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EDITORS

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Memory as an Essential Element in Irish Culture within Brian Friel's Play *Dancing at Lughnasa*

Natka Jankova Alagjozovska

Introduction

Memory strengthens and simplifies at the same time. Our minds retain the best, but only a few striking details and the remaining jig-saw pieces create new foundations for our personal histories. Brian Friel's play *Dancing at Lughnasa* does not show reality as it appears, but as a series of stories of memory and imagination. Memories are works of fiction, selective representations of experiences, actual or imagined. They provide a framework for creating meaning in one's own life as well as in the lives of others. A personal representation of general or specific events as well as personal facts is named autobiographical memory (Fan et al., 2022). But as in this case and many more literary works, authors tend to recall many personal events from adolescence and early adulthood. So, when the adult Michael Mundy thinks back to a particular summer of his Irish childhood, he recalls August 1936 as one long moment of hope and love before his family quietly disintegrated and this is the effect of the reminiscent bump.

The Plot of the Play

Dancing at Lughnasa opens with Michael's monologue, who introduces his nostalgic memories of the summer of 1936, when he was seven years old, and the five Mundy sisters, who raised him in rural Ireland and acquired their first wireless radio. Friel's play employs the central motif of dancing and music to explore themes of Irish cultural identity, nostalgia, historical change, and pagan ritual. The dancing in the play represents a break in the usual order of the play, an interruption of the non-permitted routines and a ritualized suspension of everyday life (Rossano, 2012). In those years dancing was regarded with suspicion in its representation of the morals of the nation's youth and according to an Act from 1953 license was required for dance-halls (Abra, 2009).

Unfortunately, this was a major factor for the dying out of many traditional customs and in a way ironically, the government officially pledged to a revival of Irish folklore and Irish traditional music and dancing.

By introducing Michael as a narrator, Friel emphasizes his constructed conditions of life. Michael explores his own memory and he admits its casual nature: 'memories offer themselves to me' (Friel, 1990, p.71). The five Mundy sisters (Kate, Maggie, Agnes, Rosie, and Christina) all unmarried live in a cottage outside of the fictional village Ballybeg. The oldest, Kate, is a school teacher, and the only one with a well-paid job. Agnes and Rose knit gloves to be sold in town, thereby earning a little extra money for the household. They also help Maggie to keep the house. Maggie and Christina (Michael's mother) have no income at all. Michael is seven years old and plays in and around the cottage. All of the sisters are painfully aware that life is passing them by and that they are trapped in the everyday routines from which is impossible to escape. However, the vestiges of their femininity still shine through: the severity of their gracious touches on the furniture, pretty curtains, and an attractive dresser arrangement.

Memory as the Major Topic in the Play

As mentioned previously, memory is the major theme in this play. Through a reminiscent vision of 1936 the character of Michael as a young man explains the significance of the memories:

'...And so, when I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936, different kinds of memories offer themselves to me. But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often; and what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory. In that memory, too, the air is nostalgic with the music of the thirties...' (Friel, 1990, p.71)

Friel is interested in personal memory not as a means of reproducing factual incidents, but as a means of recapturing the atmosphere of the memory. Thus, for Friel, memory is "simultaneously actual and illusory," because it is true to the emotional content of the memory without necessarily being true to the actual events that took place. Music is central to Friel's play because of the extent to which he associates nostalgic memories with "the music of the thirties." At the point when all of the characters listen to the dance music that comes over the radio, Kate's remonstrations are ignored by all her sisters who one by one succumb to the music's enchantment. The reason of that attitude is the music and the dance as a way of momentary release of the harsh reality. And when the music stops, the sisters awkwardly recollect themselves,

and resume the old routines. Dancing has a healing power for them. The pagan connotations of the sister's dancing is emphasised by relating it to the dancing, which is a part of the festival of Lughnasa taking place in the 'back hills' (Friel, 1990).

This play is concerned not only with personal memory but as well with collective memory. Just as the dance of the sisters expresses individual and private feelings, the 'back hills' manifest the hidden culture which neither colonial influence or Christian teaching has been able to extinguish. When two of the sisters hear the 'Abyssinia' song on the radio, they start dancing immediately around the kitchen. Rumours about what is going on during the festivities of Lughnasa percolate their household. Though the eldest sister, Kate, Friel struggles to maintain a hard-working, god-fearing Catholic household, Ireland's pagan origins flourish constantly, and the tension between the two ideologies threatens the family's already tenuous harmony. As a guardian of Christian values, she is terrified when she hears a story about an injured young boy who falls into a bonfire during the Lughnasa festivities. This boy becomes her example of the dire consequences of bestowing pagan traditions. Hence throughout the whole play the sisters discuss the Lughnasa festival that they know only from rumour and their questions are 'How did it happen? Are animals actually sacrificed?' However, the boy is a dweller of the 'back hills' i.e. the wilderness beyond the bounds of civilization. And into these same back hills, the sinister Danny Bready takes Rose courting. Kate claims to know what kind of people live there and according to her:

I know those people from the back hills! I've taught them! Savages – that's what they are! (Friel, 1990, p.17)

From the above we can see that there are some other characteristic features that people bear inside such as motifs like sexual awakening and magical transformation which are central in Friel's play. The above mentioned 'back hills' are connected with the sexual experience of Rose among the dying embers of the Lughnasa fires. Rose is not seen in Act 1 so that's why we are not aware of her disability. She comes back in Act 2 and she is transformed from all the events she's been through:

'CHRIS: There she is! Look – look! There she is! (...At first look this might be any youngish country women, carefully dressed, not unattractive, returning from a long walk on a summer day. She walks slowly, lethargically, towards the house...)' (Friel, 1990, p.56)

Lughnasa is not a place, but a pagan festival of the harvest, complete with roaring bonfires, ritual chants, and animal sacrifice. The fires of Lughnasa seem to burn off in the distance throughout the play; we're always aware of their presence. According to Elmer Andrews: 'Lughnasa

is traditionally associated with sexual awakening, rebirth, continuance and it is significant that the date 1 August, is exactly nine months, the normal period of gestation before the great feast of Belatine which celebrated the beginning of summer.' (Andrews, 1995). The Mundy household, though, is not a place where such revelry is enjoyed. Not only is it limping along financially, but sibling relationships are strained to a breaking point. Kate, as the eldest and the wage-earner, feels obliged to be the arbiter of everyone else's moral conduct. This positioning of the sisters is clear from the first scene, when Chris muses that she might begin wearing lipstick, and Agnes retorts, "As long as Kate's not around. Do you want to make a pagan of yourself (Friel, 1990)? Thus, all things forbidden are associated with paganism.

Conclusion

Culture is something that cannot simply be observed. It is something that consists of many levels (Jankova Alagjovska, 2021). Whenever you visit a community for a short time, the surface can be seen only i.e. the social etiquette. However, the deepest layers of culture are not visible to the eye. In order to understand culture, it must be understood that all cultures have different conducts, values, beliefs specific of that particular community. It is an idea that traditional barriers among people of different cultures will break down the traditional barriers among people. The play "Dancing at Lughnasa" portrays memory as an essential element in Irish culture along with other cultural elements which were mentioned above. What actually makes this play unique and worth reading is you learn a lot about the Irish culture and what matters is that culture identifies the different customs, traditions, dances and the destructive entanglement of myth in this case, through the Irish women's lives.

So, through the dances Michael remembers, the play takes on its religious dimension. According to religion experts, even before the dawn of the history, people danced in order to get close to the sacred time (Donaldson, 1997). In such way people acquire sense of returning to a life-giving source that has a powerful, renewing effect on their everyday lives. Finally, it can be noted that what makes this play unique and worth reading is that a lot about Irish culture can be learned through it. Hence, what identifies each culture are the different customs, traditions, dances and the destructive entanglement of myth in this case, through the Irish women's lives.

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