemporary Irish culture in an interview with Ciaran Carty: “And in some ways that’s what the play is about: having to use a language that isn’t our own” (Carty 140).

Ultimately the schoolmaster thinks hopefully about the future of Ireland, although he is not blindly optimistic enough to ignore the long progression that will take place between the renaming of these Irish places and their eventual acceptance as home. He recognizes this transitional period by qualifying these places as their “new” homes (Friel 444). “Dromduff” will not be the same place that “Druim Dubh” was (Friel 415); while the landscape may not change, the language, the culture, and therefore the people of “Dromduff” will be different from those who inhabited “Druim Dubh.” When Hugh says “We must learn where we live” (Friel 444), he does not question the Irish people’s knowledge of the landscape but of the imminent cultural shift. As a scholar of the Greek and Latin classics, the schoolmaster has read his share of stories about empires’ triumphs over smaller civilizations and the decimation of the conquered cultures as a result. Someone in his position as a knowledgeable educator may have also been aware of the eighteenth-century discovery that closely tied Ireland to Carthage, one of these colonized societies. In her article “British Romans and Irish Carthaginians: Anticolonial Metaphor in Heaney, Friel, and McGuinness,” Elizabeth Butler Cullingford explains that eighteenth-century scholars of philology discovered that “the Irish language originated ... in Scythia, spread to Phoenician cities on the east coast of the Mediterranean ... and from there reached Carthage” whose merchants carried it to Ireland (225). Not only did this new knowledge create a distinction between the history of the Irish language and the “Teutonic origins” of that of the Anglo-Saxons (Cullingford 225), but it also gave legitimacy to the oft-noted parallels between the ancient city of Carthage and Ireland. A country that had been closely associated with England throughout much of its history, Ireland held fast to the elements that distinguished it

from its neighbor – adherence to Catholicism, distinct mythology and folklore, and language – but this individual history of Ireland’s language separated the country’s identity even more starkly from that of England. Friel even alludes to Ireland’s independent nature when Hugh tells Yolland that the Irish are “not familiar with your literature, Lieutenant. We feel closer to the warm Mediterranean. We tend to overlook your island” (Friel 417).

Many Irish writers have used this relationship between Rome and Carthage to parallel what occurred in later centuries between England and Ireland. In the resulting literature, “the Rome-Carthage motif functions in complex and variable ways: as origin myth, colonial parable, and site of ... nationalism” (Cullingford 222). Friel himself alludes to this dichotomy between the two colonizers and their respective colonized at the very end of *Translations* when the hedge-school master Hugh recites a section from Book I of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Perhaps the longest passage in the play, the schoolmaster stumbles in his translated recitation of the Latin and is forced to begin again:

Urbs antiqua fuit – there was an ancient city which, ‘tis said, Juno loved above all the lands. And it was the goddess’s aim and cherished hope that here should be the capital of all nations – should the fates perchance allow that. Yet in truth she discovered that a race was springing from Trojan blood to overthrow some day these Tyrian towers – a people kings of broad realms and proud in war who would come forth for Lybia’s downfall.
(Friel 447)

In "Translating the Past: Friel, Greece and Rome," Anthony Peacock compares the two different recitations of the same passage from the *Aeneid*, highlighting how the first could be considered “a prophecy of resurgence and renewal” for Carthage and therefore Ireland, while through the second reading “another analogy asserts itself: that of Ireland with a tragically ruined Carthage,

and England with an irresistible, imperial Rome” (131). This dual reading of the passage acknowledges the ambivalent tone with which Friel composes the dialogue of *Translations*. At some moments looking back to lament over past historical events and through other lines moving forward toward the revitalization of Irish culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Friel creates a play focused on Irish culture and its many translations throughout the island’s history.

In Hugh’s shaky recitation of this passage from the *Aeneid*, he reaches the word “downfall” in the first recitation before he begins to stutter and stumble; he is unable to complete the subsequent phrase, “such was the course ordained by fate” (Friel 447), before beginning again. This emphasis on “downfall,” a word that the twentieth-century audience member would undoubtedly attribute to what later occurs to the Irish language, if not Irish culture as a whole, masks the following allusion to fate. His hesitation on “downfall” could also indicate a second collapse of Carthage through the inevitable diminishing of the classics’ importance to Irish culture. By taking over the culture and language of the country, England ensures the dominance of the English language over both Irish Gaelic and any other language that is taught within the hedge-school culture, including Latin and Greek. While the instances of classical allusion throughout the play create a foreign culture to make up for the lack of spoken Irish Gaelic, they also give an example of a culture that has survived against all odds. Although Latin is considered a “dead language,” Hugh can recite passages of text and use words and phrases in his everyday life. By accepting these observations and recounting Hugh’s optimism toward the cultural changes that were to occur an audience member can view this passage from the *Aeneid* in a positive light. While the always eloquent schoolmaster has difficulty continuing his recitation, perhaps dwelling on the difficult road that lies ahead of Ireland, he has already

established that instances of cultural individualism can form out of England's linguistic and geographical upheaval. As Hugh continues his recitation, the stage lights begin to fade, and the curtain is literally drawn on a distinct image of Ireland that will never be witnessed again.

Prior to the schoolmaster's closing soliloquy, the final interaction between the English and Irish characters solidifies the inability of these groups to work together toward a common cause, an outcome that Friel hints toward with instances of cooperation and effective communication throughout Act II. In contrast to the Irish-controlled translations from Act I, the parallel dialogue and action that occurs at the beginning of Act III shows just how drastically the power has changed hands. Unlike the bustling schoolroom from the opening sequence, the hedge-school is now quiet and barren, housing only Sarah, who is "*more waiflike than ever*," and Owen, who pretends to work with "*neither concentration nor interest*" (Friel 430). Before the English characters even enter the stage, their presence is known by Doalty and Bridget's accounts of the soldiers' destruction: "Fifty more soldiers arrived an hour ago!"; "Prodding every inch of the ground in front of them with their bayonets and scattering animals and hens in all directions!"; "And tumbling everything before them—fences, ditches, haystacks, tuft-stacks!" (Friel 434). Soon the soldiers have reached the hedge-school, and Doalty first notices "millions of them" "crawling all over the place" just before Captain Lancey makes his entrance (Friel 436). The walls of tradition surrounding the Irish characters no longer seem strong enough to fend off an attack by the English; the people have been too slow in realizing the threat that the British Empire imposes upon the Irish Gaelic and its surrounding culture.

From the moment Captain Lancey enters the hedge-school in Act III, he completely embodies "*the commanding officer*" (Friel 438). Addressing Owen as "O'Donnell" instead of his given name, speaking in short, clipped statements, and relaying a series of awful tragedies

that will take place should his lieutenant not be found in a timely manner (Friel 439), Lancey completes transforms from an awkward outsider in Act I to a high-ranking military official who represents the English colonizer in Act III. Owen immediately recognizes the change in Lancey's manner and attitude, yet he can do nothing but accurately translate the Captain's English words into the Irish that his fellow countrymen will understand. Being now outnumbered and surrounded by the colonizer, the Irish characters, and even the audience, must recognize Lancey and his English soldiers as the dominant figures in this exchange. Sarah Johnny Sally, the mute female character whom the audience sees making strides in her ability to communicate throughout Act I, can be read as a symbol for Ireland and its traditional culture as she is unable to respond properly to Captain Lancey when he asks for her name (Friel 440). When Owen tries to reassure Sarah after the altercation that her voice will "come back to [her] again," she simply "*shakes her head, slowly, emphatically, and ... then she leaves*" (Friel 441). The fact that Sarah physically leaves the hedge-school and does not return for the rest of the play confirms that Ireland has lost the power struggle against the English colonizer, and the country's voice, its language and culture, has been lost to modern culture.

Following this tragic exchange between Captain Lancey and Sarah, the schoolmaster returns to find his hedge-school in disarray. Surprisingly, Hugh, the man who seems most fixed in the traditions of both Ireland and classical civilizations, responds optimistically toward the Name-Book that Owen and Yolland have compiled at the command of the English government. When the former, now fully aware of the part that he has played in the colonizer's authority over Ireland, refuses to recognize the new names, his father is quick to reprimand him. To Owen's assertion, "I know where I live" (Friel 445), Hugh responds with one of his infamous two-part trilogies: "three thoughts occur to me: A – that it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that

shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. James has ceased to make that discrimination . . . B – we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilize” (Friel 445). An avid reader of the classics, the schoolmaster recognizes more clearly than the other characters that cultures change, and this idea that “we must never cease renewing” places the language shift in a more positive light. Classical Athens and Rome are depicted as “fossils” in this play: their stories are static, complete, with no opportunity for growth or renewal. Both Hugh and Jimmy can recite them with ease since not one word has altered during the characters’ lifetimes. Contrastingly, Ireland has the opportunity to embody the images of its past in an entirely new language through the infiltration of English. Hugh’s attitude toward this impending cultural shift seems less ridiculous to a modern-day viewer than it does to Owen; he or she will no doubt recognize the hybrid dialect Irish English that came out of this period, the Irish people’s way of adopting the colonizer’s language while maintaining aspects of their traditional culture. While Ireland’s “images of the past” will inevitably be renewed (Friel 445), the transformation will occur in a language that continues to represent Ireland’s inhabitants as a society separate from that of England, its colonizer.

Hugh and present-day viewers seem to share a certain amount of knowledge concerning the development of Irish English following the action of *Translations*, which also complements the character’s beliefs regarding the future of Ireland, the physical place. His study of the Roman Empire and its conquered societies is enough for him to realize that, while the power struggle between colonizer and colonized can bring about changes in language, religion, and other culturally significant aspects of life, the land remains virtually unchanged. As he says to Owen toward the end of the final act, “We must learn those new names . . . We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home” (Friel 444).

Despite having newly Anglicized place names that correspond to the adoption of English as the country's primary language, the island's landscape remains unchanged. The "tiny area of soggy, rocky, sandy ground where that little stream enters the sea" is physically the same whether the population calls it "Bun na hAbhann" or "Burnfoot" (Friel 410). The new title will bring about a different perception of the geographic space, but the land will maintain its physical characteristics. Although the people's perceptions of these spaces will initially vary from their previous ideas, Hugh's use of the word "home" to describe these existing locations alerts the audience to his optimism that these spaces will eventually embody the space that the word "home" mentally and emotionally connotes. Although it will be a different sort of home under English rule, the Irish people will make these places their own just as they transformed the English language into a dialect all their own. Soon, they will once again know their way from one location on the island to the next.

A viewer of Friel's play *Translations* can follow one of two distinct readings: with sad nostalgia for the loss of traditional Irish culture that occurred following Anglicization; or with hopeful recognition of the thriving contemporary culture that resulted from the creation of the Irish English dialect. Although Friel includes this power struggle between Ireland and the British Empire and, therefore, the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern throughout *Translations*, he ultimately expresses ambivalence toward the English domination of the country and the cultural and linguistic turmoil that occurs as a result. As Martine Pelletier writes in her essay "*Translations*, the Field Day debate, and the re-imagining of Irish identity," "many early reviewers concentrated on the 'brutal suppression of a perfect, self-sustaining native culture' motif. For the playwright, such readings were simplifications that missed the point:

Several people commented that the opening scenes of the play were a portrait of some sort of idyllic, Forest of Arden life. But this is a complete illusion, since you have on stage the representatives of a certain community – one is dumb, one is lame and one is alcoholic, a physical maiming which is a public representation of their spiritual deprivation. (70)

Instead of idealizing the past or lamenting the inability of Ireland and the British Empire to simply work together, Friel demonstrates a nation poised between its own tradition and the modern world. He characterizes the Irish people as able to accept the culture thrust upon them by the colonizer and “appropriate these new unfamiliar names ... endow them with meaning ... make English identifiably Ireland’s language” (Pelletier 70-1). Utilizing the breadth of language that is important to contemporary Irish culture, including Irish Gaelic, Irish English, and Standard English, Friel asserts himself as a member of the Irish literary tradition, following the “challenge [that] has been taken up [by] subsequent generations of Irish writers ... turning the new vernacular into an adequate vehicle for creative expression” (Pelletier 71). Friel’s ambivalence toward the English Ordnance Survey and its Anglicization of the Irish landscape seems purposeful when one recognizes the triumphs for Irish culture that occurred following the events of *Translations*.

Interestingly, Friel also looks back at history rather ambiguously in his play *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which premiered a decade after *Translations*. This play’s action occurs in the familiar town of Ballybeg over a century after the events of *Translations*, another transitional period for Ireland that is filled with many political and cultural changes. While this play focuses on the lives of five sisters living on the outskirts of the town, it deals with issues similar to those in *Translations*, including the tradition versus modernity dichotomy that pervades Friel’s drama.

However, in this instance, the “tradition” end of the spectrum looks back toward the Celtic spirituality present in the Ireland of *Translations* and earlier, whereas the “modernity” side deals with the distinct obstacles faced by a newly independent Irish Free State and its social and political relationship with the Catholic Church. As in *Translations*, these issues are explored through language; the language of music, particularly dance, allows Friel access into the lives of members of the Mundy family and gives the audience a glimpse of the difficulties that spring from their ambiguous position within the range of spiritual belief in Ireland at the time.

Although his words seem perfect for discussing *Translations* and the skillful way in which Friel leaves his audience unsure of his own position regarding Ireland’s Anglicization, Martin Walsh actually had *Dancing at Lughnasa* in mind when he said, “If this is nostalgia, it is a decidedly ambivalent form of longing for the past” (127). In the next chapter, I will explore *Dancing at Lughnasa* in detail, focusing particularly on those ideas and devices shared with *Translations*.

CHAPTER 2

“A Surrogate for Language”: The Ambivalence of Belief in *Dancing at Lughnasa*

Having debuted ten years after his successful play *Translations*, Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) treats many of the same subjects from this earlier drama, although in a more contemporary setting. While this play is also set in Ballybeg, the small, fictional town in County Donegal from his earlier works, it takes place in “the summer of 1936” (Friel 1), roughly a century after the beginnings of Anglicization across Ireland’s landscape. Friel creates a time gap between these two plays during which significant political, social, and cultural fluctuations occur. The pre-Civil War Ireland of the nineteenth century is markedly different from Éamon de Valera’s budding Irish Free State. However, despite this vast separation of time, the two plays are alike in the playwright’s continued emphasis on the dichotomy between tradition and modernity and its expression through a distinct “language.” In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, this divide is evinced through different means than the written or spoken word. Using dance as his major device, Friel expresses the tension felt between the Mundy family and the rest of Ballybeg as a result of their physically liminal position on the outskirts of town as well as their unique ambivalence regarding Ireland’s spiritual and religious spectrum. The five main characters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* are female, which allows Friel to also explore how gender affects the family’s standing within the town, creating a distinct contrast between this and his other history plays. The tradition versus modernity dichotomy is presented through the lives of these women whose story is told by a male narrator, a reminder of the patriarchal society that flourishes in Ireland through leadership in the government and the Catholic Church. Through the language of

dance, Friel is able to capture the tension between the older Ireland of *Translations* and its newer counterpart, a long-time colony learning to be its own nation.

In 1999, Friel gave a rare interview in which he explicitly discussed the use of dance in *Dancing at Lughnasa*:

In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* I used a piece of céilí music – or what one of the characters calls a “piece of aul thumpety-thump”. And a similar piece – only more anguished and manic – in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. And in both plays the purpose was to explode theatrically the stifling rituals and discretions of family life. And since words didn’t seem to be up to the job it was necessary to supply the characters with a new language. Because at that specific point in both plays ... words offer neither an adequate means of expression nor a valve for emotional release ... emotion has staggered into inarticulacy beyond the boundaries of language. And that is what music can provide in the theatre: another way of talking, a language without words. (Lojek 83)

Thus, Friel continues the emphasis placed on language in *Translations* through to his subsequent play that looks back at a period in Ireland’s history; instead of dealing with explicit languages, such as Standard English and Irish Gaelic, he uses instances of characters dancing to highlight the varying meanings and emotions conveyed by this “new language” (Lojek 83). In this interview, Friel mentions only one, albeit the most iconic, example of dance from *Dancing at Lughnasa*: when the Mundy sisters use “The Mason’s Apron,” “an instrumental Irish reel” to push “back at the narrow confines of their kitchen lives” (Lojek 83). Dance is used throughout the play by multiple characters and is performed to many musical styles, displaying to the audience that dancing, “another way of talking, a language without words” (Lojek 83), has the ability to be more evocative than the spoken word.

The Mundy sisters' uninhibited dance to traditional Irish music remains the most memorable image for audiences of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. This fact does not mean, however, that the other instances of dancing throughout the play have no significance of their own. Although "The 1930s ... saw the elevation of Irish traditional music (a rich inheritance inadequately recognized during the cultural revival in the years before independence) to a position in official esteem, second only to the Irish language" (Brown 135), the Mundy family's radio broadcasts "slightly exotic" music, incorporating everything from "American show tunes by Cole Porter" to "'The British Grenadiers,' a regimental slow march" to "broadcasts of jazz" (Lojek 83). With each different musical genre comes a corresponding dance, and Friel's characters themselves tend to embody their own styles of dancing. For instance, "Gerry's dancing is 'strictly ballroom', and evokes the sophisticated world of nineteen thirties urban, particularly American, culture," while "Maggie's exaggerated parodies draw attention to the sexual suggestiveness of these fashionable songs and dances, and to their incongruity in the Mundy cottage" (McMullan 93). More evocative than language, Friel's attribution of specific types of dance to some of his characters is used to aid their characterization onstage.

In addition to these staged dances that Friel incorporates within the play, he includes subtle hints of dance in his stage directions, and these particular actions also correspond to how each character is perceived. Rose, the "simple" sister, is often given explicit dances to perform that capture her inability to recognize the appropriate situations for her actions: "ROSE *kisses AGNES impetuously, flings her arms above her head, begins singing 'Abyssinia' and does the first steps of a bizarre and abandoned dance*" (Friel 13). Friel also incorporates dance into Maggie's movements, although the audience recognizes her "*very fast and very exaggerated tango across the kitchen floor*" as a deliberate action to distract her sisters from uncomfortable

topics of conversation or their mundane lives in general (Friel 6). The stage directions attributed to Michael's parents, Chris and Gerry, are typically more elegant and refined than those of the other family members. To show off his skills as a dance instructor, Gerry "*does a quick step and a pirouette*" (Friel 28), recognizable dance movements. Friel also describes the characters' dancing as "*light*" and "*elegant*" (Friel 32). Refined and carefully executed ballroom dance is what the narrator Michael and Friel's audience associate with the young couple, Chris and Gerry.

Friel seems to particularly use stage direction and the language of dance as a way to characterize Chris, a single mother who seems unsure of and even uncomfortable around her own child. When Gerry appears at the Mundy home, the audience is given a glimpse of a much younger Chris, the woman she was before having Michael out of wedlock with a man who then disappears from her life with no notice. When describing Gerry to her son, the stage directions are extremely indicative of her feelings, much more so than her dialogue, which seems deliberately cool and indifferent: "*She laughs, pirouettes flirtatiously before [Michael] and dances into the kitchen*" (Friel 37). In the first interaction that the audience sees between the boy and his young mother, she appears so happy that she laughs and dances with Michael, a child who seems only a harsh reminder of his father's abandonment during the rest of the play. Prapassaree Kramer observes that, when Gerry and Chris dance together in the family's garden, "their dance seems to convey their feelings better than their words. Chris asks Gerry not to talk any more, just to 'dance [her] down the lane'" (177). Friel incorporates such instances to emphasize "music's capacity to reach where words sometimes fail and lets the audience understand why Michael uses the dances to characterize his family" (Kramer 177). Through his parents' dancing, the narrator Michael can convey a side of their relationship for which words cannot do justice; instead of explaining what his parents said or their later "wedding" to each

other, he need only imagine their dancing: “cheerful and graceful”; “representing transient joy” (Kramer 177). Words mean little compared with the image of two people, synchronized and completely captivated by their dancing.

The characterization of Michael’s family members is only one aspect of *Dancing at Lughnasa* that Friel captures through the language of dance. Spiritual understanding and the power of religion is another important part of the play, and once again, Friel uses dance and music to introduce and express these ideas. From the very first passage of Michael’s opening soliloquy, Friel introduces the tension between paganism and Catholicism that will pervade the play. Regarding the Mundy family’s first wireless set, the playwright gives the adult Michael these lines:

...because it arrived as August was about to begin, my Aunt Maggie – she was the joker of the family – she suggested we give it a name. She wanted to call it Lugh after the old Celtic God of the Harvest. Because in the old days August the First was *Lá Lughnasa*, the feast day of the pagan god, Lugh; and the days and weeks of harvesting that followed were called the Festival of Lughnasa. 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. (Friel 1)

These initial sentences give the audience a thorough introduction to Lughnasa, a cultural Celtic festival with which not even Irish theater-goers would be overly familiar in the late twentieth century. While Friel later incorporates more detailed descriptions of the event, Michael’s lines effectively explain the reasoning for the harvest festival as well as the pagan god whom the Celtic people celebrated. However, this initial soliloquy also asserts that by 1936 the harvest god is “old” and no longer relevant, his celebration only occurring “in the old days” (Friel 1). The

end of the passage begins to introduce language of a more modern spiritual way of thinking, one that would be more familiar to contemporary audiences. The words “sinful” and “christen” as well as the disdainful tone toward the pagan ritual emphasize the Catholicism that dominates Ireland during the early twentieth century. In his article “Ominous Festivals, Ambivalent Nostalgia: Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Billy Roche’s *Amphibians*,” Martin W. Walsh considers this dichotomy to be “one of [Friel’s] favorite themes: narrow, puritanical Irish Catholicism versus an older ‘paganism,’ loosely defined” (128). For the Mundy sisters and other inhabitants of Ballybeg, this paganism is exhibited through traditional Celtic ritual, such as the harvest festival of Lughnasa.

Using these two characteristically Irish forms of spirituality, Friel is able to incorporate the tradition versus modernity dichotomy that permeates *Translations* within *Dancing at Lughnasa*. From the initial lines of Act I, he establishes the contrast between paganism and Catholicism alongside distinct characterizations of two of the Mundy sisters: Maggie and Kate. “The joker of the family” (Friel 1), Maggie is the first of the aunts to appear in Michael’s memory, and she is immediately associated with Lugh, the Celtic god for whom she wants to name the family’s radio. She is at least aware of the annual Celtic rituals as the radio’s August arrival is what initially causes her to suggest the harvest god’s name. In the following pages, Friel also connects her with superstition: Maggie refuses to allow Chris to throw away their old, cracked mirror as she is “the one that broke it and the only way to avoid seven years bad luck is to keep on using it” (Friel 3). While the recurring examples of superstition and omen are not necessarily resonant of Celtic paganism, they can be recognized as instances of belief in a spiritual force separate from Catholicism. Members of the Catholic Church also look down upon blasphemy, which Friel attributes to Maggie in particular. Whether speaking to her sisters or her

young nephew, she has no reservations about using phrases such as “Jesus, Mary and Joseph” or even “Jesus Christ!” in everyday conversation (Friel 8). While Maggie does not explicitly join the locals in their Celtic rituals of Lughnasa, she symbolizes a spirituality that is less rigid and more informal than Catholicism, a single point on the range of religious belief and practice experienced in Ireland at the time.

Unlike the joking Aunt Maggie, however, Kate stands out in the adult Michael’s memories as “a very proper woman” who argues against her sister’s notions of naming an inanimate wireless set (Friel 1). The most significant piece of information from Michael’s initial introduction of Kate is the fact that she is “a national schoolteacher” (Friel 1), which in twentieth-century, Catholic-dominated, patriarchal Ireland means she relies on the church for her employment and her family’s income. Due to de Valera’s “almost instinctual association of Catholicism with the Irish way of life,” “his government ... was zealous in its efforts to ensure that Catholic morality should be enforced by legislation and that public life, state occasions, the opening of factories, new housing estates, and the like should be blessed by an official clerical presence” (Brown 138-39). Friel personifies this presence in the parish priest, an important figure in Ballybeg society. Kate, constantly aware of her family’s struggle to make ends meet, works to ensure he views the Mundy family as a God-fearing, Catholic-practicing group as without the church’s good opinion, she could lose her job. In her essay “‘In touch with some otherness’: Gender, Authority, and the Body in *Dancing at Lughnasa*,” Anna McMullan explains that the priest “has the power to punish Kate and the Mundy family by sacking her from her schoolteaching job,” although “ironically, Kate is the sister who tries to maintain discipline and Catholic values within the Mundy household, at least partly because she understands that the

status and even the survival of the family depend on such conformity. Her authority is therefore subject to that of the priest, and beyond him, to the power of the Catholic hierarchy” (92).

In many ways, Kate then embodies this oppressive, patriarchal figure to the women of the Mundy household. She is quick to remind her sisters of her contributions to the family’s income without recognizing the work that her sisters accomplish on a daily basis; as Agnes explains, “I wash every stitch of clothes you wear. I polish your shoes. I make your bed. We both do – Rose and I” (Friel 24). Kate’s behavior has also earned her the nickname “the Gander” from her pupils, further solidifying her link to the masculine both at home and in the schoolroom (Friel 24). Her association with church diction in the opening soliloquy is only the first of many instances in which she aligns herself with Catholic doctrine: the words “pagan” and “savage” are used frequently throughout Friel’s play, and these terms are always attributed to Kate. Adult Michael’s assertion that his Aunt Kate was “a very proper woman” expresses her ability to say and do the correct things as determined by the patriarchal, Christian society of Ireland in the mid-twentieth century (Friel 1). As shown by the country’s Constitution of 1937, “there are clear signs that the ... fashionable Catholic social thinking influenced certain of its Articles” (Brown 152). One such article pertained directly to Kate’s job as a national schoolteacher, and it assured “that the state could not choose to interfere with the church’s control ... of Irish education” (Brown 152). All over Ireland, towns like Ballybeg were observed on a religious as well as a political level by parish priests and other high-ranking members of the Catholic Church.

Despite the government’s strong relationship with the Catholic Church, Friel’s play shows the entire Mundy family as still ambiguously situated within this range of spiritual belief that includes Celtic paganism and Catholicism among other forms of religion. Helen Lojek describes the many religious influences on these characters in her essay “*Dancing at Lughnasa*

and the unfinished revolution”: “The rigid Irish Catholic notion of moral rectitude, voiced by Kate, is assailed by foreign elements brought to Ballybeg by Marconi and Father Jack. It is also assailed by pagan elements that are part of a Celtic tradition often regarded as indigenous. Irish Catholic moral imperatives, forcefully concerned with emotion and sexuality, have a major impact on women’s lives” (Lojek 84). Kate is the main Catholic presence within the Mundy family, which is due both to her professional relationship with the parish priest as the national school’s teacher and her role as the only family member who ventures into the area’s religious center, Ballybeg. “The main figure of authority in the world of the play, though he never appears on stage, is the village priest” who is also consistently associated with the town, solidifying it as the symbolic location of Catholicism (McMullan 92). In fact, “Southern Ireland, the area of the Free State’s jurisdiction, was in the main a Catholic society, where the population would expect Catholic social teaching, especially when it touched on marriage and family law” (Brown 53). The Irish parish priest’s authority differs greatly from the colonial power struggle introduced in Friel’s earlier play *Translations*. In the Ballybeg of 1936, the British Empire, embodied in *Translations* by Captain Lancey, no longer controls the lives of strong Irish individuals like Owen or even the Donnelly twins. Friel’s decision to incorporate the priest as main authority figure shows this change in the political and social climate, highlighting the Catholic Church and its influence over the Irish Free State in lieu of the oppressive colonizing figure.

To parallel the tension created by the power struggle in *Translations*, the playwright explores the spiritual dichotomy of Irish life in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. While Ballybeg is characterized as the Christian setting of the play, and thus one extreme end of the religious spectrum, Lughnasa and the pagan Celtic rituals are associated with “the back hills” (Friel 5), the opposing end and a wild and indistinct locale that only Rose, the “simple” sister, visits after

being lured there. This remote location is brought up by the sisters multiple times in relation to the Lughnasa festival, and the lack of detail about the area creates an air of mystery around the pagan rituals that take place beyond the town's borders. The play "makes clear that Friel wants to imbue a sense of the pagan past and its vital, ambiguous energies in the Lughnasa festival—though is not ready to commit any of his early twentieth-century Irishmen to an actual pre-Christian faith, even in the wild back hills. What the playwright achieves is a subtle, and dramatically useful, tension between the suppressed and the liberating, the Catholic and the pagan" (Walsh 133). To increase this tension between the two religious spheres, Friel specifically situates the Mundy family's home "two miles outside the village of Ballybeg, County Donegal, Ireland" and an undetermined distance from the back hills (Friel i), placing it and its inhabitants not quite within either group; instead, they are influenced by many groups within the spectrum of spiritual thought in Ireland.

The fact that both acts of Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* take place at the Mundy residence, situated separately from the town of Ballybeg and the back hills, affirms the idea that no great spiritual revolution occurs for any of the Mundy characters during the play. The play ends as it begins, with the characters in stasis both geographically and spiritually. This level of ambivalence associated with the Mundy home presents an image that contrasts greatly with the central space in Friel's play *Translations*. While the decrepit hedge-school setting does not change dramatically throughout this play, there is a distinct power struggle over the space. The hedge-school, a traditionally Irish space that symbolizes the period before the island's Anglicization, is dominated by its Irish inhabitants in Act I; the British visitors are welcomed as guests and treated with little respect. However, by the end of Act III, the Irish hedge-school is surrounded by British soldiers on the brink of invading the space, and the Irish citizens are

forced to recognize the power of their colonizer. Friel does not use the same clear definition of space in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The most ambiguous space in *Translations* exists outside of the schoolroom when Lieutenant Yolland and Maire Chatach meet up briefly in Act II, Scene II. In contrast, the Mundy family seems to live in a state of perpetual religious ambivalence. Strictly observing neither the Celtic pagan religion nor Catholicism, they live in fluctuation between the old and the new, a fitting metaphor for the budding Irish Free State as it worked to establish itself as a modern nation while conserving its important cultural past.

Being located outside of both the traditional and the modern forms of Irish religion means that the Mundy family truly belongs to neither sphere. This sad fact is most readily recognized by the sisters' inability to join in the ceremonies of either social group. The traditional Celtic religion as observed by the Festival of Lughnasa is unwelcome in the Mundy household due to Kate's professional ties to the Catholic patriarchal society of Ballybeg. The discussion takes place when Rose begins to describe the rituals "that they do every year up there in the back hills" to the harvest god, Lugh: "First they light a bonfire beside a spring well. Then they dance round it. Then they drive their cattle through the flames to banish the devil out of them" (Friel 16). Astonished and appalled by her sister's knowledge of such pagan ceremonies, Kate expresses her displeasure toward the "savages," "those people from the back hills" (Friel 17). She cites the accepted religion of Ballybeg society and the Mundy family's position within "a Christian home, a Catholic home" as reasons for remaining outside of the "back hills" paganism (Friel 17).

However, the ambivalent space in which the Mundy family lives means that the five sisters are also not welcome at socially acceptable, church-sanctioned events. The harvest dance in Ballybeg is organized as an alternative to the Celtic rituals of Lughnasa. As Lojek explains, "Kate rejects such music and dance as pagan, echoing church and civic guardians of public

morality, who saw dancing in ‘foreign’ styles as a danger to Irish religion and nationalism ... the Public Dance Halls Act was seen as a method of protecting Irish youth from ... contamination.” (Lojek 83). Despite being viewed as respectable and moral entertainment, the harvest dance is described as off-limits to the Mundy sisters for multiple reasons. Chris is the first to bring up the economic means required to attend the dance as “it costs four and six to get in” (Friel 13). Although Agnes has saved enough money to take the whole family, conversation from earlier in the scene shows what a burden this unnecessary expense could become later for the family. Nevertheless, the idea to attend the harvest dance seems to be most surprising to the women due to their advanced age when compared with Miss Sophia, the girl from Kate’s encounter in the chemist’s shop “who must be all of fifteen” (Friel 11). Although Agnes adamantly states, “I’m only thirty-five. I want to dance” (Friel 13), Kate quickly counters, “Dancing at our time of day? That’s for young people with no duties and no responsibilities” (Friel 13). Still, even she seems willing to consider the idea until Rose displays a hint of what her actions would be at the dance: “ROSE ... *flings her arms above her head ... and does the first steps of a bizarre and abandoned dance*” (Friel 13). The deciding factor for Kate is undoubtedly the family’s connection to the Catholic Church: “What’s come over you all? And this is Father Jack’s home—we must never forget that—ever. No, no, we’re going to no harvest dance” (Friel 13). As a member of the clergy, Father Jack cannot risk having his position within the church questioned because his sisters wish to attend a town dance. The Catholic Church is the deciding factor in the Mundy family’s absence from Ballybeg society.

Although Friel particularly separates Celtic spirituality from the proper Christian religion of Ballybeg, it is not the only pagan religion treated in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The playwright is known for utilizing separate, “foreign” cultures within his plays to further highlight struggles of

the Irish, just as he evokes the classical colonial comparisons between Carthage and Rome to parallel the power struggle between Ireland and Britain throughout *Translations*. The schoolmaster Hugh's recitations of Greek and Latin drive home the relevance of these histories to the contemporary colonial situation plaguing Ireland. Similarly in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel incorporates another culture to promote the universal quality of Ireland's "other" pagan religion. Besides the acquisition of a wireless set, adult Michael looks back on the summer of 1936 as the time when "Uncle Jack came home from Africa for the first time ever" (Friel 1). To the Mundy family, he was "a hero and a saint," and even the town regarded him with esteem as "our own leper priest" (Friel 8). However, upon arriving home from his leper colony, it becomes apparent to his sisters, the town, and eventually the parish priest that Father Jack "has succumbed to an African animistic spirituality after twenty-five years in Uganda" (Walsh 128). While the Mundy women, especially Kate, continue to travel between the Catholic-dominated culture of Ballybeg and the family's ambivalent space at home, Father Jack's inability to cast off his Ugandan way of life and embrace the Christianity of his native country keeps the Mundy family from being accepted back into Ballybeg society with the pomp and circumstance they had imagined. When the town realizes their leper priest has gone native, there is no "great public welcome" for Jack with "flags, bands, speeches, everything!" (Friel 17).

Although the Catholic Church has taken over for the British colonizer as the main figure attempting to assert authority over Friel's characters, *Dancing at Lughnasa* includes remnants of this power struggle from *Translations*. As Christopher Murray explains in his essay "'Recording Tremors': Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and the Uses of Tradition," Father Jack has lost his native language and now "operates like a character from *Translations*, as one who has to learn codes all over again" (34). Similarly to Friel's earlier play, the audience learns that an Englishman, the

English district commissioner in Uganda, has been the cause of Father Jack's dismissal. There are many parallels between this commissioner and Captain Lancey from *Translations*: he displays "imperialist arrogance" by refusing to speak Swahili despite knowing the language; he "disapprove[s] of Jack's 'going native'"; and he perpetuates a disdain for the Irish by referring to Jack as "the Irish outcast" (Murray, "Recording Tremors" 34). Through a complicity with officials of the Catholic Church, the English district commissioner has Father Jack discharged and sent home against his wishes, clearly asserting "the church as collaborator in colonialist repression" (Murray, "Recording Tremors" 34). This less-than-positive view of the church carries over into the rest of the play as the Mundy family struggles to make ends meet on the outskirts of Ballybeg society.

While the African pagan culture that Father Jack embraces seems "other" to both the Celtic paganism and the Catholicism of Ballybeg, it is not quite as foreign to their own culture as the Mundy sisters would care to believe. While I have already established that the Mundy family is spiritually situated between these two religious ideologies and recognizes each as a separate part of their culture, it still "strive[s] towards respectability despite being highly non-traditional in terms of the ideal Catholic image of the family: it consists of five unmarried sisters, one of whom, Chris, has had a child out of wedlock" (McMullan 92). The family's position is aided by the fact that "the eldest sister, Kate, holds the respected post of schoolteacher" (McMullan 92), yet they still remain on the outskirts of town from both a religious and a societal point of view. When one takes into account the family's struggles and the seeming lack of compassion shown by the Catholic Church through the parish priest character, it becomes less surprising that Father Jack would want to join the Ryangan culture where "there is no distinction between the religious and the secular" (Friel 48).

The Ryangan spiritual culture may be too “other” for the Mundy sisters to identify as similar to their own, but Friel incorporates multiple parallels between the African society and the family’s pagan-Catholic hybrid culture. All of these examples come from Father Jack, particularly when he struggles to distinguish between Ireland, his natural home, and Uganda, where he resided for a quarter of a decade. These instances generally pertain to confusion regarding his former and present society, such as when Jack asks Chris if Michael is a love-child and explains that “in Ryanga women are eager to have love-children. The more love-children you have, the more fortunate your household is thought to be” (Friel 41). Although Kate becomes frustrated trying to explain that in Donegal love-children “are not exactly the norm,” she cannot deny that Michael was born out of wedlock or that only two lines earlier the family agrees that they are “all lucky to have him” (Friel 41). Similarly, the sisters later appear scandalized when Jack explains that while he “couldn’t promise four men” for the women, he “should be able to get one husband for all of [them]” (Friel 63). In a painful instance of dramatic irony, the audience recognizes that one of the characters is unwittingly already in a polygamous relationship; as Michael learns later in life, his father is married and has a family in Wales (Friel 61). If Chris could recognize Gerry’s attentions to her sister Agnes as a reflection of his character instead of harmless flirtation (Friel 64), she might be able to see her situation as closely resembling that of Ryangan women in Uganda, opening the Mundy sisters’ eyes to the possibility of social, and perhaps spiritual, connections with this “other” culture. Instead, the women disregard the African society as completely separate from that of their own lives.

Friel does not simply compare elements of Irish society to the village culture in which Father Jack lived for nearly three decades. The priest’s accounts also exhibit similarities between the spiritual rituals of the Ryangan people and the religious ceremonies of adherents of

both Celtic paganism and Irish Catholicism. Toward the end of Act I, Maggie and Kate have a serious conversation regarding all of Kate's apprehensions about the future, and "the back hills" seem to naturally come up during their discussion. Although she doesn't "know why that came into [her] head" (Friel 35), Kate explains to Maggie how one of the boys from town actually burned himself: "That young Sweeney boy from the back hills – the boy who was anointed – his trousers didn't catch fire, as Rose said. They were doing some devilish thing with a goat – some sort of sacrifice for the Lughnasa Festival; and Sweeney was so drunk he toppled over into the middle of the bonfire" (Friel 35). The fact that the ritual involves killing a goat immediately alerts the audience to its similarities with a Ryangan ceremony during which Father Jack says, "when we want to please the spirits – or to appease them ... we kill a rooster or a young goat" (Friel 39). Not only does this ritual from the Lughnasa Festival resemble what Father Jack describes, but the inexplicable death of Rosie's rooster at the end of the play also reminds the audience of pagan Ryangan ceremonies. However, this time, instead of simply hearing about the sacrificial slaughter, the audience is witness to it: "*In her right hand, [Rose] holds the dead rooster by the feet. Its feathers are ruffled and it is stained with blood*" (Friel 67). The "other" pagan culture of Uganda has entered Ireland through Father Jack, complementing Celtic paganism and the other schools of thought within the range of spiritual belief.

Similar to the parish priest's role within the Catholic society, Father Jack serves as the patriarchal figure who brings Ryangan paganism into the Mundy household. The women in the play never possess power over any of the potential schools of spirituality; even Danny Bradley, the man who takes Rose "up through the back hills" to see "what was left of the Lughnasa fires" (Friel 59), is portrayed as the authority figure over this religious space. The Mundy sisters must navigate between these religions as best they can, never gaining their own agency over spiritual

decisions. Friel emphasizes the powerlessness of women in early twentieth-century Irish society just as he asserted the traditional Irish culture's subjection to British colonization in his play *Translations*. Whereas the Mundy sisters never truly control their own ambivalent religious space, being instead thrust between paganism and Christianity, the Irish spaces in *Translations*, both the physical landscape and hedge-school setting, are invaded and ultimately wrested from the control of Ireland's people. The power struggle between the colonizer and colonized parallels that of the different religious groups depicted in Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

While Friel's audience may expect comparisons between sects of paganism in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the playwright extends his religious comparisons even further by aligning the two pagan rituals with the saying of Catholic Mass in the mind of Father Jack. When Kate asks Jack if he will "soon begin saying Mass again" (Friel 46), he agrees to begin the following Monday and asks how the neighbors will know to join them for the ceremony. This thought leads him to a memory of Okawa, his house boy, gathering the Ryangans together for an important ceremony. To Kate's inquiries into the nature of the ceremony, Jack responds that they might be gathered for Mass, although his long description of a ritual "to offer sacrifice to Obi, our Great Goddess of the Earth, so that the crops will flourish" gives the impression that Catholic rituals have been all but forgotten (Friel 47). As Kate tries to steer him back to the task at hand, Jack once again agrees to say Mass "at first light" the next week but confuses it with "a harvest ceremony" that seems more like the Lughnasa festivities from the back hills (Friel 49).

Despite the similarities in these three different religious ceremonies, the eldest Mundy sister in particular refuses to acknowledge anything outside of the accepted Catholic rites. "Indeed, Kate refers to the participants in the cattle ritual as 'savages' and deplores their 'pagan practices'. The same vocabulary serves to describe the local people as to describe Fr. Jack's leper

colony. Once we make the equation we can see the spiritual deviation of this family whose culture can offer no support or sustenance. It knows only hardship and denial” (Murray, “Recording Tremors” 36). As Friel explains the fate of his characters through Michael’s concluding soliloquy, this harsh Irish society is displayed through its treatment of Father Jack:

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. And the neighbours stopped enquiring about him. And his name never again appeared in the *Donegal Enquirer*. And of course there was never a civic reception with bands and flags and speeches. (Friel 60)

Although he regains his ability to function successfully in Irish society within a year of returning home, Father Jack is never welcomed back to Ballybeg by his neighbors or the parish priest. Having been stripped of his position for the Catholic Church, he is left with his sisters on the outskirts of the town, forced to join them in their ambivalent position between Christianity and Celtic paganism. While his continued preoccupation with his past life in Ryanga means that he never feels the town’s abandonment, his sisters undoubtedly experience it for him and for themselves. Instead Michael explains that Father Jack continued to tell stories of his years in Uganda: “And each new anecdote contained more revelations. And each new revelation startled – shocked – stunned poor Aunt Kate” (Friel 60).

Eventually, however, “poor Aunt Kate” (Friel 60), the member of the Mundy family with the closest ties to the Catholic Church, finds a way to accept her family’s more central position on the religious spectrum, especially as concerns Father Jack. As Michael describes it, “finally she hit on a phrase that appeased her: ‘his own distinctive spiritual search’” (Friel 60). This acceptance of her elder brother’s break with Catholicism signifies a large change in Kate from

the beginning of the play. Whether due to her continued persecution by the parish priest as indicated by the loss of her school teaching job or her recognition of the merits of other religions, Kate's acceptance of this "spiritual search" symbolizes the unique state of religion and its range of manifestations in Ireland during this time period. Once again evoking dance to further explain his point, Friel uses Michael's final soliloquy to relate "dancing to three of the key words in the play, *ritual, ceremony, sacred*" (Murray, "Recording Tremors" 38): "Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement – as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness" (Friel 71). Throughout his play, Friel incorporates ritual and ceremony from each form of religion discussed, most often through the language of dance and movement. These dances show a physical manifestation of the similarities between the different religions, blurring the lines between each individual ceremony and unifying them in their use of ritual to evoke the sacred. This idea of being "in touch with some otherness" through dance (Friel 71), not specifically in touch with God, Lugh, or Obi, parallels Kate's acceptance of Father Jack's spiritual ambiguity, 'his own distinctive spiritual search'" (Friel 60).

The fact that Friel attributes this phrase, which is included word-for-word two times on the same page, to Kate, using proper punctuation to set it out from the rest of Michael's soliloquy, makes it probable that these are words the adult Michael distinctly remembers his aunt saying during his childhood. This confidence in his words is not apparent throughout the play. Similar to Friel's earlier plays, such as *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Faith Healer*, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a memory play, told from the perspective of a man looking back on his early years. Everything is touched by his own unique view of what happened in the summer of 1936, so although Friel "created a largely female environment" within the household of the Mundy sisters,

“that environment is evoked through the memory of the narrator, Michael, the son of one of the sisters, who is reflecting back on a significant moment of his childhood” (McMullan 90). While Kate’s dialogue regarding Father Jack’s “distinctive spiritual search” appears authentic, it and everything around it must be regarded cautiously as memories told from the male perspective. Friel encourages his audience to recognize that, even in the retelling of their own story, these women have no agency separate from the men in their lives, which is no different from their struggle in life.

Unlike the very central and obvious language struggle between Irish Gaelic and English that is incorporated throughout *Translations*, Friel uses the language of memory in a more subtle way. Although Michael has great authority over what the audience sees and hears onstage, Friel never attempts to hide this fact from the audience. The first act opens with Michael’s initial soliloquy and the lines “when I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me” (Friel 1). The rest of the play is comprised of the character exploring the events of his past as he remembers them. Friel even includes explicit hints that what occurs onstage may not be completely truthful. As Helen Lojek explains, “*Dancing at Lughnasa* is a memory play. References to memory toll throughout, but the controlling memory is the retrospective gaze of Chris’s son...Michael’s closing memory, lit by ‘a very soft, golden light’ (106), is sentimental, and (he is careful to specify) ‘owes nothing to fact’ (107)” (Lojek 80). If this final scene is a combination of memory and imagination, the audience can infer that other instances may not have been grounded in fact.

Even earlier than this final tableau, Friel gives glimpses into the imaginative quality of Michael’s memories. In his first soliloquy, the narrator explains, “even though I was only a child of seven at the time I know I had a sense of unease, some awareness of a widening breach

between what seemed to be and what was, of things changing too quickly before my eyes, of becoming what they ought not to be” (Friel 2). While this line certainly points to the many changes that occur in the Mundy household during the summer of 1936, including the return of Father Jack, the brief episodes with Michael’s father, Gerry, and the eventual departure of Agnes and Rose, it also hints at the changes between the actual events that took place during this time and Michael’s later memories of them. This “widening breach between what seemed to be and what was” is also manifested on stage. During a scene with the boy Michael and Maggie, the aunt releases a bird and watches its rapid flight into the sky. When Michael asks what it was that she freed from her hands, Maggie enigmatically states, “Don’t you know what it was? It was all in your mind” before leaving him outside (Friel 15). Through Friel’s organization of *Dancing at Lughnasa* as a memory play, everything that occurs onstage is translated through Michael’s mind.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Friel’s memory play is the fact that there is no physical embodiment of the narrator Michael as a seven-year-old boy. Instead, the characters act to a blank space onstage that is voiced by the adult Michael. The absence of a physical body to portray the younger version of the narrator is “a device which maintains the dual perspective of memory, both absent and present, then and now, real and imagined, originating yet 'other'. The play stages the search for the missing corporeal link through individual memory and alternative histories” (McMullan 91). In a way, this device makes it even more apparent that the play unfolds from Michael’s memories; no one can take the place of the narrator in his own mind. McMullan’s emphasis on the dichotomy of memory, that it takes place both “then and now” (91), is especially important to this memory play in which Friel uses the adult Michael’s memories to tell what occurred during the summer of 1936 as well as later in the lives of his

family members. In his soliloquys, Michael tells the audience the fates of his uncle, aunts, mother, and father while they remain onstage in the action of his memories. This “interruption of the narrative flow ... through Michael’s announcements of the future histories of the characters, works as an alienation device, defying the audience’s expectations of remaining within the time-structure of the play” (Murray, “Recording Tremors” 29). Breaking down the barriers of past, present, and future and allowing the audience access to all of Michael’s information regarding his family brings audience members closer to the Mundy family and makes them more invested in the characters. Also, Friel is able to highlight the consequences of the family’s status outside of the economic, societal, and religious circles of Ballybeg in a way that would otherwise be difficult to convey. Ultimately, Michael’s deviation from the exact truth aligns itself more closely to human nature: “The play becomes a life-class, a demonstration of the process by which imagination and memory combine or conflict to transform so-called actuality into significant form” (Murray, “Recording Tremors” 32). Friel skillfully weaves fact and fiction throughout the play to create the truest form of memory from adult Michael’s perspective.

The unique combination of past, present, and future that the audience experiences through adult Michael’s narration of a summer during his childhood is reminiscent of the audience’s distinct position through Friel’s other play, *Translations*. Instead of Michael’s memory, this play pertains to the memory of Ireland itself and of its people. While evoking images of an earlier Ireland along with ancient classical civilizations, Friel manages to treat both the Ireland of the characters’ present, a nation on the brink of Anglicization, as well as the Ireland of the future, the time in which the audience views it. The memories that weave throughout *Translations* are specifically bound to the language of the Irish people and the

island's changes from a completely Irish-speaking nation to a country in which the playwright must give the impression that Irish Gaelic is being spoken as only those in Gaeltacht regions would be able to understand the dialogue. Just as he does with the ambiguous fact or fiction nature of Michael's memories, Friel takes liberties with his country's past, and both plays ultimately remind the audience that these history plays are an artistic look at moments in Ireland's past. The fact that *Dancing at Lughnasa* is Friel's most autobiographical play and holds many similarities with his own life as a boy during the summer of 1936 does not mean that it can be viewed as completely realistic. Friel is still a playwright, and his plays are creative works of art.

Just as *Translations* before it, *Dancing at Lughnasa* depicts a nation straddling the line between tradition and modernity. However, in this later play, Friel chooses to focus on post-Civil War Ireland, its everyday society shown through the lives of the Mundy family. While *Translations* depicts the introduction of this British foreign power, *Dancing at Lughnasa* shows life following its elimination from the country. This new Irish Free State is in flux, "the ancient Gaelic Irish nation [that] had finally thrown off the thrall of foreign subjugation" (Brown 134), and Friel's use of dance as a more evocative "language" of expression presents it in a less nostalgic and more realistic manner. In the words of Brian Friel himself: "Words fail us at moments of great emotion. Language has become depleted for me in some way; words have lost their accuracy and precision. So I use dance in the play as a surrogate for language" (Kavanagh 222).

Showing a great contrast between "the frugal lives of the sisters, ruled by strict Catholic dictates, and the wildness and spontaneity of their 'pagan' dance" (McMullan 90), he emphasizes the position of the Mundy sisters as outsiders, both physically through the location of their home

and socially due to the status of women during this time period. Following this tradition by using a male narrator to tell the events of the sisters' lives, Friel "reiterates the distrust of language he revealed in *Translations* and emphasizes this play's balance of storytelling and spectacle: 'words didn't seem to be up to the job,' so music's purpose was 'to explode theatrically'" (Lojek 83-4). While *Translations* details Ireland on the brink of losing its cultural identity through language, Friel uses *Dancing at Lughnasa* to portray an opposing situation: the Irish Free State on the cusp of asserting its nationalism and cultural identity. Another moment of great change for Ireland, the early twentieth century presents yet another power struggle, an internal struggle, between tradition and modernity. However, in this scenario, it is up to the Irish people and their new Irish Free State to determine what will be recognized as the languages of this budding, modern country.

In both *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel looks to Ireland's past and its rich history for the settings of his plays. By focusing on these two separate periods of cultural revolution, the beginning of Anglicization in Ireland and the period following the development of the Irish Free State, he subtly comments on the social and political environment of the late twentieth century during which Friel composes these plays. As Claire Gleitman explains, "In the early 1980s, Ireland's conflict with Britain and its own population of Northern Irish Protestants was feverishly intense," and this period of violence and divisiveness within Ireland prompted the Field Day Theatre Company to contribute to the re-envisioning of Ireland's past "by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation" (14). Friel's exploration of the tradition versus modernity dichotomy during these distinct periods of Irish history and his varying use of "language" to

express his characters' deep emotions allow the audience to recognize his ultimate ambivalence toward these characters and the conflicts that they encounter.

It is this recurring ambiguity that keeps audience members, both Irish and not, returning to *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* as well as his other history plays. In the essay "Northern Ireland's Political Drama," D.E.S. Maxwell comments on Friel's use of language to demonstrate this ambivalence: "Language is not just transmitting simply coded signals which the audience can easily decipher into statements *about* 'real life.' Language itself enacts emotional and intellectual conflicts, often political in substance. The play sets varieties of rhetoric against one another to enquire into the sentiments they are used to express" (4). His plays reject an outright interpretation of the playwright's own opinions, instead encouraging his audience to recognize both sides of a dichotomy and draw their own conclusions. Friel's use of dialect in *Translations* introduces the English colonizer's language as well as Irish English, the island's response to Anglicization, which ultimately led to a revival of Irish culture, while the music and dance displayed throughout *Dancing at Lughnasa* shows the Mundy family in flux within the range of spiritual belief. This consistent ambivalence and the dichotomies that Friel incorporates within his drama (tradition/modernity, pagan/Christian, Irish/English) correspond to the division within Ireland of which Friel, as a product of the area on the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, was intensely aware. Looking back on history, Friel effectively comments on the divided nature of Ireland through his history plays. His ambiguity surrounding the conclusions of *Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* mirrors the feelings of melancholy regarding past violence and timid hope for Ireland in the future.

WORKS CITED

- "aqua-vitae, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web.
- Arkins, Brian. "The Role of Greek and Latin in Friel's *Translations*." *Colby Quarterly* (1991): 202-209. Web.
- Boltwood, Scott. *Renegotiating and Resisting Nationalism in 20th Century Irish Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
- Brown, Terence. *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-2002*. London: Harper Perennial, 2004. Print.
- Carty, Ciaran. "Finding Voice in a Language Not Our Own." Delaney, Paul. *Brian Friel in Conversation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003. 138-143. Web.
- Conner, Marc. "Chapter Three: Revolution, Emancipation, Starvation." March 2010. *The Context and Development of Irish Literature: History, Poetry, Landscape*. Web.
- Cullingford, Elizabeth Butler. "British Romans and Irish Carthaginians: Anticolonial Metaphor in Heaney, Friel, and McGuinness." *PMLA* (1996): 222-239. Web.
- Dehoratius, Edmund F. "A Modern *Odyssey*: The Intertextuality of Brian Friel's *Translations* and Its Classical Sources." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* (2001): 366-385. Web.
- Friel, Brian. *Dancing at Lughnasa*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990. Print.

- Friel, Brian. "Translations." Friel, Brian. *Selected Plays*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984. 377-447. Print.
- Gleitman, Claire. "'I'll See You Yesterday': Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, and the Captivating Past." Holdsworth, Nadine and Mary Luckhurst. *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013. 13-26. Web.
- Kavanagh, Julie. "Friel at Last." Delaney, Paul. *Brian Friel in Conversation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003. 218-227. Web.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation*. London: Random House, 2009. Print.
- Kramer, Prapassaree. "Dancing at Lughnasa: Unexcused Absence." *Modern Drama* (2000): 171-181. Web.
- Kurdi, Maria. "An Interview with Tom Murphy." *Irish Studies Review* (2004): 233-240. Web.
- Lojek, Helen. "Dancing at Lughnasa and the unfinished revolution." Roche, Anthony. *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 78-90. Web.
- Maxwell, D.E.S. "Northern Ireland's Political Drama." *Modern Drama* (1990): 1-14. Web.
- McMullan, Anna. "'In touch with some otherness': Gender, Authority, and the Body in *Dancing at Lughnasa*." *Irish University Review* (1999): 90-100. Web.
- Murray, Christopher. "Palimpsest: Two Languages as One in Brian Friel's *Translations*." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* (1999): 85-95. Web.

- Murray, Christopher. "'Recording Tremors': Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and the Uses of Tradition." Kerwin, William. *Brian Friel: A Casebook*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997. 23-42. Web.
- Peacock, Alan. "Translating the Past: Friel, Greece and Rome." Peacock, Alan. *The Achievement of Brian Friel*. Padstow: T.J. Press, 1992. 113-133. Web.
- Pelletier, Martine. "*Translations*, the Field Day debate, and the reimagining of Irish identity." Roche, Anthony. *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 66-77. Web.
- "traducer, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web.
- Walsh, Martin W. "Ominous Festivals, Ambivalent Nostalgia: Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and Billy Roche's *Amphibians*." *New Hibernia Review* (2010): 127-141. Web.
- Whelan, Kevin. "Between: The Politics of Culture in Friel's Translations." *Field Day Review* (2010): 7-27. Web.
- Worthen, W.B. "Homeless Words: Field Day and the Politics of Translation." *Modern Drama* (1995): 22-41. Web.