RITUAL AS THE WAY TO SPEAK IN *DANCING AT LUGHNASA*

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ABSTRACT

Brian Friel’s plays frequently explore questions of language, communication, and memory. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), he incorporates dances and Irish and African rituals as a challenge to the centrality of language. Along with other ritualistic elements, including silence and characters who exist in the liminal space between strict boundaries, the embodied communications of ritual and dance are able to “speak” that which words are forbidden, by systems of civility, respectability, and good order, to say. Corporeal and non-binary communication circumvents such systems and sets into unsteady motion that which the controlling forces of colonization and Catholicism accept as most stable. As Friel’s characters communicate through ritual and dance, they serve as a reminder that carefully ordered binaries are subject to disruption, and that balanced life must function within freedom as well as control.

The study begins with considerations of two very different approaches to unspoken communication: ritual and language theory. First, in order to examine the ritual elements within *Dancing at Lughnasa*, it is important to come to an understanding of what ritual is and how it works. The first chapter of this study attempts a wide overview of ritual studies and definitions, concluding that ritual is a physical, symbolic enactment of serious belief that effects results, blends the real and the ideal, and allows for a liminal space between roles and worlds. Following this, a study of Saussure’s binary language structure and Derrida’s counterargument of difference establishes that, according to Derrida, much communication can exist outside of a binary understanding of language. Taken together, these two disparate ideas allow for an in-depth reading of Friel’s play, studying both literal rituals and dances, and the ways that these and
other elements “speak” outside of binaries and in liminal spaces between worlds. The play then serves as an example of the power of corporeality – all that lies beyond language itself – to break through boundaries and communicate the “great mysteries of life” which are so important and so ineffable. When language surrenders to movement, ritual and “wordless ceremony” become, indeed, “the way to speak.”
For Mom and Dad, who first taught me to write,

and for Fiona Grace, my wee Irish colleen. Someday we'll go find Ballybeg together.
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Writing a thesis is itself a ritual, the first initiation into academia. Like all rituals, it requires the participant – me – to give physical form to that which is known, believed, or considered important. That embodiment is this thesis, yes; but moreover, it is the process that has brought this document into being. On my own, I could have achieved neither. And so it is to my guides on this journey that I owe my deepest appreciation.

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INTRODUCTION

“Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement – as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak […] to be in touch with some otherness.”

– Brian Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa (84)

In February of 2004, I directed a high school production of Dancing at Lughnasa. Throughout the process, I was continually struck by the beauty of Brian Friel’s script and amazed to see how deeply the imagery and eloquence resonated, despite the age and inexperience of my cast (and myself). As I tried to describe the play to others, I struggled to find words that would do justice to the ideas and images in Friel’s text, but found that they were, in effect, unsayable. “You just have to see the play,” I told people. “The language is haunting, but there’s more than that… The depth of emotion can only be told through movement.” In my program notes I tried to explain, “the seeming hopelessness that they all face, the desperation, the need for love, are emotions far beyond words. The sisters can express them only through dance.” I had only begun to understand what drew so many critics, scholars, and playgoers to Friel’s works, especially to Lughnasa: his ability to address and communicate that which is beyond words. Friel's haunting use of language (in monologue, dialogue, and even stage directions) is coupled with an understanding that language is limited – that the depth of emotion, frustration, faith, memory, and an “otherness” cannot always be communicated in words. In the closing moments of the play, Michael tells us that his childhood memories are “simultaneously actual and illusory,” not conveyed in words but in dancing:

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. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary ... (Friel 84)

There is more at work here, however, than dance simply being a silent means of expressing feelings during moments of great emotion. It is, as well, potently able to speak that which is forbidden by systems of civility, respectability, and good order. By being wordless, it circumvents such a system and challenges the phonocentric privileging of words as the only (or ideal) connection to the mind, insisting that language is not the only way to speak, and that, therefore, the system is inadequate.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* is a play about language – both what words can say, and what they cannot. As made most clear in the final sentences, dance and its related forms, including ceremony and ritual, are used as “the way to speak,” to express the ineffable. Throughout the play, dances are performed, rituals enacted, ceremonies described, and native rhythms pounded out, connecting the characters to the conflicts in their lives and allowing them to express forbidden, unsayable emotions and an underlying, primitive instinct. *Dancing at Lughnasa* powerfully communicates the depth of the human soul – unspoken longings, hopeless dreams, and unshaken faith – through words, yes, but also through silence, dance, movement, music, ritual, and memory.

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel contrasts the controlled respectability and Catholicism within the lives of the five Mundy sisters with an underlying “paganism,” as found in the pulsing Irish dance music, ancient Celtic festival, and native Ryangan rhythms that disrupt this life, especially by their refusal to acknowledge a separation of sacred and secular worlds.
Throughout the play, literal dances create new layers of meaning; described ceremonies acknowledge some forgotten mystery; and even mundane, daily activities become rituals in a search for significance – “whether we want to call it religion or the acknowledgement of mystery or a salute to the otherness” (Friel, qtd. in Delaney 215). The play’s title underscores the importance of dance, and the sisters’ exhilarating explosion of dance, early in Act I, is arguably the most memorable moment in the show. “Irish dance music” is introduced as a theme in the third paragraph of Michael’s opening monologue, and continues throughout the play as a central metaphor, reinforced even in Michael’s final sentence, “Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary” (Friel 10, 84). This dancing, from its most literal to most symbolic moments, is “linked in the text to ritual and ceremony” (Jones 179). It is in this connection that Friel explores his underlying thought: “Dancing at Lughnasa is about the necessity for paganism” (qtd. in Delaney 222). Dance, then, becomes a trope through which the ineffable “large elements and mysteries of life” can be explored and revealed, a silent but vital “surrogate for language” (Friel, qtd. in Delaney 222). Dancing reaches beyond the limits of language into the unspoken and unknown.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

If the ritual in Lughnasa is, in fact, meant to express some unsayable meaning, it is important to study how it does so, and to what end. Friel has written that

I think there’s a need for the pagan in life … I don’t think of it as disrupting Christianity. I think of it as disrupting civility. If too much obeisance is offered to manners, then in some way we lose or suppress the grumbling and dangerous
beast that’s underneath the ground. This denial is what causes the conflict.

(Delaney 214)

In what ways do the characters and dances in *Lughnasa* both reflect this need and, in some way, disrupt civility? In the play, Friel contrasts the respectability of institutional Catholicism with native celebrations of the Irish and Ryangan – both of which are disparaged by the British because they combine the sacred and secular into one ceremony. “English colonizers considered [dance] patterns barbaric precisely because they blurred the distinctions between ceremony and celebration […] as] traditional forms of worship and celebrations were integrated into secular life” (Morrison 176). How does the corporeality of ritual in *Lughnasa* express this, working outside of boundaries to convey meaning when the voice is silenced by “civility”?

**METHODOLOGY**

This study will be conducted in three main chapters. In the first, I will examine ritual, defining it as a mode of action and exploring its use in cultural communication. This overview of studies in ritual, and specific descriptions of the Celtic and Ryangan festivals described in the play, will provide the basis for larger conclusions about ritual and ceremony in *Lughnasa*.

In Chapter Two, I will explore contemporary language theories, as they examine the limits and “tragedy” of language. Beginning with a brief look at Ferdinand de Saussure’s theories of language as architecture, I will examine his conclusions on language as a system, and Jacques Derrida’s assertion that, therefore, some things must exist outside of that system. The binary system of signified and signifier will be contrasted with a Derrida’s understanding of “difference” and the idea that context creates meaning beyond the binary of language itself (Collins 66). Adding to this Michel Foucault’s views on silence, “the things one declines to say,
or is forbidden to name,” as that which “functions along the things said,” I will be able to study the play’s critique of colonizing phonocentrism and, by extension, develop an understanding of dance and ritual as a means of communication that exists outside of the speech/text binary and disrupts the expected civility of the colonizer’s system (27).

In the final chapter, I will then examine the dances, rituals, ceremonies, and liminalities of context and character within *Lughnasa*. Describing each, I will explain how each “dance,” along with other disruptions of binaries, communicates ideas about theme and character in ways that language alone cannot, connecting these characters to the conflicts in the play and allowing them to express unsayable emotions, longings, and primitive instincts. Specifically, I will examine their role as ritual (in the world of the play or its context as a script), and their ability to silently communicate the ineffable.

In my conclusion, I will once again call upon contemporary theories of language to discuss the resulting effect of these binary disruptions upon the play, and draw conclusions which will bear relevance to further studies and productions of *Lughnasa* and Friel’s other dramatic works.

LIMITATIONS

Although many of Friel’s works deal with similar themes of unrequited longings, unfulfilled dreams, and the unsayable desires of his characters, each play addresses these ideas in different ways, and to different ends. Friel has stated that, to avoid falling into a rut or becoming predictable, he constantly changes his themes and ideas. Although much could (and should) be said about Friel’s varied methods of “saying the unsayable” in his other plays, such a look will
be postponed for now. Therefore, to best examine the use of dance and ritual to express the ineffable, this study will be limited to this trope and a single play, Dancing at Lughnasa.

I will also limit my choice of examples within the examination of the play’s rituals. The definition of “ritual” could easily be made wide enough to include many other examples, including everyday chores and activities, common courtesies, performative speech acts, gift-giving, and items which are ceremonially or metaphorically meaningful. While all of these are important and could be studied at length, undoubtedly adding new layers of insight and understanding, I will remain largely focused on the larger rituals at work.

It is necessary to recognize, as well, that this study only encompasses half of the subject at hand. My concern is with the ways that ritual and dance subvert control and allow for indeterminacy and freedom. However, Lughnasa is important among Friel’s works in that, in it, Friel also acknowledges the need for control, as well as the limitations it imposes. That is, although Kate represents an overly strict adherence to “civility” (the reading supported by this thesis), Gerry, Jack, and Rose could all be studied as characters who have moved too far to the other end of the continuum, existing completely outside of boundaries.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Within this study, dance will be used both to refer to literal dancing, and to the overarching trope which includes similar, related forms of physical communication, as in ceremony and ritual. Because each of these act in similar ways, using a wordless, physical form to acknowledge the mystical and disorderly aspects of life, they will all be considered as part of the “dancing,” Friel’s “surrogate for language,” in Lughnasa. However, non-literal dancing will also be acknowledged as such, in clear ways.
The idea of *paganism* is also potentially problematic, because the word will not be used in its technical sense to refer to the actual pre-Christian, Celtic religion of paganism. Instead, it has two more general, interrelated meanings. Primarily, the definition is Friel’s own, from his description that *Lughnasa* “is about the necessity for paganism,” defined, for him, not “as disrupting Christianity […] but] as disrupting civility” (qtd. in Delaney 222, 214). Within the text of the play, the characters, especially Kate, refer to “paganism,” “pagan,” and “pagan practices” as, essentially, anything or anyone that is not explicitly Catholic. In this context, the term is linked to the Celtic roots of the Lughnasa celebration, but also used much more widely and generally.

Much of this study will examine the ways that characters, especially within rituals, occupy *liminal* spaces. From the Latin *limen*, “threshold,” and made popular through the research of Victor Turner, the idea of liminality refers to the “gap between ordered worlds” (13). Technically, within the study of social systems, it is “the state of being in between successive participations in social milieux,” “the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions” (52, 237). More generally, it defines all that is “between worlds,” not fully part of either of two opposing groups or identities.

**BACKGROUND**

Brian Friel was born in 1929 near Omagh, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland. During his early years, he spent holidays and summers with his mother’s family in the town of Glenties, remote County Donegal, and the fictional Ballybeg, which serves as the setting for *Lughnasa* and many of his other plays, is an amalgamation of Glenties and several Donegal towns. The area
has always seemed to him to be, if not idyllic, at least appealing, and he returned to live there in 1969.

The town name *Ballybeg*, in Irish, is *Baile Beag*, or “small town,” and suggests both a cohesive community and an overly conservative mindset. *Baile* also means “home.” Set in Donegal, it lies at “the edge of the known world,” and is both breathtakingly beautiful and remotely desolate (Jones 6-7). “His map of Ballybeg is a portrait of modern society and its precarious lien on the verge of history: provincial, peripheral, subject to the eternal quest of individuals and communities for a homecoming, a way of reaching the hearth” (Pine 2). This sense of place and identity is crucial to Friel’s plays, and in each, Ballybeg seems to be on the brink of change.

It would be helpful at this point to clarify the geographical, political, and religious divisions of Donegal and Glenties (Ballybeg). Before 1921, Ireland was divided into four provinces, with Ulster as the northern quadrant. When the Irish Free State was created, this province was split up: six counties, including Derry (renamed Londonderry, although always referred to by Friel by its Nationalist name), became Northern Ireland (and therefore part of the United Kingdom); the remaining three, including Donegal, were separated off and remained part of the Republic of Ireland. County Donegal, which remained Catholic and nationalist, was connected to the rest of the Republic by only a tiny strip of land along the west coast, and is almost completely surrounded by Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, there is no separation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in Friel’s plays, and Ballybeg could be “Ballyanywhere” – a microcosm of all of Ireland (Delaney 223).

It is, however, distinctly western Donegal – both because of the landscape and because *Lughnasa* is Friel’s most autobiographical play. Friel describes its inception:
I was at a play at the National Theatre with the playwright Thomas Kilroy. We walked across the Waterloo Bridge and up the Strand. It was about eleven-thirty at night, and there were homeless sleeping in the doorways. Tom said, “If you talked to these people, I’m sure many of them are Irish.” And I said, “I had two aunts who, I think, ended up something like that.” He said, “Why don’t you write about that?” So that’s how it began: backward. (Delaney 214)

The play is dedicated to “those five brave women of Glenties” – one of them was his mother – and it was in Glenties, County Donegal, that Friel spent childhood holidays (Friel 5). Like Michael, he was seven in 1936 (although his parents, unlike Chris and Gerry, were married). Friel “had four aunts with those names and an uncle who came back from being a missionary in Africa. [His] Aunt Rose was a simple girl” (Delaney 222). She and his Aunt Agnes, as far as he knows, did die in London, homeless and alone. But the autobiography provides just the barest of frames for the story. Within this realistic, microcosmic setting, Friel explores questions of paganism, religion, colonial control, language, and communication, exploring them in a way that is both literal and mythical, through the malleable memories of dance.
CHAPTER ONE: RITUAL AND COMMUNICATION

“I take ritual to be the basic social act.”
– Roy A. Rappaport (qtd. in Bell v)

“Since ritual is a good form for conveying a message as if it were unquestionable, it is often used to communicate those very things which are most in doubt.”
– S. F. Moore and B. G. Myerhoff (qtd. in Leeds-Hurwitz 87)

_Dancing at Lughnasa_ is full of dance and ritual, two activities which communicate meaning through primarily physical and symbolic means. Chapter Three of this study will include a textual analysis of the dances and rituals in the play, and the ways in which they communicate; in order to do so, it will be important to begin with an understanding of what “ritual” is and how it is understood within contemporary culture studies and, to a lesser extent, within the early twentieth century anthropological perceptions that shape the context of the play. What, then, is ritual? How does it work? How is it a means of communication (individual, social, and cross-cultural) or of understanding communication? Within this context, the cultural rituals that explicitly frame the play – the Festival of Lughnasa and Father Jack’s Ryangan ceremonies – will be overviewed.

Every ethnographer and theorist, it seems, has a different definition for “ritual.” Indeed, there is “the widest possible disagreement as to how the word ritual should be understood” (Leach, qtd. in Bell v). When, in the nineteenth century, anthropology and ritual studies began in earnest, most researchers viewed rituals as explicitly religious rites, enactments of myth and worship. Social functionalists, in turn, saw ritual as a means of analyzing society and the social
values of the community; symbolic anthropologists focused on the wider dynamics of culture (Bell 14). Contemporary studies have examined the ritual nature of behavior on many levels – from Catholic masses to weddings and funerals to handshakes and etiquette.

Ritual has as many forms and purposes as it has scholars and theorists, but there are several elements that are, in general, common to all. Ritual, necessarily, involves action. Thought and belief, even when socially constructed, do not become ritual until they are enacted or embodied. This enactment is a performance done for an audience (the gods, the community, even the observants themselves) and is “expressive of social relationships” and social orders (Rothenbuhler 14). That is, rituals are neither (solely) recreational nor individualistic; even those rituals enacted individually are socially structured within the context of community, history, or religion. For example, prayer, even when the participant is alone, is enacted for an audience or receiver, and follows proscribed patterns. In this way, ritual acts are “expressions of commitment” – to a god or religion, a social or ethnic community, a cultural expectation of behavior, a nation, or any other series of beliefs (De Vos, qtd. in Leeds-Hurwitz 101).

The elements or forms used in ritual are pre-existing, although they may be modified, combined, or restructured in new ways: “Rituals are forms of customary behavior[…] There is always something about ritual that is stereotyped, standardized, stylized, relatively invariant, formal. This implies that ritual is repetitive in the sense that others have done it this way before” (Rothenbuhler 20). This repetition is also reflected in the regularly recurring rhythms of ritual, whether based on a calendar, cycle, or passage of time. Although ritual acts are performed for specific, standardized purposes, “ritual works by a logic of signs, meanings, and morals that is distinct from the logic of technical rationality” – that is, they effect change in ways that are more symbolic or indirect than rationally logical (Rothenbuhler 11-12). Therefore, in many ways,
“what distinguishes ritual from ordinary behavior is the way in which its form signifies meaning beyond the behavior itself” (Rothenbuhler 54).

Similarly, rituals do not literally represent the community or its beliefs, but symbolically reflect an ideal: “Rituals often occur in the subjunctive mood. They are often not about what is, but what could be, might be, or ought to be. [...] They are occasions for imagining the way things could be or evaluating how they ought to be” (Rothenbuhler 15). As Clifford Geertz phrased it, “In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world” (112). In performing rituals, participants consciously or voluntarily behave in ways that may be more polite, generous, or obedient; more connected to deity or community; more aesthetically excessive; or more fully engaged in their beliefs than in less structured moments. However, in “performing” being more polite or more connected, we are or become those very things, so that, “socially, our ritually structured conduct of ourselves, on examination, turns out to be who we are” (Rothenbuhler 25).

Such symbolism, extended meaning, and metaphorical logic also allows the ritual to act as communication:

This generative logic of ritual – that appropriately patterned behavior constitutes symbols that are effective beyond the behavior itself – must also be the generative logic of communication. No act of communication could be such unless that logic held; all acts of communication presuppose it. Ritual and communication are kin; they are logically related and share family characteristics. (Rothenbuhler 26)

Because of the social structures in which rituals are constructed, they have inherent communicative meaning.
As was emphasized by the myth-and-religion school of anthropologists, ritual actions regard the *sacred*. Although this word may (and often does) refer to what is religiously sacred, the concept must be expanded to reflect the much wider understanding of ritual; therefore, “in any given cultural community, the sacred is whatever is treated as unquestionable, ‘beyond interdiction,’ as Durkheim puts it, as of the utmost seriousness by members of that community” (Rothenbuhler 24). Nationalistic or patriotic beliefs, then, are sacred to the communities that hold them. Concepts of class and gender, age and maturity, familial roles, socially effective behavior, and appropriate means of communication may also fit within this concept.

Rothenbuhler (with others) has referred to this “sacredness” as “the serious life,” suggesting that “ritual events allow celebrants to participate in the serious life, however they define it” (25), and concludes that, at its most essential, “[R]itual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (27).

Especially important for this study, ritual is also

a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together. Examples include the ritual integration of belief and behavior, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual and the group, subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture, the real and the imaginative ideal […]. Ritual is […] a mechanistically discrete and paradigmatic means of sociocultural integration, appropriation, or transformation. (Bell 16)

As ritual brings such oppositional forces together, it also highlights the difference and, for Victor Turner, the liminal space between them. As participants move between systems (from daily individual life to stylized group interaction, from belief to action, from observer to participant,
from an uninitiated state to full membership, or between two opposing social communities), they exist in a space between the worlds or roles.

In this interim of “liminality,” the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one’s own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements. That this danger is recognized in all tolerably orderly societies is made evident by the proliferation of taboos that hedge in and constrain those on whom the normative structure loses its grip during such potent transitions as extended initiation rites in “tribal” societies.

(Turner 13-14)

As participants assume roles within rituals, they are able to transcend or distance themselves from their normal roles, explore their situation, or move from an old life to a new one. Within the critical moment of ritual, “the participants are neither what they were nor what they will become […] neither children nor adults, male nor female, human nor animal. They are momentary anomalies, stripped of their former mode of being, in preparation for something new” (Ray 59). Similarly, seasonal celebrations (including the Celtic and Ryangan harvest festivals) are marked by this liminality, as a transformation in the agricultural cycle:

the old year is made into the new, and the season of drought and scarcity is made into the season of rain and fertility […]. The time between the seasons […] belongs neither to the old nor to the new, but to both. It is a ritual time out of time when the usual order of things is reversed and thrown back to primordial chaos, waiting to be reestablished and renewed. (Ray 59)
In light of the many dichotomies within Brain Friel’s play, including action/thought, silence/spoken word, act/meaning, sacred/secular, primitive/colonized, and Irish/British, it is interesting to note the way in which ritual can both enact and integrate these differences.

Within these transitions, ritual acts performatively; that is, as they symbolically effect change, they create actual change as well, so that a participant actually becomes an adult, a community member, a citizen, or a king. Taken in context, symbolic speech acts work in a similar way, so that the words “I do” do not only celebrate the ceremony of marriage, but actually create or enact the marriage, so that the speaker, by participating in the ritual, becomes a husband or wife. Rituals can also create change in other ways: those which embody the ideal cause participants to become what they act out, thus shaping individual identity and establishing social cohesion or social structures; group ceremonies and celebrations allow, in the moment of participation, for diverse peoples to become (momentary) equals, or power structures to be reversed.

Besides ritual itself, it is also necessary to consider “ritualistic” and “ritualized” behavior, as well as “ritual symbols.” Although some scholars insist on the distinctive difference between ritual and all other activity, many others “stress the congruity of ritual with other forms of human action, usually by seeing ritual as ‘the expressive, symbolical or communicative aspect’ of action in general” (Lewis, qtd. in Bell 70). Many everyday activities, social activities, and communicative functions, therefore, are or can be routinized, socially enforced, or otherwise ritualized, so that, for some, everything is ritualized to a degree. Ritual behavior may be habitual or routine, but it is never merely that; that which is ritualistic still fits, in some way, into the definitions provided for ritual itself. The term “ritualization” was developed by Julian Huxley to
indicate “the adaptive formation or canalization of emotionally motivated behavior, under the
teleonomic pressure of natural selection” (qtd. in Bell 73) – therefore, behavior is ritualized to
distinguish it from everyday activities, set it apart as more special, and privilege it as more
“sacred” or “serious” than the everyday “profane.”

Ritual symbols, similarly, work in the same symbolic way as ritual, condensing multiple
meanings, encouraging belief, and promoting social cohesion. In this way, they are often (but
not necessarily) conservative in nature, encouraging adherents to follow the historically
established or socially accepted ways of doing or believing. “For the religious – and that
includes those under the sway of patriotism or nationalism – condensed symbols explode with
meaning when released in the ritual situation. Ordinary objects like flags, uniforms, crosses, and
vestments expand to fill their situations with meaning” (Rothenbuhler 17). Quoting Robert A.
Nisbet, Victor Turner analyzed such symbols by comparing them to metaphor:

“Metaphor is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the
unknown[…]. It is a way of cognition in which the identifying qualities of one
thing are transferred in an instantaneous, almost unconscious, flash of insight to
some other thing that is, by remoteness or complexity, unknown to us[…].”

Metaphor is, in fact, metamorphic, transformative. “Metaphor is our means of
effecting instantaneous fusion of two separated realms of experience into one
illuminating, iconic, encapsulating image.” (25)

Like ritual, which links acts and belief through participation, ritual symbols work interactively to
create meaning by connecting two different thoughts within a single image or phrase.
Because ritual requires action, much theoretical discourse has distinguished it from belief and myth by invoking (and reaffirming) the mind/body dichotomy: beliefs are held in the mind as what is *thought*; rituals are the resultant actions, what is *done*. Because what is *done* can denigrate into that which is *done thoughtlessly* (as mere habit, routine, or mimicry), and because, since Descartes, the mind has been privileged over the body, ritual is too often given secondary place in the dichotomy.

Ritual, however, is more than action. Besides being an object for cultural study, it has also functioned as a method of analysis, and a way of linking action and thought. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim explained that ritual is a means of conditioning behavior and affirming collective beliefs – so that it connects, or functions between, “the collective representations of social life (as a type of mental or metamental category) and individual experience and behavior (as a category of activity)” (Bell 19-20). This is an important but taken-for-granted pattern within the study of ritual: ritual is seen as a “discrete object of analysis by means of various dichotomies that are loosely analogous to thought and action; then ritual is subsequently elaborated as the very means by which these two dichotomous categories, neither of which could exist without the other, are reintegrated” (Bell 21). As ritual acts perform and enact beliefs, they give physical expression to thought; at the same time, the ritual nature of the behavior actually integrates the concepts and the actions. Bell explicates this on yet another level by considering the observer: ritual performers are involved, explicitly, in action; anyone observing the ritual from the outside, instead of acting, thinks about the ritual’s meaning. “Most simply, we might say, ritual is to the symbols it dramatizes as action is to thought; on a second level, ritual integrates thought and action; and on a third level, a focus on ritual performances integrates *our* thought and *their* action” (Bell 32). Within this study of *Dancing at Lughnasa*,
therefore, ritual and dance are both what is being studied and how the play is being considered, and rituals connect the characters’ actions and beliefs in ways that are explicitly observable for the audience.

For this study, then, ritual can be understood to include physical or active behavior that enacts social, communal, or religious beliefs. Working in a standardized and symbolic way, it communicates and enforces these sacred / serious ideas, effects results, and allows for a liminal space between roles and systems.

Within Dancing at Lughnasa, dance is the primary example of physical, ritualized communication. In her introduction to Corporealities, which “approach[es] physicality as a site of meaning-making,” Susan Leigh Foster suggests that

   bodies always gesture towards other fields of meaning, but at the same time
   instantiate both physical mobility and articulability. Bodies do not only pass
   meaning along, or pass it along in their uniquely responsive way. They develop
   choreographies of signs through which they discourse: they run (or lurch, or
   bound, or feint, or meander…) from premise to conclusion; they turn (or pivot, or
   twist…) through the process of reasoning; they confer with (or rub up against, or
   bump into…) one another in narrating their own physical fate. (xi)

That is, like ritual, bodily communication such as dance communicates indirectly, through signs and “choreographies” of its own. Because of this, it is especially suited to speak to “those aspects of culture which are … ‘unsayable’ […] and] to move – to dance – beyond an imposed boundary” (Morrison 173). As it does so, the ritual of dancing, “as a representational practice that explores rigorously strategies for developing bodily signification, [and] as a cultural endeavor through which cultural change is both registered and accomplished, provides a rich
resource for any study of embodiment” (Foster xiii). Such embodiment, as in Lughnasa’s dances and rituals, “reminds us of the concrete, the here-and-now presence of people to one another, and the full complement of senses and feelings through which they communicate with one another” (Strathern 2). In Lughnasa, as in ritual itself, language alone is inadequate for communication; the body, the physical enactment of belief and feeling, is required.

Within this discussion of ritual, it will be useful to describe the cultural dance-rituals which are described in the play – the Irish celebration of Lughnasa and Father Jack’s Ryangan dances. Although these rituals are, in some ways, invented by the playwright, they also find their basis in historical fact, and therefore both origins need to be considered.

The Festival of Lughnasa celebrates the ancient Celtic holiday of Lughnasa, one of the four quarterdays in the Celtic calendar. It has been celebrated since ancient times as a time to celebrate the end of summer and remind or encourage the crops to grow. The Celtic religion was cyclical, earth-based, and matriarchal; great emphasis was placed on encouraging and celebrating the life cycles of the earth (from planting to harvest) and humans (from birth to death). Marking the transition from one season to another, the quarterdays were Samhain (November 1), Imbolc (February 1), Bealtaine (May 1), and Lughnasa (August 1). These holidays begin each of the four seasons and “bisect the quarter periods set by the solstices and equinoxes, so that … Lughnasa [is] half-way between the summer solstice and the autumn equinox” (Ó Duinn 231).

The Lughnasa festival had its mythological origins in Lugh Lámhfhada, the generous god of light. According to legend, Lugh successfully led the Tuatha Dé Dannann, the gods or spirits of light and prosperity, against “Balar of the Evil Eye,” the stingy, destructive god, and his “malevolent sea-pirates, the Fomhóraigh,” who were causing devastation to the crops (Ó Duinn 302). After the battle, Lugh was declared king, and married Baoi, the goddess of fertility. “The
ritual marriage of god and goddess takes place at Samhain and nine months later, at Lughnasa, a child is born to them – their child is the new corn harvest” (Ó Duinn 305). The annual festival, traditionally believed to be instated by Lugh Láimhfhada himself, was thus the celebration of health, fertility, and plenty over hunger and decay, and of light over darkness.

Hundreds of years ago, the Festival of Lughnasa was celebrated at “about 200 sites throughout the country,” on high points overlooking the fields, at sacred wells, and on the lake and ocean shores; in County Donegal, where Lughnasa is set, Beltany Hill was the province’s official site, but participants met at several other hills and mountains as well (Ó Duinn 306). Traditionally, the celebration included climbing the hill, feasting, music, dancing, games, bonfires, and match-making. One of the most significant elements “of the Rite of Lughnasa was the offering of a sheaf of the newly ripened corn on the Lughnasa hill. It could be placed on the site or buried in the ground. In any case, it resembles the act in which the nurse places the newly born child in the arms of the father” (Ó Duinn 305). In this way, the earth was honored as the source of the crops, and the people recognized nature’s power to allow them a healthy harvest or bring floods or blight.

Similar festivals and folk rituals, which lasted for days or weeks, were held at each of the quarterdays to celebrate the life cycle of birth and death, planting and harvest, and the desire to connect to nature. “The quarterly festivals can be traced back at least to early Christian times, and probably further into the prehistoric period. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the life-cycle drama itself must go as far back as the occasions upon which it was performed” (Gailey 69). Like other ancient pagan rituals worldwide, Celtic festivals sought good luck and fertility from the gods through feasting, singing, dancing, and costumes related to plants and animals.
These festivities were marked by the performance of folk rituals, and from these roots sprung wider forms of Celtic folk drama.¹

Each of the quarterdays was celebrated with processional dramas to mark the arrival of the new season. February 1, *Imbolc*, celebrated the onset of spring; although, with the spread of Christianity, the day was later connected the festival to St. Brigid’s day, it has pre-Christian origins.² The eve of *Imbolc* was marked with a “processional, luck-bearing ceremony” performed by “biddy-boys” or *brideogai* (Gailey 85). The biddy-boys (which, unlike all other traditional revelers, could include women) sang or danced at a succession of houses, often collecting money at each for a community dance. They carried a *brideog*, a doll, straw body, or turnip dressed in white baby clothes or a local girl’s dress, and costumed themselves with ribbons and straw. Without parallel in Britain, St. Brigid’s day was a “peculiarly Irish festival” (Gailey 86).

*Mayday* (*Bealtaine*) was the next quarterday. Various areas celebrated with fertility dances, processions including a clown and musicians, or a mock king and queen (as described in 18th and 19th century accounts). County Wexford May Mummers enacted a combat drama including a costumed, masked fool, his wife, and her lover, leading to reconciliation. This drama, accompanied by bagpipers and fiddlers, was performed throughout the countryside to collect contributions (Gailey 87-88).

As winter began, the eve of *Samhain* fell on Hallowe’en and was similarly celebrated with customary, luck-bringing performances. This holiday was a critical juncture in the earth’s life cycle, and as the Irish prepared for winter, they also marked human death with bonfires and festivals that would aid the dead on their journey to the afterlife. In later years, youths claimed

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¹ These ideas were previously explored in my paper “‘Critical and Dangerous’: Theatre as Cultural Nationalism in Ancient and Classical Ireland,” written in December 2004, under the supervision of Dr. Jane Barnette.
² The holiday, even later, grew into the American celebration of the onset of spring: Groundhog’s Day.
to represent Muck Olla (a sort of devilish boogey-man) and in his name demanded contributions from farmers for their year’s prosperity. They were led by a white mare, the *Lair Bhan*, who was dressed in a white sheet and emceed the event, and each boy recited one of a long string of verses.

These three quarterdays, along with midwinter, marked seasonal crises of a sort. *Lughnasa*, most commonly celebrated with fairs and dances, was a safer time, as the harvest was ready and winter not yet arrived. “By piecing together the scraps of information that the different surviving customs hold for us, a coherent picture emerges of an old, possibly pre-Christian ritual. It was a mimed representation of the human life-cycle that must originally have been enacted to promote the well-being of the community at large” (Gailey 7). This connection to the seasonal life-cycle of the earth provides for scholars “an ultimate ritual significance for the different ceremonies, [because the] original concern of the performers must have been for the well-being of their fields and folds. It was as if the mimed human life-cycle would assist nature in the unfolding of the seasons, or at least remind nature of the necessity for it” (Gailey 73). In this way, the ancient Irish developed performative rituals which celebrated and upheld their religious beliefs – honouring the earth, encouraging the life cycle, celebrating community, and dispersing luck all over the earth. Long before Brian Boru became the first king to politically unite Ireland in 1002, a national identity emerged to unite the peoples of Ireland (including Celts, Gaels, Saxons, Vikings, Scoti, and later English) with one cultural heritage. Based on legend, religion, and tradition, a sense of “Irishness” was developed and spread through folk rituals, festivals, holidays, and performances.

After Christianity was introduced to Ireland by St. Patrick in 432 A.D., this folk heritage began to adopt tenets of the new faith and follow them alongside the ancient Celtic beliefs, and
the dramatic tradition reflected this. Christmas, Easter, and Saints’ Days were incorporated into the calendar, and festivals and performances were adapted to celebrate both sets of beliefs. Just as there was little separation between the sacred and secular aspects of Celtic Ireland, there was initially no great divide between Celtic and Christian celebrations. The new ideas were introduced into existing dramatic forms when they could be adapted to promote beliefs about the life-cycle, earth, community, and luck-bearing, thus creating a culture marked by both old and new, Celtic and Christian.

Despite this initially easy integration, the English colonization of Ireland continued to be a cultural and political power struggle, with European modernity attempting (and generally succeeding) to repress its native opposition. As with most colonial movements, the invaders considered themselves more evolved and rational, and dismissed anything which did not fit into their new mode or structure. A system of binaries was introduced: native and high culture, old and new, primitive and modern. The indigenous culture became a savage Other, a primitive, “sensory, sensuous world” whose peoples were so immersed in myth and physical ritual that they surely could not co-exist with the colonizing modernity; instead, their national consciousness and cultural heritage were repressed and “demonized and thereby laid open to extinction,” to be replaced by a new and supposedly better national consciousness (Deane 357).

This struggle plays out at the heart of Dancing at Lughnasa, as the “civilized” English society (partially represented by Kate, the most fully socialized of the sisters) works to stamp out native, “pagan” barbarism. Throughout the world history of colonization, the various imperial powers have promoted the idea of a universal civilization that has the power and duty to overcome barbarity, backwardness, and savagery in highly specific national terms. Thus the British Empire produces a complicated
discourse of chivalric, gentlemanly behavior towards inferior races as an extension of and substitute for its Christianizing mission throughout the world[…]. In all cases, a version of national identity and destiny is translated into a civilizing mission for humanity at large. These rhetorics are not merely rationales for domination, they are narcissistic repetitions, part of what Derrida calls the “fundamental culpability” of writing through which the subject subordinates the world by idealizing itself. (Deane 359)

Despite this move towards imperialism, the native Irish maintained a cultural nationalism and combated the colonizers by holding fast to their religious, linguistic, and performative traditions. From the first influx of the English to the modern fight to reclaim a Gaelic heritage, the Irish have used ritual as a tool – and, at some point, a weapon – for nationalism. Although it could not abolish imperialism or its lasting effects, nationalism could

redraft for its own purposes the double narrative that was at the heart of the imperialist enterprise – the narrative of a world civilization and that of a national civilization, one enfolding the other. The Celtic version of Irish nationalism had its own world-civilization narrative, the discourse of culture as a particularly Celtic “country,” as a territory rescued from the dominance of an impoverishing modernity. (Deane 364)

As late as 1900, this ancient Celtic culture maintained itself through dramatic and ritual form, at festivals, wake games, processionals, and holiday dramas, even as it was replaced by Catholicism throughout the country. Celtic rituals celebrated the sacred and secular together, and this heritage was so firmly part of Ireland that, for hundreds of years after Christianity was
introduced into the country, ancient practices existed peacefully alongside the doctrines of the Church. Sacred and secular, ancient and new – this became the dramatic heritage of Ireland.

Although most Celtic festivals, including the other three quarterdays, were Christianized, there is no Christian holiday corresponding with Lughnasa. Perhaps its closest relative is the Anglican Harvest festival, but even that is a thanksgiving celebration which occurs at the end of harvest; Lughnasa is set at the beginning of the harvest in order to encourage and stimulate the crops. Indeed, “a remarkable feature of these Lughnasa celebrations is that so many survived into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without having been taken over by Christianity. Of course they had shed all obvious connections with pagan rite and lived on as festive outings, as annual occasions for meeting, sports, dancing, courting, and faction-fighting” (MacNeill 68). By the nineteenth century, the Lughnasa holiday was evidently celebrated on the first Sunday of August (commonly “Bilberry Sunday”) and often involved young people climbing the mountains to pick bilberries, sing and dance, play games, flirt and match-make, feast, and celebrate the end of summer. By most accounts these festivities had died out by about 1900, 1914, or the 1930s (MacNeill 142-150).

As described within Dancing at Lughnasa, this festival more closely resembles the ancient celebrations than the modern, non-religious version that was, by the play’s 1936 setting, finally dying out. The harvest dance the sisters consider attending seems to be a more organized event, a tradition within the community. Kate tells her sisters that “Everywhere you go – everyone you meet – it’s the one topic: Are you going to the harvest dance? Who are you going with? What are you wearing? This year’s going to be the biggest ever and the best ever” (Friel 19). Even as good Catholics, they enjoyed the harvest dance when they were girls, and now recognize that it is primarily for young people, although Maggie insists: “I don’t care how young
they are, how drunk and dirty and sweaty they are. I want to dance” (Friel 22). She also describes the dances that were common all over the countryside at the beginning of August during her teen years, local events and organized competitions held in each town at harvest time.

The Festival of Lughnasa, however, is a much darker, wilder event than those publicly sanctioned dances. Even more than the “dirty and sweaty” youths at the harvest dance, the Festival celebrants are, as Kate exclaims, “people from the back hills! […] Savages – that’s what they are! And what pagan practices they have are no concern of ours” (Friel 26). Rose describes to her sisters what she has heard:

It was last Sunday week, the first night of the Festival of Lughnasa; and they were doing what they do every year up there in the back hills[…]. 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[…] And this year there was an extra big crowd of boys and girls. And they were off their heads with drink[…]. They do it every Lughnasa.” (Friel 25-6)

Kate later adds that “they were doing some devilish thing with a goat – some sort of sacrifice for the Lughnasa Festival” (Friel 45). When Rose returns from her lunch with Danny Bradley three weeks later, she describes how they “went up through the back hills. He showed [her] what was left of the Lughnasa fires. A few of them are still burning away up there” (Friel 71). Through these descriptions, Friel draws upon an understanding of the ancient celebrations to create an atmosphere of uncivilized revelry.

The Festival of Lughnasa, then, was a sacred-and-secular celebration based in an ancient pagan belief which made no distinction between the two; it is paralleled, of course, by the dances described and symbolically reenacted by Father Jack. Jack, the sisters’ older brother, had been
sent as a Catholic missionary to Uganda some twenty years ago; his mission outpost was stationed in a leper colony “in a remote village called Ryanga in Uganda” (Friel 10). Just as Ballybeg, as a fictional town (based on the real Glenties) set within County Donegal, is able to represent Donegal and, indeed, all of Ireland, Jack’s Ryanga seems to be a generalization of much of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the villages of Uganda. During his time there, Jack lost much of his Catholicism and even his Irishness, and became a part of the local community, serving as a spiritual leader over native African celebrations. Because he provides a detailed description of the rituals and festivals of the Ryangan people, it will be helpful to quote from the play at length:

JACK. We gather in the common in the middle of the village. If it’s an important ceremony, you would have up to three or four hundred people.

KATE. All gathered together for Mass?

JACK. Maybe. Or maybe to offer sacrifice to Obi, our Great Goddess of the Earth, so that the crops will flourish. Or maybe to get in touch with our departed fathers for their advice and wisdom. Or maybe to thank the spirits of our tribe if they have been good to us; or to appease them if they’re angry[…]. Now at this time of year over there – at the Ugandan harvest time – we have two very wonderful ceremonies: the Festival of the New Yam and the Festival of the Sweet Casava; and they’re both dedicated to our Great Goddess, Obi –

KATE. These aren’t Christian ceremonies, Jack, are they?

JACK. Oh, no. The Ryangans have always been faithful to their own beliefs – like these two Festivals I’m telling you about; and they are very special, really magnificent ceremonies[…]. They begin very formally, very solemnly with the
ritual sacrifice of a fowl or a goat or a calf down at the bank of the river. Then the ceremonial cutting and anointing of the first yams and the first casava; and we pass these round in huge wooden bowls. Then the incantation – a chant, really – that expresses our gratitude and that also acts as a rhythm or percussion for the ritual dance. And then, when the thanksgiving is over, the dance continues. And the interesting thing is that it grows naturally into a secular celebration; so that almost imperceptibly the religious ceremony ends and the community celebration takes over. And that part of the ceremony is a real spectacle. We light fires round the periphery of the circle; and we paint our faces with coloured powders; and we sing local songs; and we drink palm wine. And then we dance – and dance – and dance – children, men, women, most of them lepers, many of them with misshapen limbs, with missing limbs – dancing, believe it or not, for days on end! […] The Ryangans are a remarkable people: there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in their culture. (Friel 58-9)

As Jack describes them, these Ugandan rituals are a loose conglomeration of many common sub-Saharan African rites. “Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices[…]. There are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system,” but in creating “Ugandan” ceremonies, Friel highlights common elements of African ritual in order to emphasize the similarity to Lughnasa celebrations (Mbiti 1).

According to African scholars, traditional religious systems integrate all parts of life, so that religion cannot be distinguished as a separate entity, and
there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop[…]. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. (Mbiti 2-3)

Because of this unity, the individual is also completely integrated into his community, and the spiritual beliefs structure the life of the community as well as the individual. Therefore, in a traditional society, “there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence” (Mbiti 3). For the traditional Africans, as well as the ancient Celts, there is no sacred/secular dichotomy. Ritual governs all of life, reinforces beliefs, and unites the community.

Traditional African rituals include dance, music, and drumming; costuming, body-painting, and masks; animal sacrifices, offerings (usually of food), and gift-giving; and prayer to God, spirits, ancestors, and the living-dead. Ceremonies varied in formality, from elaborate rituals led by medicine men or priests, to spontaneous, everyday worship. Formal ceremonies were often held to mark individual transitions (birth, initiation into adulthood, illness, and death), seasonal changes and crises (harvest, drought, flood), and community celebrations and calamities. Within many tribes, harvest time was commonly celebrated as a time to “express joy and gratitude to God” (Mbiti 77). Some African societies
hold worship ceremonies at the harvest festivals, at which they make sacrifices or offerings and prayers to God[…]. Times of national need, such as war, raid, drought, calamity, distress or other disaster, call for turning to God in prayers, invocations, sacrifices and offerings. Examples of this are found everywhere, and generally the communities concerned have public ceremonies involving these acts of worship and sometimes lasting for several days. (Mbiti 93)

One festival, which celebrates and encourages social harmony, begins with an all-night celebration, including performances, riddles, and dances, followed by a carefully choreographed dance by masked, costumed women. It is “an intense spiritual experience: beating the drums, dancing in the costumes, receiving the blessing of the mask or responding to the music is like being charged with divine energy” (Ray 50-1). Across all tribes and individual events, it is important that “music, singing and dancing reach deep into the innermost parts of African peoples, and many things come to the surface under musical inspiration which otherwise may not be readily revealed” (Mbiti 87).

Because there is no traditional African concept of “religion” as a category separate from the rest of life, there is no word in indigenous languages to describe the idea. Instead, within such African society, worship and “religious” practices are tied into every part of life. This metaphysical understanding and interconnectedness is completely different from European ideas of “religion,” a western concept, which can be formally and fully separated from all other aspects of society. Therefore, to read African practices as religion is inherently problematic. Indeed, “the word religion is a late-comer to the scholarly discourse about Africa” (Ray xi). Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Europeans generally assumed that Africans were, in general, all the same, and categorized their supposed beliefs as animism, the belief in spirits.
This word, along with superstition, heathenism, primitive religion, paganism, and others, reflects a distinctly Western, culturally derogatory, bias: “As the Kenyan scholar and poet Okot p’Bitek emphasized years ago, ‘the concepts of “fetishism” or “animism” … were not African religions…. There is no such religion as animism in Africa.’ It was only in the late colonial period of the 1950s that scholars began to use the terms religion and philosophy to characterize African religions in a positive way” (Ray xi). Nonetheless, the older understanding of heathenism is precisely the bias that would have been held by an Irish Catholic community in 1936.

R ritual, then, is the physical embodiment of social, communal, or religious beliefs. It communicates and enforces these ideas, symbolically effects results, and allows for a liminal space between roles and systems. The overt rituals which shape Dancing at Lughnasa represent traditional beliefs (Celtic and African) which were both sacred and secular, uniting the entire person, a community, and all of life through embodied ceremony. Lughnasa also communicates through the ritualistic use of dance, which “speaks” physically and metaphorically as it, too, concretely unites people. Dance and ritual are effective, especially within the play, because they speak to (and through) deeply held beliefs and unspoken emotions. The enactment of these feelings symbolically communicates the participants’ – in this case, the characters’ – commitment to that which they consider most important, and allows them to transition between roles and through liminal spaces in order to perform their ideal selves.
CHAPTER TWO: LANGUAGE THEORY AND UNSPOKEN COMMUNICATION

“When you come to the large elements and mysteries of life, they are ineffable. 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.”

– Brian Friel (qtd. in Delaney 222)

In Dancing at Lughnasa, language alone is inadequate for communication. Both the spoken and written languages must be supplemented with a physical or corporeal “dance” that is arguably more able to express the ineffable feelings and ideas of the characters. This use of dance and embodied ritual as communication works outside the expected language boundaries of written and spoken communication, thus upsetting the (relatively) stable and normalized binaries of written/spoken and English/Irish. Through a discussion of how this communication of indeterminacy “disrupts civility” within the play, it will become apparent that much of Lughnasa works in this way. The life of the play works outside of the boundaries and binaries of “stable” systems of the documentary imperative (the pure form/absolute authority of the written play text), civility, and colonizing control. By challenging binaries such as spoken/written, English/Irish, sacred/secular, and past/present, Friel’s play shows meaning to exist in the fluctuating indeterminacy of liminal spaces.

To best understand this liminality of communication, it will be necessary to briefly examine the linguistic system of semiotics set up by Ferdinand de Saussure, as contrasted by Jacques Derrida’s post-structuralist counterargument. Dance, ritual, and silence, when considered as communication that works outside of the signified/signifier and speech/text
binaries, can then be examined as a critique of phonocentrism that, along with other disruptions of expected boundaries, works by “disrupting civility.”

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) studied the architectural structure of language. In his system of *semiotics*, language is comprised of the *signified* (the idea, concept, or object) and the *signifier* (the word) working together as a sign-system. Within Saussurean semiotics, nothing can exist outside of the system; that is, “[w]hether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system” (Saussure 120). There can be no signified that has no signifier, and no signifier without a signified; no ideas without words to signify them, and no words that are unconnected to ideas. It is only when the two are together that a sign is established. “Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (Saussure 112). For Saussure, word-signs, which are the basic building-blocks of language, do not merely express or give name to existing meanings; instead, “they are the mechanisms by which meaning is created, for in fixing abstract concepts (signifieds) to material objects (signifiers), sign systems provide the structures in which thought occurs, shaping our perceptions and experiences” (Counsell 3). For Saussure, language structure is a closed system which creates and establishes meaning. It is based in a belief that discourse functions within a pattern or structure that can be mapped. Such “analytico-referential discourse” constructs meaning, which is understood as objective truth made or understood by the human subject as the author, speaker, reader, or receiver – whoever is, at the time, accepted as the maker of truth (Hutcheon 78).

To that end, Saussure’s system works by ordering thought into dichotomies, especially signified/signifier, spoken/written, and speech/language system (in French, *parole/langue*).
“Thought, chaotic by nature, has to become ordered in the process of its decomposition” (Saussure 112). Neatly ordered binaries such as good/bad, inside/outside, and sacred/secular help to provide a society or philosophy with a sense of stability. But such a dichotomous structure can seem unrelated to the “real world,” which is naturally chaotic, unwilling to fit nicely into mutually-exclusive binaries. Within structuralism, therefore, “the individual never encountered the real world, only a version of it already mediated by sign systems” (Counsell 1).

For this reason, in the late twentieth century, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) challenged many of the ideas held by Saussure and the structuralists as being too limited, and caught within binaries that refused to acknowledge that which is left out of the system. “To study structure is to examine an abstraction. When you make an abstraction, something is left behind. That neglected something is likely to turn out to be significant in another context,” a context Derrida was intent upon revealing (Lidov 128). Derrida’s work, in its time, was revolutionary and subversive in its challenge to the entire system of the structure of modern language, logic, and thought. For him, studying structuralism provided “some clear ideas about certain types of structure” but, more importantly, “some vaguer ideas that there must be others” (Lidov 129). From these “others,” he saw all binaries as suspect and introduced the idea of the indeterminate/undecidable – that which upsets the boundaries of the binary by being, instead of either/or, both/and. Instead of trying to restructure or correct philosophy and language-structure systems, Derrida accepted the systems, but insisted on finding and playing with the places of instability within them – thus drawing out the fact that they are humanly constructed, fallible, and necessarily operating within a context. Closed systems and binaries, such as Saussure’s language structure, were challenged as incomplete because, for Derrida, something must exist outside them. Within post-structuralism, this “outsider” was “dangerous” to the very system – it
challenged the very existence of the binary. For example, in “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1969), his study of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, a conversation on the merits of speech and writing, Derrida destabilizes the argument by pointing out the indeterminacy of the terms *pharmakon* (a drug, both poison and cure) and *supplément* (both addition and replacement). Instead of refuting, confirming, or modifying Plato’s argument, Derrida “sets its undecidables into unlikely movement” (Collins 39).

Derrida chose to confront this particular argument, which argues for the priority of speech over writing, because “setting speech to rule over writing is crucial to the underpinning presuppositions of Western philosophy” (Collins 40). According to Derrida, Western philosophers of the last three thousand years have upheld and accepted *phonocentrism*. The voice is central, an immediate representation of thought; the written word is a mere representation of speech. Despite the perceived authority of the knowledge held in books – even those which record philosophy – the voice is privileged as more accurate, more immediate, more present. For Derrida, Western philosophy’s *phonocentrism* is a necessary result of its *logocentrism*, its belief in truth grounded in a foundational, central origin. Within metaphysics, this logocentrism privileges being over non-being and presence over absence; therefore, speech is closer to truth because it is closer to thought: the speaker must be both temporally and spatially present to the listener, and there seems to be no lapse in time or consciousness between thought and speech. Writing, which depends on (or, at least, allows for) the writer’s absence from the receiver, is a mere representation of speech, denigrated to the bottom half of the binary. The absence of the speaker and the delay in reception leave writing more open to ambiguity and opacity. Derrida describes how “the written marks are abandoned, cut off from the writer, yet they continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his
meaning, i.e., beyond his life itself” (qtd. in Collins 53). Within the metaphysical, logocentric philosophy that has dominated Western thought, the presence of the spoken word is privileged over the absence of the written, so that the analytico-referential discourse of Saussure and others is believed to totalize meaning within a finite system. Derrida, in response, insists that the meaning system is both constructed and unable to contain total meaning.

For Derrida, Saussure’s linguistic system is inadequate because “meaning can’t be produced only in the binding of signifier to signified. It needs the operation of difference” (Collins 66). Within semiotics, “big” means what it does, not because the word “big” has any inherent link to the size it signifies, but because it is not the words “pig” or “bag” or “bit.” This system, then, becomes a system of presence/absence: for the word to be meaningful, those other sounds, such as the /p/ in “pig,” must be absent. And yet, they are “not simply absent” – for “big” to be identifiable and distinct from other words, it “depends on [the /p/], and on all the other sounds from which it differs. Without /p/ and the others, it is lost. So the /p/ is in a way present, though not simply so. It is carried as a trace in the /b/, necessarily present in its necessary absence” (Collins 69). This trace, both-present-and-absent, is the undecidable. For Derrida, language is only meaningful insofar as it carries this difference from and trace of other elements within the system. Nothing can be fully present or fully absent; the trace is always sliding between the two. And if nothing can be fully present, then Western metaphysics loses the basis of its central meaning. Once again, binaries are destabilized.

This understanding of meaning as constructed through difference can also be seen in Lughnasa through the act of communication through silence or the wordlessness of dance and ritual. In studying the history of open discussions of sexuality, Michel Foucault notes how this discourse
was gradually stifled. But this was not a plain and simple imposition of silence. Rather, it was a new regime of discourses. Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results. Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (Foucault 27)

Within the play, silence communicates by making the receiver/audience aware of what is not being said. Part of what is being “said” within the play’s dances is, simply, that words are not enough, that some fears and emotions and ideas are too ineffable or too forbidden to be spoken aloud – so that they are both-said-and-not-said. These non-verbal moments remind the audience that communication is not purely binary, because the would-be spoken words remain as a *trace* within the silences (and this imposed silence is the trace which highlights the difference of language, when words are spoken). The destabilizing liminality of Irishness, too, is forced by the “civility” of colonization to become, in Foucault’s terms, “abusively reduced to silence[…], not a thing which stubbornly shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence
that speaks in a voice so muted and often disguised that one risks remaining deaf to it” (35). By upsetting the binaries which attempt to govern and organize Irish life into neatly English patterns, the silences, dances, rituals, absences, and liminalities in Friel’s text give “voice” to that which has been “muted,” working as the undecidable trace, silently speaking that which cannot be said in words.

Derrida’s deconstruction “seeks to identify logocentric paradigms, such as dichotomies, and show that the possibility of presence within any contextual language is in constant ‘play’ and ‘differs’ continuously in relation to something else, leaving only a ‘trace’ of the subject/object” (“Jacques Derrida” 1). To further study this, Derrida coined the term “différance.” Itself a pharmakon, a poison-and-cure, the word is both French and not-French; neither noun nor verb, neither thing nor action; and meaning both “the difference” and “to defer.” Because the word is indistinguishable from “difference” when spoken, it can be read but not heard, and emphasizes the importance of context and of the grammatical markings of written (but not spoken) language (punctuation, spaces, homonyms, etc.) – and therefore privileges writing over speech. And because the word does not actually mean anything, it lies between word and concept, between signified and signifier. Différance actively disrupts the stability of communication. It is a reminder that language is polysemic, that there are many words (signifiers) that have multiple definitions and can relate to many (signified) ideas. Such words threaten the stability of language systems and of communication itself, and “permit themselves to be massively reduced by the limits of what is called CONTEXT” (Derrida, qtd. in Collins 78). Context, which is both-inside-and-outside of text, helps to determine meaning. But for context to be fully effective, it must be understood in precisely the same way, by everyone. Because it cannot do this, it
reinforces both of Derrida’s foundational assumptions, that communication is *disorderly* and full of *undecidability*.

For Derrida, meaning can no longer be understood as Saussure’s objective, finite truth, but as a constructed perception of reality, both because context and relationship helps to determine meaning, and because communication is undecidable and disordered. Communication is no longer understood as a simple, infallible transaction between speaker/text and reader, but as a process of enunciation based in instability and context – it becomes “discourse analysis” (Hutcheon xiii). As postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon writes, “to see language as ‘*verbal responses [...] performed in response to various sets of conditions*’ […] is] to change the focus away from individual authorial expression and mimetic representation toward a consideration of shared enunciative contexts and particular […] usage” (82). For Derrida, meaning is constructed through the difference of context.

Silence and language structure in *Lughnasa*, therefore, are dangerous and subversive because they challenge the stability, civility, and boundaries of the colonizer’s system. Friel has written that *Dancing at Lughnasa* “is about the necessity for paganism.” “I think there’s a need for the pagan in life […] I don’t think of it as disrupting Christianity. I think of it as disrupting civility. If too much obeisance is offered to manners, then in some way we lose or suppress the grumbling and dangerous beast that’s underneath the ground. This denial is what causes the conflict.” (qtd. in Delaney 222, 214). In many ways, *Lughnasa* upsets the “manners” of proper, clearly bounded binaries by working through indeterminacy.

One of its most startling undecidables lies in the narrated structure of the play itself. As narrator, Michael himself disrupts boundaries by being both present and absent, both past and
present, both child and adult, both all-knowing and limited, both insider and outsider, both stuck and free. In semiotics, “The sign stands for something that is not present, thus reinforcing the absence and metaphysical hollowness that haunts all signification” (Fortier 20). In this way, Michael stands for something (his young self) that is not present, so that the absence of the child is inescapable. Yet while Michael, as narrator, is given authority an emblem of phonocentrism, his monologues and lack of active participation serve to emphasize the communicative power of the dances. The text embodies difference.

Within the play, it is possible to consider a strong written/spoken word binary. On its surface, not unlike Western philosophy, the written play privileges the written word. It is written (a paper-and-ink text). The stage directions, which remain unspoken even in performance, are lengthy and notably as poetic as the text itself. Kate is a teacher – teaching written English, out of books – at the parochial school. However, within the play, every example of the written word is a letter which brings or reflects “bad news”: that Kate will lose her job; that Agnes and Rose have left; that Gerry had a family in Wales, and had died; that Michael expects to (but, we know, will not) receive a bicycle. Yet even these letters are orally described to us, not physically present; the exception is Michael’s letter to Santa, which he abandons, unfinished. The script, in performance, becomes oral. Phonocentrism overshadows the prominence of the written text. Read in this way, the play might reflect the Irish heritage of spoken/sung performance (represented by traveling musician-performers and by W. B. Yeats’s dance-dramas) privileged over the English assumption (ironically mirrored in the Irish Literary Theatre of Yeats and Lady Grey) that literature and drama, at least post-1600, is necessarily written.

Paradoxically, however, this perceived phonocentrism fails to withstand the force of performance. The text, even more than being spoken, is enacted – and the most important, most
effective, most subversive communication functions outside of language. Language itself fails Jack. No longer fully Irish or Ryangan, yet inescapably a part of both cultures, he cannot communicate in either language. In his constant search for English words he’s forgotten, he escapes the language binary by enacting rituals and using corporeality to replace or supplement language. Marconi’s “voodoo,” the music on the radio, turns the sensible sisters into “shrieking strangers” (Friel 10). And the sisters’ dances, of course, are a corporeal enactment of emotions and fears that do not fit within the respectability of Catholicism and colonization. Gerry’s waltzes allow for a relationship with Chris that is both marriage and non-marriage – “No more words. Just dance” (Friel 44). The kitchen dance (which, despite the poetic beauty of the play’s language, is the most commonly remarked-upon and remembered moment in the play) develops characterization and a level of emotion that is rarely allowed to surface within the spoken text of the play. This dance alone refuses several binaries: neither spoken nor written word, it is the “body word,” corporeal; neither spoken nor silent, its “pulsating beat” and noisy steps “complicates the notion of ‘orality’ by embodying an intersection between sound (speech) and movement” (Morrison 174); neither fully Irish nor English, it is Irish in form and freedom from control, but maintains an element of English-imposed self-mockery; and it is both individual and communal.

Thus, phonocentrism and the written/spoken binary, both imposed by the English, are questioned. The English language, binary systems, and a structural view of language are all challenged by the neither-English-nor-Native Irish, with their both-Catholic-and-Celtic religion and their rich history of communicating in non-literary ways, through dance, music, and ritual. These people, because they have been colonized for so long, can no longer fit neatly into any category. To act as English is to be traitor; to act as Irish is to be unacceptably rebellious. To be
Irish is to be uncomfortably, but necessarily, liminal. Language and binaries are inadequate; ritual and indeterminacy must be embraced, so that, “in ritual forms, speech becomes incantation, becomes gesture, becomes dance” (Morrison 176). Irish identity and communication are defined by their difference: to celebrate Irish dance, music, or legend is meaningful in that it reinforces that the Irish are *not* English (but this not-English remains as a trace); similarly, Celtic ritual is dangerous because it is *not* fully contained within Catholicism. Similarly, the dances are meaningful because their communication is *not* made with words – their physicality emphasizes the presence of the “speakers,” but the characters’ thoughts are not present in language form. Such strong physicality and depth of communication reinforces, through difference, the absence and inadequacy of language. This instability, liminality, and difference allows for meaning outside of linguistic – or any other – binaries. Just as a finitely-structured language system cannot stand unchallenged, the controlling binaries of nationality and religion are made unstable by Friel’s play.

The Mundy family, Irish by birth and heritage, is forced by colonization to function within an English system and English language. They are, therefore, neither fully Irish nor English – and thus both Irish and English. By its very existence, “The post-colonial subject is constructively hybrid and unfinished and not tied to an imperialist ideal of unity and completeness” – instead of fitting neatly into any system, they are subversively liminal (Fortier 132). The Irish, therefore, are “dangerous” to the English because, by refusing to fully conform, they retain this indeterminacy – they are no longer either English or Native; they are both insider and outsider – through their difference, they upset the boundaries by which the English attempt to govern their society.
Similarly, their religion is both Catholic and pagan. Friel actively contrasts the controlled respectability and Catholicism within the lives of the five Mundy sisters with an underlying “paganism,” as found in the pulsing Irish dance music, ancient Celtic festival, and native Ryangan rhythms that disrupt this life, especially by their pagan refusal to acknowledge a separation of sacred and secular worlds (Friel, qtd. in Delaney 222). “English colonizers considered [dance] patterns barbaric precisely because they blurred the distinctions between ceremony and celebration” (Morrison 176). Just as ritual functions liminally by reflecting both the world as it is and as it should be, and by functioning both as play and as worship, both sacred and secular, and both individually and communally, ritual also acts within the space between worlds – uninitiation and membership, belief and action, childhood and maturity, winter and spring, drought and fertility. Unlike structuralism, ritual, with its indeterminant element, is able to accept liminal space and integrate such differences. Dance, ritual, silence, and physical communication accept that “truth” is always in flux, never stable, but necessarily constructed; “stable” systems (structuralism, Catholicism, English colonizing control, and even the expected politeness of civility), ruled by dogma, cannot allow for indeterminacy.

Friel, then, by setting up a play about indeterminacy, difference, liminality, and ritual, effectively challenges the binaries necessary for colonization. By allowing for meaning to exist within Lughnasa outside of Saussure’s ordered system and the binaries of Irish/English, sacred/secular, primitive/colonized, spoken/written, and silence/spoken word, he questions the very validity of ordered “civility” itself. Undecidable, both-and elements, such as Michael’s presence as narrator, work outside of the system to constantly remind the audience of the instability of communication and the importance of context in the creation of meaning. In this way, dance, ritual, and silence are recognized, not as moments of not-saying, but, through
difference, as different ways of saying, and as ways of communicating outside of language entirely.
CHAPTER THREE: TRACING EMBODIED COMMUNICATION

“[The body] is an instrument with which to express great truths of life.”

– Martha Graham (qtd. in Goellner 22)

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, dance, ritual, silence, and liminality work together in ways that are subversive to order. Both subtly and overtly, they disrupt “civility.” Ritual works because it allows for transition, for a crossing between disparate roles, even between what is real and what is imagined. Both-sacred-and-secular, ritual upsets order, especially within the rigidity of a system such as Catholicism. It functions through action, bodily communicating and reinforcing the emotions and beliefs of the mind. Dance, as a form of ritual, connects participants in this language of corporeality, both to each other and within themselves, connecting their thoughts and actions in a unique way. Challenging the mind/body dichotomy, it often allows the body to bypass the constraints which controlled, polite society places upon spoken and written communication, thus giving voice to the words which civility silences. This silent, embodied communication is all the more powerful because the not-said remains as a trace, an unspoken reminder of the controlling forces at work. In the same way, the structure of the play and the characters themselves question the validity of this external control by refusing to fit neatly into binaries. For example, the indeterminacy of the spoken, written, and corporeal “word” unsettles the dominance of each element; Father Jack, by being both-Catholic-and-pagan, both-Irish-and-African, brings into question what it means to be a member of these worlds. In order to explicate this silent subversion of order, throughout the remainder of this study, following a brief overview of the play itself, I will consider each example individually. The Irish and African harvest festivals, the sisters’ dance in the kitchen, Chris and Gerry’s dances, the ceremonial opening and
closing of the play, and the development of the eight characters, will be studied textually,

enlightened by the research of the previous chapters.

THE “NECESSITY FOR PAGANISM”

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel sets up this subversiveness by placing his protagonists, the Mundy sisters, both inside and outside Ballybeg. Too unorthodox to be accepted as a part of their town, they are a society on their own, of their own making. But this household, expelled from full membership because it cannot follow the “rules” of civilized, Catholic society, is just as easily upset by outsiders as is the town; it, too, becomes hegemonic and cannot maintain the status quo when its own structure is challenged. In this way, Friel doubly reinforces the idea that liminality is subversive to established society (that, in fact, Irishness cannot be contained within British hegemony) – but he encourages this challenge. His answer, perhaps, is in the idea of “paganism”: that which combines sacred and secular, allows for ritual to cross over boundaries and binaries, and functions outside of the “established norms” of hegemonic, British culture.

Friel wrote that *Dancing at Lughnasa* “is about the necessity for paganism,” which he defines, not “as disrupting Christianity […] but] as disrupting civility. If too much obeisance is offered to manners, then in some way we lose or suppress the grumbling and dangerous beast that’s underneath the ground. This denial is what causes the conflict” (Delaney 222, 214). Propriety, manners, and civility are all means of maintaining hegemony; like Catholicism, British colonization, and Kate’s carefully ordered household, they do not allow for internal conflict. Liminality subverts this control by insisting that binaries are inadequate. “Paganism,” along with the corporeal, boundary-crossing communication of dance and ritual, works outside of civility
and order. In so doing, these elements can both speak that which civility silences, and question the effectiveness, supremacy, and even the validity of the order itself.

THE STORY OF LUGHNASA

_Dancing at Lughnasa_ is a memory play. Set in 1936, it is the story of that August as Michael remembers it, as an adult, thirty years later. It is the story of the summer he was seven, the summer life changed for him forever. Through Michael’s eyes, we see his mother and aunts struggling to find hope, joy, and escape amidst the difficulties of life during Ireland’s depression.

The women are trapped – or at least controlled – by their environment, their society, their religion, and their poverty. Living on the outskirts of town, unmarried at a time when women married out of necessity, and with a child born “out of wedlock” in a place where the Church was supreme, they were indeed on the fringe of their society. Kate, the eldest at forty, is a teacher at the parochial school in town, and the only one with any real connection to the outside world. Maggie keeps the house; Agnes and Rose take in knitting. Rose is simple, and Agnes is her special caretaker. Chris, only twenty-six, is Michael’s mother, although all the women raise the boy together. They live in the family home, two miles outside the village. Michael, now an adult, narrates the story, and watches much of the action. His childhood self is present only in memory, as Michael speaks the lines of the boy but does not represent him physically.

The events of that August are memorable for Michael because of three intruders, outsiders who violently disrupt the order of his small world. First, Father Jack, the sisters’ older brother, returns home, ill and jaundiced, from some twenty-five years of missionary work in Africa. His arrival offered his sisters hope, a final chance for redemption in the eyes of the village. But _Lughnasa_ addresses the conflict between what is real and what is imagined,
between the way things are and the way they should be – and Jack’s reality cannot match the brightness of their imagination. He was remembered as “a hero and a saint” by the family he left behind, but they soon realize that “he won’t [say Mass again]. He’s changed […] completely changed. He’s not our Jack at all” (60). Sent off as a Catholic missionary to a leper colony in “a remote village called Ryanga in Uganda,” Jack was instead converted by the African peoples and won over to their beliefs (10). At first he said Mass in his church, but was soon holding ceremonies in the center of the village, leading the people in offering “sacrifice to Obi, our Great Goddess of the Earth” (58). He spoke Swahili while in Africa and, back in Ireland, finds the transition to English unexpectedly difficult. He cannot remember English words; he cannot forget Ryangan ceremonies. Ballybeg’s “own leper priest” is too African, too pagan, to be accepted back into the village’s Catholic community. Instead of welcoming him with the promised “civic reception with bands and flags and receptions” (72), the local parish priest marks Jack’s return by firing Kate from her teaching position. Jack was, in fact, sent home by his superiors; he will be dead in a year. His presence should restore wholeness to the Mundy family; instead, they are already on the fringe, and the return of the “Irish Outcast” marks them all as too subversive for full community membership. Their hopes – and their family – begin to crumble.

The family’s instability is reinforced when Gerry Evans, Michael’s father, visits for the first time in Michael’s memory. A Welsh drifter recently turned ballroom instructor and unsuccessful traveling gramophone salesman, Gerry visits twice over the summer, staying only long enough to dance with and propose to Chris, tell a few stories, fiddle with the radio, and promise Michael a bike. At the end of the summer he will leave to fight in Spain with the International Brigade; in the next years he will visit three or four more times before disappearing
altogether. In the mid-1950s, Michael will receive “a curt note from a young man of [his] own age and also called Michael Evans,” letting him know that their father died peacefully in his “family home” with his wife and children (73). Gerry’s presence in the Mundy family’s life is fleeting and ultimately apart from his “real life” in Wales, but it is as close as any of the sisters will come to a marriage, and his visits offer Chris a hope that she realizes, even then, is illusory.

August 1936 is also marked by the sisters’ new Marconi radio: “our first wireless set … well, a sort of a set; and it obsessed us” (9). Michael describes how the “sheer magic of that radio” – a radio that piped in American pop music as well as Irish tunes – led his carefully Catholic mother and aunts to dance, laugh, and scream “like excited schoolgirls,” and how its music was the background for his parents’ most intimate communication, their dancing (10). These dances, however, are not the beginning of a bright future, but the last outburst of joy and hope, passion and ecstasy. These women are spinsters, and their dance marks the Lughnasa of their lives, as well – the autumn, the last fling before the bleakness of winter. What follows for them is not a carefree, youthful festival, but the tragic, dismal breakup of the family. Within the first two pages of the play, Michael makes us aware of all this, and notes:

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. That may have been because Uncle Jack hadn’t turned out at all like the resplendent figure in my head. Or maybe because I had witnessed Marconi’s voodoo derange those kind, sensible women and transform them into shrieking strangers. Or maybe it was because during those Lughnasa weeks of
1936 we were visited on two occasions by my father, Gerry Evans, and for the first time in my life I had a chance to observe him. (10)

There is also a fourth intruder that summer: the Industrial Revolution. By fall, all home knitting will be replaced by a factory in a nearby town, and Agnes and Rose will be out of work. Ten days after the action of the play ends, the two sisters, already unhappy in Ballybeg, will leave for London, where years later they will die of exposure, homeless and alone.

With this backdrop of hopelessness carefully in place, a remembered trace which shapes our understanding of the story, the action of the play begins. It is an everyday, peaceful afternoon, and Kate returns home from school to tell her sisters that the upcoming harvest dance is all the talk of the town. Unexpectedly, Agnes suggests that they all go to the dance this year, as they did when they were young; they are nearly able to convince Kate, who finally refuses. As talk returns to groceries and cigarettes, Rose tells them what she has heard about last week’s Lughnasa festival, that a boy fell into one of the bonfires and is dying. As this line of conversation, too, is quelled by Kate, Jack wanders through the kitchen, lost, confused, and cold. Determined to believe that he will be well soon, the sisters return to their tasks until Irish dance music is heard on the radio. Defiantly, Maggie begins to dance; Rose, Agnes, and Chris join her. Finally Kate jumps up and dances too, alone, until the radio abruptly dies. Without looking at each other, the women catch their breath and begin to work again.

Only moments later, the sisters are once again thrown into confused chaos when they notice Gerry Evans coming up the lane. Nervously, Chris goes outside to talk to him, and her sisters watch, appalled, as “suddenly he takes her in his arms and dances” (42). Just as suddenly, he is gone. As if to cut the tension, Jack reappears, trying to remember the strangers who are his sisters and make them understand the value of his African ceremonies. To Kate’s great shock, he
is pleased to discover that “Michael is a love-child,” and hopes that his sisters have other children like him (51). The act ends with Jack in the garden, dancing to the rhythm he makes with two of Michael’s kite-sticks, as Michael describes his parents’ dancing.

Three weeks later, Jack’s vocabulary has improved enough for him to describe and enact his favourite Ryangan ceremonies, the harvest festivals of the New Yam and of the Sweet Casava. Gerry is back, flirting with Chris in the garden. And after picking bilberries with Agnes, Rose has disappeared to go through the back hills and out on Lough Anna with Danny Bradley, the man she is in love with, and who she believes can love her, now that his wife and children have left him. When Rose returns, Michael describes how she and Agnes will leave, ten days later, and how they will die – and, too, how Jack and Gerry will die. With only ten pages left, which will close the play with a beautiful, if distorted, picnic in the garden, Michael reminds us how hopelessly it will all end. But he does not leave us there: in his memory, dream and reality blur into an illogically enchanted reminiscence. His most vivid memory of that summer is based, not in the bleakness of facts, reality, or words, but in atmosphere and nostalgia. It is the memory of that dance, as if “the very heart of life and all its hopes” might be found in that simple, wordless ceremony. Memory, then, by being “both real and imagined,” is the final escape from factuality and control (84).

**JACK’S RYANGAN CEREMONIES**

Perhaps the most startling example of “pagan” ritual disruptively working outside of established civility is in Jack’s Ryangan ceremonies. He describes the Festival of the New Yam and the Festival of the Sweet Casava at great length. Although it is not stated explicitly, it is clear that these harvest-time festivals closely parallel Lughnasa: in both, the villagers gather to
offer sacrifices “so that the crops will flourish” and to dance, sing, drink, and light fires (58-9). These harvest celebrations, importantly, disrupt both sacred/secular and insider/outsider binaries.

Jack notes with approval that “there is no distinction between the religious and the secular” in the Ryangan culture (59). He explains that initially, the people gather for these communal ceremonies for a religious purpose. Startlingly, it is a religion (and, therefore, a culture) which he, too, has embraced, including himself by referring to Obi as “our Great Goddess” (58, emphasis mine).

JACK. We gather in the common in the middle of the village. If it’s an important ceremony, you would have up to three or four hundred people.

KATE. All gathered together for Mass?

JACK. Maybe. Or maybe to offer sacrifice to Obi, our Great Goddess of the Earth, so that the crops will flourish. Or maybe to get in touch with our departed fathers for their advice and wisdom. Or maybe to thank the spirits of our tribe if they have been good to us; or to appease them if they’re angry. I complain to Okawa that our calendar of ceremonies gets fuller every year. Now at this time of year over there – at the Ugandan harvest time – we have two very wonderful ceremonies: the Festival of the New Yam and the Festival of the Sweet Casava; and they’re both dedicated to our Great Goddess, Obi –

KATE. These aren’t Christian ceremonies, Jack, are they?

JACK. Oh, no. The Ryangans have always been faithful to their own beliefs – like these two Festivals I’m telling you about; and they are very special, really magnificent ceremonies […]. They begin very formally, very solemnly with the ritual sacrifice of a fowl or a goat or a calf down at the bank of the river. Then the
ceremonial cutting and anointing of the first yams and the first casava; and we pass these round in huge wooden bowls. Then the incantation – a chant, really – that expresses our gratitude and that also acts as a rhythm or percussion for the ritual dance. And then, when the thanksgiving is over, the dance continues. And the interesting thing is that it grows naturally into a secular celebration; so that almost imperceptibly the religious ceremony ends and the community celebration takes over. And that part of the ceremony is a real spectacle. (58-9)

The incantation is representative in that, as both an expression of gratitude and the percussion for the dance, it has both a formal, sacred purpose and is also part of the wider celebration; it is performed for both the Goddess and for the people themselves, linking them all together in dance. The solemn ritual becomes a chaotic celebration, but the two halves are not separate. Instead, Jack denotes the secular community festival as “part of the ceremony,” just as important as the sacrifice itself (59).

Jack continues his story with great relish, describing the “spectacle” of community celebration:

We light fires round the periphery of the circle; and we paint our faces with coloured powders; and we sing local songs; and we drink palm wine. And then we dance – and dance – and dance – children, men, women, most of them lepers, many of them with misshapen limbs, with missing limbs – dancing, believe it or not, for days on end! It is the most wonderful sight you have ever seen! (laughs.)

That palm wine! They dole it out in horns! You lose all sense of time…! (58-9)

These celebrations are also meaningful for Jack because they are communal, allowing all people to be intimately involved in worship. He describes how the sacred first fruits of the harvest are
passed around to everyone, so that they all can participate in the thanksgiving (59). Moreover, all the people dance together. There is room in this society and this worship for liminals, for the Irish Outcast and his band of lepers; it is not a ceremony performed by a few holy men, but by hundreds of people of all kinds. As they worship and dance and revel with the rest of the villagers, lepers – the most outcast people of all – become beautiful, become, in some way, whole, as they are made to be as important to the ceremony and the outcome of the harvest as is anyone else.

In a way, the Ryangan ceremonies exist outside of ordered, controlled “reality” entirely. Surely it is not every day that lepers are encouraged to dance in the town center, not every day that the entire community is allowed to drink and dance for days on end, to “lose all sense of time” (59). Crops must be planted, meals must be made, daily life must go on. But Jack tells us that his “calendar of ceremonies gets fuller every year,” that ceremonies are held regularly, not as an escape from reality, but very much a part of it (58). As villages come together, as outcasts are invited into the heart of life, as spirits are appeased and crops made to flourish, the ceremonies perform and allow for an ideal version of life – they act out the way things should be. With their sacred-and-secular purposes, these harvest festivals are as important for crop growth as is the planting itself, and no more detached from reality than is the harvest.

Jack ends his description of the festivals by remarking that the Ryangans are a remarkable people: there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in their culture. And of course their capacity for fun, for laughing, for practical jokes – they’ve such open hearts! In some respects they’re not unlike us. You’d love them, Maggie. You should come back with me! (58-9)
The contrast here is not between the Irish and the Ryangans, who, as Jack notes, are not so different after all. Instead, it is between those with open hearts, the jokers and laughers – the Ryangans, Jack, and Maggie – and those whose hearts are less open, such as Kate, whose Catholicism has no room for Jack’s ceremonies or for Maggie’s jokes and “pagan songs.” In fact, Kate’s response to Jack’s story (“But these aren’t Christian ceremonies” [59]) is not unlike her reactions to Maggie’s songs and dances (“If you knew your prayers as well as you know the words of those aul pagan songs!” [45]). Jack’s ceremonies upset Kate because, as they insist upon being worship outside of Catholicism, they refuse to bend to her insistence on a sacred/secular divide.

THE KITCHEN DANCE

The most unrestrained moment of corporeal communication in the play falls early in Act I, when Friel’s “grumbling and dangerous beast that’s underneath the ground” is tempted to the surface by Marconi’s voodoo, allowing the women to momentarily abandon self-controlled civility (Delaney 214). Thus, the sisters’ dance in the kitchen is an act of defiance. It is a conscious subversion of order; at the same time, it is a parody of itself. The women cannot speak their defiance to order, to the Church, or to a society that would laugh at them for dancing. They can only dance out their aggression. But at the same time, they mock themselves for doing so.

[MAGGIE’s] features become animated by a look of defiance, of aggression; a crude mask of happiness. For a few seconds she stands still, listening, absorbing the rhythm, surveying her sisters with her defiant grimace. Now she spreads her fingers [which are covered with flour], pushes her hair back from her face, pulls her hands down her cheeks and patterns her face with an instant mask. At the
same time she opens her mouth and emits a wild, raucous ‘Yaaaah!’ – and immediately begins to dance, arms, legs, hair, long bootlaces flying. And as she dances she lilts – sings – shouts and calls, ‘Come on and join me! Come on! Come on!’ For about ten seconds she dances alone – a white-faced, frantic dervish. Her sisters watch her. (30)

Maggie is the most overtly defiant. Her dance is a response to the conversations of the past eight pages or so: the sisters, excited and happy, decided to go to the harvest dance, until Kate ruled against it; Rose described the destruction of the recent Lughnasa celebration, of the Sweeney boy being burned; and Jack appeared for the first time, lost and confused, unable to remember the words he needs. Hoping to lighten this oppressive mood, Kate unintentionally upset Maggie by mentioning that she had seen Bernie O’Donnell, with whom Maggie went to dances when they were young. Bernie is now happily married, the mother of beautiful twin girls, living in London. The conversation makes Maggie think, too, of their dancing partner Brian McGuinness, a boy she was “keen on,” who also escaped Ireland by moving to Australia. In the face of all this loss and frustration, these reminders of the happiness she cannot and will never have, and of the life of singleness and poverty she cannot escape, Maggie is unable to respond with any of her normal jokes and songs. Instead, she dances, and with the flour mask, the screaming, the rhythm, the flailing, it is all crudely ritualized, foreign, and out of control. In this dance, “Friel examines the idea that, beneath the veneer of civilization, humanity still harbors much that is primitive, spiritual, superstitious, and savage. The right combination of catalysts can prompt these deep stirrings to surface, even if only momentarily” (Faherty 185). Frustrated with her inability to control her own life, she responds with a conscious lack of control. To subvert the system that is crushing her, she consciously breaks out of it. If even for a moment,
she is free from the laughter of those who think that she is too old to dance, free from the confines of Catholic control and Kate’s dominance, free from an awareness that life is falling to pieces around her. For a moment, she is purely, defiantly corporeal.

Then ROSE’s face lights up. Suddenly she flings away her knitting, leaps to her feet, shouts, grabs MAGGIE’s hand. They dance and sing – shout together; ROSE’s Wellingtons pounding out their own erratic rhythm. Now after another five seconds AGNES looks around, leaps up, joins MAGGIE and ROSE. Of all the sisters she moves most gracefully, most sensuously. Then after the same interval CHRIS, who has been folding JACK’s surplice, tosses it quickly over her head and joins in the dance. The moment she tosses the vestment over her head KATE cries out in remonstration, ‘Oh, Christina –!’ But her protest is drowned. AGNES and ROSE, CHRIS and MAGGIE, are now all doing a dance that is almost recognizable. They meet – they retreat. They form a circle and wheel round and round. But the movements seem caricatured; and the sound is too loud; and the beat is too fast; and the almost recognizable dance is made grotesque because – for example – instead of holding hands, they have their arms lightly around one another’s neck, one another’s waist. Finally KATE, who has been watching the scene with unease, with alarm, suddenly leaps to her feet, flings her head back, and emits a loud ‘Yaaaah!’ (31)

Rose is quick to dance: like Maggie, she lives in and communicates with the corporeality of her body, even if it is awkward and gauche. The two dance and sing together, in self-parody, throughout the course of the play.
Agnes, the quietest of the sisters, dances the most gracefully. Her movement is connected to her silence; she dances beautifully but rarely chooses to speak her mind (and when she does, it is startling and upsetting). It is Agnes’s idea that the sisters go to the harvest dance, and she is even willing to pay for them all to get in: “I want to dance[…]. It’s the Festival of Lughnasa. I’m only thirty-five. I want to dance” (22). Like Gerry, she communicates more freely with her body than with her words, but she cannot escape from reality in the way that he does. Gerry can live a dance-dream; Agnes’s “escape” to London proves more destructive than her life of silence. In her body, she is not a gauche, silent, spinsterly knitter, but a free, graceful, beautiful young woman.

Chris’s movements are subversive in a different way. She dances with Jack’s surplice thrown over her head, challenging, in her own way, the control of the Church. She does, after all, have a child “out of wedlock,” and for the past seven years, her entire adult life, she has lived on the outskirts of the Church, both disparaged and unaccepted. To wear Jack’s sacred, priestly garment as a costume – moreover, to join into the secular, defiant dance while wearing it – is, in effect, to defy the control of the Catholic Church. Kate speaks up in defense of the Church, “but her protest is drowned” (31). Dancing allows Chris to ignore Kate, to ignore the Church, and to ignore anyone who questions her motherhood. For a moment, she is able to exchange this oppressing control for a communication that embraces physicality.

This dancing is defiant, but at the same time the women are aware of, even uncomfortable with, their defiance. Their movement, then, is not the graceful beauty of Irish step-dancing, but a caricature. “Almost recognizable,” it is too loud, too fast, too intense, and too alarming. If this were merely a dance, it might be beautiful; instead, it is a parody of freedom, an act that is both defiant and hopeless. It alarms Kate, but it also appeals to her in
some way, to the inner desires she has so long silenced, so carefully restrained and controlled.

Finally, it breaks through her self-imposed resistance and she joins them.

*KATE dances alone, totally concentrated, totally private; a movement that is simultaneously controlled and frantic; a weave of complex steps that takes her quickly round the kitchen, past her sisters, out to the garden, round the summer seat, back to the kitchen; a pattern of action that is out of character and at the same time ominous of some deep and true emotion. Throughout the dance ROSE, AGNES, MAGGIE and CHRIS shout – call – sing to each other. KATE makes no sound.*

*With this too loud music, this pounding beat, this shouting – calling – singing, this parodic reel, there is a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being induced. The music stops abruptly in mid-phrase. But because of the noise they are making the sisters do not notice and continue dancing for a few seconds. Then KATE notices – and stops. Then AGNES. Then CHRIS and MAGGIE. Now only ROSE is dancing her graceless dance by herself. Then finally she, too, notices and stops. Silence. For some time they stand where they have stopped. There is no sound but their gasping for breath and short bursts of static from the radio. They look at each other obliquely; avoid looking at each other; half smile in embarrassment; feel and look slightly ashamed and slightly defiant. CHRIS moves first. She goes to the radio.*

CHRIS. It’s away again, that aul thing[…]. Bloody useless set, that[…]. It’s a goddamn, bloody useless set. (31-2)
The dance is “parodic” because it subverts even its own order; it mocks the control of its own form. It refuses to be a graceful dance, and it refuses to be silent. Even in his stage directions, Friel emphasizes how loud this “silent” discourse is. “The sound is too loud”; the sisters “shout – call – sing.” The meaning of the sisters’ emotions is silenced verbally, but in its notable absence it is present as a trace, and in the presence of such corporeal discourse, the spoken word is remarkably absent. The noise and physicality of this communication is a clear reminder that the spoken word is being consciously avoided. As Foucault notes, verbal “silence” is not the absence of meaning:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse […] than an element that functions alongside the things said[…]. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (Foucault 27)

In their silence, the sisters recognize the limit of their discourse, what it is they are forbidden to say. But by dancing, they find a way to both acknowledge this silencing control, and express their frustration with it. By dancing, they are able to defy that which controls them, the authority of the church and the ordered structure of society; they are able to say, with their bodies, that they refuse to be controlled, to be boxed in and restrained and pushed to the outskirts of society. But at the same time, the dance’s parodic nature admits their awareness that the dance does not,
and cannot, actually change anything. The women’s roles in life are set, and there is no real hope for change. From the embarrassment and frustration that comes when the dance is over, the audience is able to realize that what is being “said” in the moment is important and honest, but normally hidden by propriety. We discover that the sisters, aware of their hopelessness, do hope; they allow their frustrations and dreams to exist, latent, under the surface. In the noise of their dance, it is as if we can hear their silence saying, “yes, we will be ashamed in a moment – that we acted like unrestrained children, that we have such corporeal natures, that we cannot control ourselves, that we let the truth be spoken. And we will put it all away again. But it will have been spoken. By the noise of our silence, even if it is heard only by ourselves, we will have spoken. We will have shouted NO.” In dance, these women can “speak” that which civility requires them to keep silenced. They are able to acknowledge that which controls them, and yet, even for only a moment, refuse to yield to it.

THE UNSEEN “MARRIAGE”

One of the most important dances in the play, paradoxically, is not performed at all; it exists only in memory and in Michael’s words. At the close of Act I, he describes:

But [Kate] was wrong about my father. I suppose their natures were so out of tune that she would always be wrong about my father. Because he did come back in a couple of weeks as he said he would. And although my mother and he didn’t go through a conventional form of marriage, once more they danced together, witnessed by the unseen sisters. And this time it was a dance without music; just there, in ritual circles round and round that square and then down the lane and back up again; slowly, formally, with easy deliberation. My mother with her head
thrown back, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open. My father holding her just that little distance away from him so that he could regard her upturned face. No singing, no melody, no words. Only the swish and whisper of their feet across the grass.

I watched the ceremony from behind that bush. But this time they were conscious of only themselves and of their dancing. And when he went off to fight with the International Brigade, my mother grieved as any bride would grieve. But this time there was no sobbing, no lamenting, no collapse into a depression. (52-3)

This dance is his parents’ marriage. Michael calls it both “ritual” and “ceremony”; Chris is a “bride”; Michael and his aunts act as witnesses. As ritual, it escapes the control of the literal, the rational, and the expected. It does not require words, or a priest; instead, it “works by a logic of signs, meanings, and morals that is distinct from the logic of technical rationality” (Rothenbuhler 11-12). Symbolically, it marries Chris and Gerry. By remaining unspoken, it embraces the liminality and disorder of their relationship and finds a way to give it meaning and order. It reflects an ideal world, the way things could or should be: “In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined […] turn out to be the same world” (Geertz 112). In some way, as these lives are structured by ritual, the order becomes ceremonially, even actually, true; that is, “our ritually structured conduct of ourselves, on examination, turns out to be who we are” (Rothenbuhler 25).

It is meaningful for Chris, and for the observing family, because this dance expresses and silently speaks the sacred, emotionally charged truth of the moment, and because it also creates that truth, making meaning for them. This ceremony, both-marriage-and-not-marriage, makes sense of an idea that is otherwise silenced, that can be understood only in this corporeal, ceremonial way – that cannot be valued, logically understood, or even named within the binaries of Church
and polite society. It is not a “conventional form of marriage,” but the idea of “marriage” is strikingly present despite its literal absence; it is both real and imagined, both true and false, both private (too private even for the intrusion of Chris or Gerry’s own words) and public. It creates the truth of this marriage, but its silence also acknowledges that this “truth” is limited, that it holds no meaning that can be understood or recognized by the carefully structured society in which they live.

Ironically, this highly performative, silent dance is, in actuality, never performed. Literally, it exists only in the spoken and written word. It is how Michael describes his father’s second visit, but when Gerry does reappear in Act II, we never see him dance with Chris. She avoids his embrace, he spends most of the act in the sycamore tree, and he dances with Agnes. Michael describes (as if from memory) the kitchen dance which he did/does not witness, but which we do; yet he describes the dance which he did see, but which we do not. The moment thus raises questions of presence/absence and logocentrism/corporeality: it is a silent, performative dance that is not enacted at all, and not actually silent. Its body-centrism is subverted by the logocentrism of Michael’s monologue, which does the actual “performing,” yet is reaffirmed by Michael’s acknowledgement of the importance of this unspoken moment.

Chris, perhaps unlike Gerry, understands the truth-and-untruth of the moment. She seems to be aware that the presence of this “marriage ceremony” means that any “real” marriage will be forever absent. She grieves when he leaves, “as any bride would grieve,” but this time it is with sorrow and loss, not with the desperate keening of a dreamer whose hopes have been once again raised and dashed (53). She weeps when he is gone, for all that is lost, but she is finally able to understand that he is gone. By marrying him in dance, she realizes that that is the only marriage she will ever have, that Gerry is as real, but only as real, as dance.
Chris understands what is being silenced in this dance, but she also understands what is
being said. With her, we become doubly aware of the dance’s meaning (especially for her) when
a version of it is repeated in Act II: here, Gerry dances in the garden with Agnes. We know
already that Agnes is a graceful dancer, and we understand that she is, or was, in love with
Gerry. The two dance “with style and easy elegance,” as Gerry sings to her the words of
“Anything Goes” (76). In that way, and in that we actually watch it, it is different from Gerry’s
silent-but-described dance with Chris. But it is uncomfortably similar as well: Gerry says to
Agnes, “You’re a great dancer” and “You should be a professional dancer” – word for word the
same compliments he paid Chris on his first visit (77, 61). Chris, who cannot hear this, watches
him dance with and kiss her sister (we will, but have not yet, seen him kiss Chris). When the
two return to the kitchen, Gerry’s suggestion, “Now, Chrissie – you and I” is met with Chris’s
rebuff: “(Sharply) Not now[. . .]. Not now, I said. Are you thick?” (77). Gerry begins to dance
with Maggie instead, and “CHRIS suddenly turns the radio off. ‘Sick of the damned thing,’” she
exclaims (78). 1 Her next line “to AGNES, icily,” begins to reveal to Agnes the presence of the
knitting factory which will shortly leave Agnes and Rose without a job. Chris, upon seeing
Gerry dance with her sister as he did with her, is angry, hurt, and hurtful. For her, dancing is
communicative, personal, and meaningful. It carries all the weight of a spoken marriage.

It can be assumed, I argue, that the “marriage” ceremony takes place, chronologically,
immediately before the start of Act II. When Chris and Gerry next appear, she is clearly aware
of how meaningful their dancing is, and how it is able to affect her more deeply than his illogical
words can:

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1 The radio itself is a “dangerous” force, both because it pipes in American music (making it an “outsider,” as
highlighted in its Italian name) and because, as a disembodied “voice,” it encourages fully bodied, unvoiced,
unrestrained communication.
Throughout the scene he keeps trying to embrace her. She keeps avoiding him.)

GERRY. No false modesty. You know you’re a great dancer, Chrissie.

CHRIS. No, I’m not.

GERRY. You should be a professional dancer.

CHRIS. You’re talking rubbish.

GERRY. Let’s dance round the garden again.

CHRIS. We’ve done that; and down the lane and up again – without music. And that’s enough for one day. (61)

Instead of dancing, she asks him questions and “avoids his embrace” (62). Words are required, even if they are only the tall tales of Gerry’s mythology, when corporeality is too meaningful. After the “ceremony” that reminds Chris of what she cannot have, she insists upon language as an escape from the painful, heartbreaking truths of their dance.

This moment, which embraces the thoughtlessness of and distance created by conversation, is, in effect, the opposite of their first dance together. When we first see Gerry, he enters, “his step jaunty, swinging his cane, his straw hat well back on his head. He knows he is being watched. Although he is very ill at ease the smile never leaves his face. CHRIS goes out to the garden where they meet. GERRY has a Welsh accent” (36). He is, from the first moment, a dancer and an outsider, with a smile to mask his discomfort. The conversation begins awkwardly:

GERRY. How are you, Chrissie? Great to see you.

CHRIS. Hello, Gerry.

GERRY. And how have you been for the past six months?
CHRIS. Thirteen months[…].

GERRY. Wow-wow-wow-wow. Where does the time go? Thirteen months? Phew! A dozen times – two dozen times I planned a visit and then something turned up and I couldn’t get away[…]. The chappie who gave me a lift tells me Father Jack’s home.

CHRIS. Just a few weeks ago.

GERRY. All the way from Africa.

CHRIS. Yes.

GERRY. Safe and sound.

CHRIS. Yes.

GERRY. Terrific.

CHRIS. Yes.

GERRY. Lucky man.

CHRIS. Yes. (36-7)

The conversation does not become any easier for them until it turns to dancing, and the fact that Gerry had been giving dancing lessons.

GERRY. Cross the old ticker[…]. Strictly ballroom[…]. (He does a quick step and a pirouette.) Oh, that was fun while it lasted. I enjoyed that[…]. Don’t look so surprised! Everybody wants to dance. I had thousands of pupils – millions!

CHRIS. Gerry –

GERRY. Fifty-three. I’m a liar. Fifty-one. And when the good weather came, they all drifted away. Shame, really. Yes, I enjoyed that. (37-8)
Gerry’s talk of dancing, even his “pirouette,” eases the tension. It reminds them that they are comfortable together; it is a safe, neutral ground, juxtaposed between the harsh reality of Chris’s life and the dreaming unreality of Gerry’s, on which they can meet, exist, and love each other. Dance is, for the most part, outside of Chris’s Catholic life; it is Gerry’s whole world. Dancing with him, she can meet him on his own terms, and on hers – escaping from the rigidity of her life, but not giving in to the transience of his. Finally, they begin to dance together.

(He suddenly swings her round and round and dances her lightly, elegantly across the garden. As he does he sings the song to her.)

GERRY. Do you know the words?

CHRIS. I never know any words.

GERRY. Neither do I. Doesn’t matter. This is more important. (Pause.) Marry me, Chrissie. (Pause.) Are you listening to me?

CHRIS. I hear you.

GERRY. Will you marry me when I come back in two weeks?

CHRIS. I don’t think so, Gerry.

GERRY. I’m mad about you. You know I am. I’ve always been mad about you.

CHRIS. When you’re with me.

GERRY. Leave this house and come away with –

CHRIS. But you’d walk out on me again. You wouldn’t intend to but that’s what would happen because that’s your nature and you can’t help yourself.

GERRY. Not this time, Chrissie. This time it will be –

CHRIS. Don’t talk anymore; no more words. Just dance me down the lane and then you’ll leave.
GERRY. Believe me, Chrissie; this time the omens are terrific! The omens are unbelievable this time! (43-4)

Chris can be swayed in body and heart, but not in mind. She will dance with Gerry, even allow herself to love him, but she knows his words are empty. He will always make promises he cannot keep, and so his words are painful because they suggest a truth that is not there. The presence of his promises and proposals and protestations of affection are only reminders of the absence of all that he promises, and so she silences him. Gerry believes that this time will be different, because at last the omens are in their favour. Chris, however, is not free to live in a world of omens, but of order; good omens or not, she will still be responsible for Michael, and Gerry will be gone. She knows that his language is flexible, that it reflects some imagined ideal – that the omens are, quite literally, “unbelievable.” She knows that his words cannot carry meaning, but that his dancing can, and so she cuts off his empty words, mid-sentence. She allows for dance to make the promises that would be false if spoken aloud: “no more words. Just dance[...].”

KATE’S DISTRUST OF “PAGANISM”

The dance may be a “marriage” for Chris, but as silent, corporeal, ritualistic ceremony, it is entirely outside Kate’s realm of understanding. She is “so out of tune” with Gerry that she is, in many ways, his opposite (52). Kate’s world is ruled by the Church, the structure of society, logic, responsibility, and the written word. Michael introduces her as “a schoolteacher and a very proper woman,” an authority figure, one who decides what is and is not done in the house, and one supremely concerned with what is “sinful” and “pagan” versus what is “proper” (9-10). She quiets the discussion of the Lughnasa festival by insisting that “what pagan practices they
have are no concern of ours – none whatever! It’s a sorry day to hear talk like that in a Christian home, a Catholic home” (26). For Kate, anything outside of Catholicism is “pagan.” She uses the word loosely, although in keeping with the European understandings of the time regarding heathenism and primitive religions, to describe anything that does not submit to the teachings of the Church. Her logic is largely Catholic, and the highest authority in her carefully ordered world is the Pope: “[Polygamy] may be efficient and you [Jack] might be in favour of it, but I don’t think it’s what Pope Pius XI considers to be the holy sacrament of matrimony. And it might be better for you if you paid just a bit more attention to our Holy Father and a bit less to the Great Goddess … Iggie” (75). Kate uses this religion (and, subliminally, an understanding that, priest-like, she is the only one who can appropriately interpret it for the family) as a means of strict, self-righteous control. She corrects her sisters’ behaviour as “very unchristian” and holds them to her own standards: “it would be on my conscience if I didn’t tell you how strongly I disapprove[…]. I just want to clear my conscience” (35, 63-4). The most controlling of the sisters, she is their mother and their priest.

A slave to reason and order, Kate is the least corporeal, least physical of the women. She is the last to dance, and even when she does, it is alone, not with them. She admits that dancing is “absolutely beyond [her] comprehension” (41). She dislikes the radio, and is glad when Chris turns it off and stops Gerry’s dancing: “Peace, thanks be to God! D’you know what that thing has done? Killed all Christian conversation in this country” (78). For Kate, “Christian conversation” evidently requires the civility of language, as “that thing” encourages the opposite, the “pagan” conversation of dance. Subversively, it allows conversations which are normally silenced by proper, “Christian” order to be spoken in the body. Dance makes room for the “deep and true emotion” which is “ominous” for Kate (31). Because of this fear of uncontrolled
emotion, she, unlike her sisters, has no real or physical relationship with the man she fancies. Chris has a child with Gerry, Maggie has danced with Brian McGuinness, Rose runs off to the back hills with Danny Bradley, and even Agnes, who silences her love, dances with Gerry. Kate simply buys groceries from Austin Morgan. She cannot allow herself to live in her body, but only in her carefully controlled, Catholic mind. During Gerry’s first visit, she expresses her distrust:

MAGGIE. *(Quietly.)* They’re dancing.

KATE. What!

MAGGIE. They’re dancing together.

KATE. God forgive you!

MAGGIE. He has her in his arms.

KATE. He has not! The animal!

*(She flings the paper aside and joins MAGGIE at the window.)*

MAGGIE. They’re dancing round the garden, Aggie.

KATE. Oh God, what sort of fool is she?

MAGGIE. He’s a beautiful dancer, isn’t he?

KATE. He’s leading her astray again, Maggie.

MAGGIE. Look at her face – she’s easily led[…].

KATE. That’s the only thing that Evans creature could ever do well – was dance.

*(Pause.)* And look at her, the fool. For God’s sake, would you look at that fool of a woman? *(Pause.)* Her whole face alters when she’s happy, doesn’t it? *(Pause.)* They dance so well together. They’re such a beautiful couple. *(Pause.)* She’s […] beautiful[…]. (43)
For Kate, Gerry is little more than an animal. Both as a dancer and as Michael’s father, he is fully in his body (unlike Kate, who is fully in her mind) and therefore less than human. She calls him a “creature,” an “animal,” a worthless stray who must be fed and let to sleep in the barn and then sent away again. In Kate’s mind, he is neither rational nor useful, but sinful, even dangerous: “he’s leading [Chris] astray” (43). Gerry’s very presence and, especially, his dancing, upsets the order of the household. It is, for Kate, a frightening reminder of the “grumbling and dangerous beast” which lurks, despite her attempts to quell it, just below their veneer of propriety, threatening to destabilize them all (Friel, qtd. in Delaney 214). Gerry is engaged in dangerous communion with Chris, making a “fool” of her. But his dancing is beautiful, Chris is not the only one changed by it. It upsets Agnes, entrances Maggie, makes Chris happy, and, if only for a moment, melts Kate. Within seven sentences, she pauses four times, and these silences speak to how hard she is having to try to remain strict. She falls back on what she has just heard herself say: that Gerry can only dance, that Chris is a fool. But the beauty and intimacy and happiness of the dance is stronger than her control. For a moment, she can allow the dance, allow herself to be moved by the beauty and meaning of the moment. She and Maggie watch in silence, but when the dance is over and reason reasserts itself, Kate reacts angrily against her own weakness, again contrasting her righteous, superior sensibilities with the thoughtlessness of “that creature.”

Kate asserts her control because she believes in the order of the Church and society, and therefore sees it is her duty, as the eldest, to be the wage-earner and protector, surrogate mother

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Kate’s use of the word “fool” is, of course, pejorative; in the context that Friel has created, however, perhaps it is not such a bad thing. Webster’s primary definition of “fool” is “a person lacking in judgment or prudence,” but it continues to include “one with a marked propensity or fondness for something <a dancing fool>” (480). More importantly, the word also brings to mind Lear’s fool, who (not unlike Chris) understands the circumstances most clearly but is forced to exist outside of the social order, stripped of agency. Chris is aware of her “foolishness,” and as such she chooses to dance “with eyes half closed,” allowing herself to participate in both versions of reality (84).
and father. Although it is too often expressed in self-righteousness, her authority is grounded in something much deeper: in fear. She distrusts dancing and “paganism,” in large part, because she fears them. They exist outside of control, and they allow truths and emotions, properly silenced, to be revealed. Upset by Gerry’s dancing and Agnes’s outburst, she allows emotion for a moment, and says to Maggie:

    You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best you can – because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can’t be held together much longer. It’s all about to collapse[…]. (45)

Kate is desperate to maintain control – to keep the family together, yes, but also simply because she believes in “good order.” But life is chaotic, and the reality of life is that it is fragile, it cannot be controlled and maintained by even the best of order. Her fear cuts to the heart of the matter: life is marked by liminality, and does not neatly fit within the binaries of good order and control, proper society and the Church. One or the other must change. Liminals must submit to binaries, or the rigid ordering system, trying to hold them together, will crack. This disruption is described in violently destructive terms: the home will “collapse” and, as Michael tells us, will “break up” (52). It is telling that Kate describes her obligation in the second person. The truth is too deeply emotional to be accepted as her own fear; instead, she hears it as a command from another, from an authority that must be obeyed. It is also telling that her next thought is about Lughnasa; the two are more closely connected than she realizes.
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 sacrifices for the Lughnasa Festival; and Sweeney was so drunk he toppled over into the middle of the bonfire. Don’t know why that came into my head … (45)

She fears that “control is slipping away,” and the recent Lughnasa Festival is the most vivid example of a loss of control. It is drunken, disorderly, and (especially in the Sweeney boy’s case) destructive; it is pagan, secular, ritual; it frightens Kate because it disorders Catholic and societal control.

In her unchecked outburst of words, she continues:

And the doctor says he doesn’t think Father Jack’s mind is confused but that his superiors probably had no choice but send him home. Whatever he means by that, Maggie. And the parish priest did talk to me today. He said the numbers in the school are falling and that there may not be a job for me after the summer. But the numbers aren’t falling, Maggie. Why is he telling me lies? Why does he want rid of me? And why has he never come out to visit Father Jack? (She tries to laugh.) If he gives me the push, all five of us will be at home together all day long – we can spend the day dancing to Marconi. (Now she cries[...].) But what worries me most of all is Rose. If I died – if I lost my job – if this house were broken up – what would become of our Rosie? […] I must put my trust in God, Maggie, mustn’t I? He’ll look after her, won’t he? You believe that, Maggie, don’t you? […] I believe that … I do believe that…” (45-6).
Kate believes in God, and in the Church, but does not understand what she is admitting: that the Church, as an ordered institution, has no room for liminals. It has already excluded Chris and Gerry and Michael, forbidden them to be a “family,” and now it is refusing Jack and, by extension, the whole Mundy family. The priest “wants rid of” Kate because of what Jack has become: because Jack is-but-is-not a Catholic priest, and so has disgraced Catholicism by embracing the native ways of the Ryangans. The “leper priest” has become a leper himself, and he is cast out, tainted, dangerous. But despite her need for order, Kate realizes that liminals must be protected: her fear is not for herself, but for Rose. Rose may subvert Kate’s control by her very existence, but she must still be taken care of. She is a challenge to Kate’s ordered life, but she is nonetheless a full member of this family community. Rose (as with Chris and Michael) is accepted and cared for by Kate, but she is very carefully controlled, so that her difference becomes ordered, not subversive, and certainly not embraced. Kate’s strict order, unlike the institutional Church, can allow, in some way, for liminals – but only if they can be successfully forced to function within the established expectations. Without exception, Kate’s system requires order.

THE “REALITY” OF GERRY’S DANCING

In contrast to Kate, Gerry is a dancer and dreamer. He is fully physical, unrestrained and spontaneous, disengaged from the logic of the mind. Perhaps this is why he can successfully give dancing lessons, but fails to sell a single gramophone: voice and body are as disconnected in his professional life as in his interpersonal communication. It is hardly a surprise when, up in the sycamore, fixing the wireless aerial, he whimsically suggests: “Do you think I could get a job in a circus? Wow-wow-wow-wow-wow! … (Sings.) ‘He flies through the air with the greatest of ease
– ’Wheeeeeeeeee!'” (65). With Chris, he can speak honestly in dance, but his dances are more meaningful and performative than his empty words. He promises Michael a bike, but will never deliver; he proposes to Chris, but she knows he could never stay. His stories are always exaggerated, full of lucky signs and ill omens. His favourite words seem to be “unbelievable” and “wow-wow-wow-wow.” Gerry uses language not for its literal meaning, but to create mood – not unlike dance itself. In Ballybeg, with Chris, he can be who he wants to be, a heroic figure worthy of myth and omens and mysterious signs. And so he mythologizes his own life, telling stories about seeing “a cow with a single horn coming straight out of the middle of its head[…]. Wasn’t that a spot of good luck? […] Oh, yes, that must be a good omen” and a midget, “no bigger than three feet[…] Promise you!” (40, 63). Words, for him, are just a way of redefining his life, making it more interesting, more viable. Gerry creates his world in this way, and believes that it is real: twice he asks Chris, quite seriously, “Would I tell you a lie?” (40, 61). The flexibility of his language reflects the instability of his life; for him, as he sings to Agnes and Chris, “Anything Goes.”

Near the end of the play, Michael tells us:

My father sailed for Spain that Saturday. The last I saw of him was dancing down the lane in imitation of Fred Astaire, swinging his walking stick[…]. When he got to the main road he stopped and turned back and with both hands blew a dozen theatrical kisses back to Mother and me.

He was wounded in Barcelona – he fell off his motor-bike – so that for the rest of his life he walked with a limp. The limp wasn’t disabling but it put an end to his dancing days; and that really distressed him. Even the role of maimed veteran, which he loved, could never compensate for that. (73)
Gerry is a dancer above all; for him, dancing is more real than reality. Michael describes him in the language of performance: “Fred Astaire,” “theatrical kisses,” playing a “role.” Gerry is as embodied and ephemeral as theatre; he is dangerously subversive to order because he does not recognize the difference between reality and performance. His life does not fit into binaries; instead, he is eternally in that ritual space in which the ideal, the performed and enacted, becomes real. Yet there is a reality beyond this, and all the performative reality of dance cannot change it. Gerry dies in his “family home” in Wales, nursed by “his wife and three grown children” who were almost certainly in existence even as Gerry was again proposing to Chris in the garden (73). We do not know the details of the timeline, only that Gerry is not a man of reason, and that his dream-life in Ballybeg was in some way an escape from the “reality” of his ordered life in Wales (and the British Empire), an escape in which he could remake and idealize himself through dance and myth. Gerry is a wanderer, a drifter; a few weeks here, a few months here, he lives for life itself and never works too hard. He goes to Spain to fight with the International Brigade because “it’s somewhere to go – isn’t it?” (62). Not tied or subservient to the Church, or to the ordered expectations of society, he loves freely, comes and goes unexpectedly, sells gramophones and gives dancing lessons instead of holding down a permanent job, and goes off to war on a whim. Kate cannot comprehend how it is that “that creature has no sense of ordinary duty. Does he ever wonder how she clothes and feeds Michael?” (44). Kate lives by the order and responsibility of the Church; Gerry’s life is a dance, beautiful, corporeal, unpredictable, a ritual ideal. He exists outside of reality.

It is important to recognize, however, that Friel is not suggesting that his characters, or Ireland itself, should seek or attempt a life separated from reality. Indeed, Gerry, Jack, and Rose “allow themselves to live life in accordance to their urges,” yet end tragically (Faherty 197).
Michael describes how all three die, ill-suited to their own lives and ultimately unable to transition between their imagined and actual selves. In the end, the “liberating alternatives, as symbolized by Rose, Jack, and Gerry, are shown to be every bit as problematic as is Kate’s world of constraints” (Faherty 202). The two extremes, the (wayward, even irresponsible) Celtic spirit and the condemning, controlling order of colonizing Catholicism, are too much of a binary to be stable. Neither can be in unquestioned control, and the characters who are at one extreme or the other are all on shaky ground.

AGNES’S DANGEROUS SILENCE

In many ways, Agnes and Gerry are very much alike. They are the beautiful dancers, corporeally graceful and verbally awkward. He is responsible to no one, wandering around the countryside and between continents as he likes, able to support himself as he goes but needing very little besides his motorbike and a dance. Although Agnes recognizes her responsibility as Rose’s “special protector,” she too dreams of being free, of living anywhere but Ballybeg, of escaping responsibility and family and Kate’s church. Finally out of work, Agnes and Rose will similarly attempt escape and run off to London. However, while Gerry’s vibrant irresponsibility may be frowned upon, it does not actually limit him within society; it is far harder for the two Irish spinsters to find work in the impersonal chaos of the city. Gerry, as Kate’s opposite, is what Agnes dreams of, but cannot be. And so he speaks freely, although this rarely reveals much truth. Agnes, instead, stays carefully silent.

When Gerry first appears at the end of the lane, the house is turned into chaos, confusion, and hectic activity – but “AGNES picks up her knitting and works with excessive concentration” (34). In the midst of this noise, she mutes herself, but her silence is a trace, a “way of saying” all
that she does not say. Kate tells her to help tidy the room but “AGNES does not hear her, so apparently engrossed is she in her knitting” (34). She does not speak at all until Rose decides that “there’s nobody coming at all,” at which there is “Silence. Then AGNES puts down her knitting, rushes to the window, pushes ROSE aside and looks out.” (34-5). As Gerry approaches, “AGNES sits beside the radio and knits with total concentration” (35). She stays there, furiously keeping herself occupied, while her sisters watch Chris and Gerry from the window. Maggie suggests that she join them; “Not just now,” and then “I’m busy! For God’s sake can’t you see I’m busy!” (40, 43). The “truth” of Agnes’s silence – that which is not being said – is hinted at and then explodes from her:

   KATE. They’re away. Dancing[…]. We probably won’t see Mr. Evans for another year – until the humor suddenly takes him again.

   AGNES. He has a Christian name.

   KATE. And in the meantime it’s Christina’s heart that gets crushed again. That’s what I mind. But what really infuriates me is that the creature has no sense of ordinary duty. Does he ever wonder how she clothes and feeds Michael? Does he ask her? Does he care?

   (AGNES rises and goes to the back door.)

   AGNES. Going out to get my head cleared. Bit of a headache all day –

   KATE. Seems to me the beasts of the field have more concern for their young than that creature has.

   AGNES. Do you ever listen to yourself, Kate? You are such a damned righteous bitch! And his name is Gerry! – Gerry! Gerry!

   (Now on the point of tears, she runs off.)
KATE. And what was that all about? […] Don’t I know his name is Gerry?
What am I calling him? – St. Patrick? […] You see, that’s what a creature like
Mr. Evans does: appears out of nowhere and suddenly poisons the atmosphere in
the whole house – God forgive him, the bastard! There! That’s what I mean!
God forgive me!

(MAGGIE […] sings listlessly, almost inaudibly.)

MAGGIE. ‘’Twas on the Isle of Capri that he found her […]’

KATE. If you knew your prayers as well as you know the words of those aul
pagan songs!... She’s right: I am a righteous bitch, amn’t I? (44-5)

Agnes’s silence, carefully controlled, is subversive, even dangerous, to the society of the family.
It hides-and-reveals the truths she is forbidden to name: that she loves Gerry, that (on some
level) she cannot stand Kate or the Church she represents and imposes, and that she is desperate
to escape. But her corporeal way of not-saying is as revealing as the words she finally flings at
Kate. The fact that she must stay silent points to the system that represses her. Agnes’s silence,
and the one line she finally speaks aloud, violently highlights (even for Kate) the fact that Kate is
self-righteous, and that such righteousness is overpowering. It reveals the irony in Kate’s words:
her inflexible control, not Gerry’s presence, is what is actually poisoning the atmosphere, and
what finally drives Agnes away. Now that she has given name to her silenced frustrations,
Agnes is able to break out from the order of the home. By speaking the forbidden, she denies the
structured society’s power over her. At that moment, she becomes an outsider to the family.
FATHER JACK, CEREMONY, AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

Father Jack is, as much as anyone else in the play, liminal. Irish-and-Ryangan, Catholic-and-pagan, he has been removed from one part of his life but is ill at ease with what remains, and so exists, tenuously, between the two worlds. Comfortable in the language of ritual and dance, he cannot fit into the controlled reality of the household to which he has returned after twenty-five years. We first see him, in the opening tableau, as he imagines himself, as he wants to be:

“wearing the uniform of a British army officer chaplain – a magnificent and immaculate uniform of dazzling white; gold epaulettes and gold buttons, tropical hat, clerical collar, military cane. He stands stiffly to attention. As the text says he is ‘resplendent,’ ‘magnificent.’ So resplendent that he looks almost comic opera” (7). Michael tells us that he had looked forward to seeing Jack as he had been in a 1917 photograph, looking like “the hero from a schoolboy’s book […] radiant and splendid in his officer’s uniform” (17). But Jack is anything but resplendent, and when he first enters, this impressive, ideal vision remains as a trace of all that, in reality, he is not.

(FATHER JACK enters by the back door. He looks frail and older than his fifty-three years. Broad-brimmed black hat. Heavy grey top coat. Woolen trousers that stop well short of his ankles. Heavy black boots. Thick woolen socks. No clerical collar. He walks – shuffles quickly – with his hands behind his back. He seems uneasy, confused. Scarcely any trace of an Irish accent.)

JACK. I beg your pardon … the wrong apartment … forgive me …

KATE. Come in and join us, Jack.

JACK. May I?

MAGGIE. You’re looking well, Jack.
JACK. Yes? I expected to enter my bedroom through that … […]. It is so strange: I don’t remember the – the architecture? the planning? – what’s the word? – the lay-out! – I don’t recollect the lay-out of this home … scarcely. That is strange, isn’t it? I thought the front door was there. (To KATE.) You walked to the village to buy stores, Agnes?

KATE. It’s Kate. And dozens of people were asking for you […].

JACK. I’m afraid I don’t remember them. I couldn’t name ten people in Ballybeg now.

CHRIS. It’ll all come back to you. Don’t worry.

JACK. You think so?

AGNES. Yes, it will.

JACK. Perhaps … I feel the climate so cold … if you’ll forgive me …

AGNES. Why don’t you lie down for a while?

JACK. I may do that … thank you … you are most kind …

(He shuffles off. Pause. A sense of unease, almost embarrassment.)

KATE. (Briskly.) It will be a slow process but he’ll be fine. Apples … butter … margarine … flour …. (26-7)

Jack is no longer Irish. He cannot speak the language, does not have an accent, and is freezing in August, even in heavy clothes. The presence of the coat and socks marks the absence of Africa. The photograph Michael remembers, and the resplendent costume of the opening tableau, are traces in our memory now as we see how frail and uneasy he has become. Language for him is limited, and a limit to how he can communicate. The sisters are embarrassed for him, by him – their uneasy silence speaks too loudly, and Kate quickly uses language as a means of covering up
what is being silently said. The ideal, fully Catholic version of Jack had been, for twenty-five years, an encouragement to the sisters and a glory for the town:

“our own leper priest,” as they called him – because Ballybeg was proud of him, the whole of Donegal was proud of him – it was only natural that our family would enjoy a small share of that fame – it gave us that little bit of status in the eyes of the parish. And it must have helped my aunts to bear the shame Mother brought on the household by having me – as it was called then – out of wedlock.

(17)

In his absence, Jack gave his sisters the status and approval they did not normally have; with his presence, he shamed them even more. Kate later admits that “ever since Father Jack came home [the parish priest] can hardly look me in the eye,” but for now, they are all still desperate, for Jack’s sake and for their own, to help him fit back into Irish society (25). They insist that all is well, that they “must remember how strange everything here must be for him after so long. And on top of that Swahili has been his language for twenty-five years; so it’s not that his mind is confused – it’s just that he has difficulty finding the English words for what he wants to say” (20). As language fails Jack, he becomes inevitably excluded from society. Now unable to speak Swahili or English, he cannot fully participate in or be accepted by either culture.

Jack continues to struggle with the language throughout the first act, even as he desperately attempts to connect his memories to the strange circumstances of his new life in Ireland.

MAGGIE. Look what [Rosie’s pet rooster] did to my arm, Jack. One of these days I’m going to wring its neck.
JACK. That’s what we do in Ryanga when we want to please the spirits – or to appease them: we kill a rooster or a young goat. It’s a very exciting exhibition – that’s not the word, is it? – demonstration? – no – show? No, no; what’s the word I’m looking for? Spectacle? That’s not it. The word to describe a sacred and mysterious…? (Slowly, deliberately.) You have a ritual killing. You offer up sacrifice. You have dancing and incantations. What is the name for that whole – for that – ? Gone. Lost it. My vocabulary has deserted me. Never mind. Doesn’t matter … I think perhaps I should put on more clothes…

(Pause.)

MAGGIE. Did you speak Swahili all the time out there, Jack?

JACK. All the time. Yes. To the people. Swahili. When Europeans call, we speak English. Or if we have a – a visitor? – a visitation! – from the district commissioner. The present commissioner knows Swahili but he won’t speak it. He’s a stubborn man. He and I fight a lot but I like him. The Irish Outcast, he calls me. He is always inviting me to spend a weekend with him in Kampala – to keep me from ‘going native,’ as he calls it. Perhaps when I go back. If you cooperate with the English they give you lots of money for churches and schools and hospitals. And he gets so angry with me because I won’t take his money[…]. When I was saying goodbye to him – he thought this was very funny! – he gave me a present of the last governor’s ceremonial hat to take home with – Ceremony! That’s the word! How could I have forgotten that? The offering, the ritual, the dancing – a ceremony! Such a simple word. What was I telling you? […]. Ceremony! I’m so glad I got that. Do you know what I found strange? Coming
back in the boat there were days when I couldn’t remember even the simplest words. Not that anybody seemed to notice. And you can always point, Margaret, can’t you?

MAGGIE. Or make signs.

JACK. Or make signs.

MAGGIE. Or dance.

KATE. What you must do is read a lot – books, papers, magazines, anything. I read every night with young Michael. It’s great for his vocabulary. (49-50)

The binary of language resists liminality and so collapses upon Jack. In Africa, he became a part of the Ryangan culture instead of the British colonizing force; unlike others, he spoke Swahili as well as English, marking his refusal to be a colonizer. Jack refused to take the English money, keep its language, or enforce its religion. Instead, he embraced ceremony, and so was seen as “going native,” an “Irish Outcast.” Maggie and Jack understand that when language fails, corporeality is enough. Kate, however, does not question the need for proper language. A schoolteacher even at home, she thinks of reading as an exercise one does for betterment, like quinine: “you’ll read the paper from front to back and then you’ll take your medicine and then you’ll go to bed. And we’ll do the same thing tomorrow and the day after and the day after that until we have you back to what you were” (51). Where Jack and Maggie could dance, embracing change, Kate can only insist upon a structured return to order.

As he struggles with language, with relearning English and finding ways to communicate within Kate’s household, Jack finds refuge in ritual.

(JACK picks up two pieces of wood, portions of the kites, and strikes them together. The sound they make pleases him. He does it again – and again – and
again. Now he begins to beat out a structured beat whose rhythm gives him
pleasure. And as MICHAEL continues his speech, JACK begins to shuffle-dance
in time to his tattoo – his body slightly bent over, his eyes on the ground, his feet
moving rhythmically. And as he dances-shuffles, he mutters – sings – makes
occasional sounds that are incomprehensible and almost inaudible. KATE comes
out to the garden and stands still, watching him. ROSE enters. Now ROSE and
MAGGIE and AGNES are all watching him – some at the front door, some
through the window. Only CHRIS has her eyes closed, her face raised, her mouth
slightly open; remembering. MICHAEL continues without stopping [and
describes his parents’ “marriage ceremony”…] KATE now goes to JACK and
gently takes the sticks from him. She places them on the ground.)

KATE. We’ll leave these where we found them, Jack. They aren’t ours. They
belong to the child[…]. Now we’ll go for our walk. (52-3)

Unable to communicate with language, Jack uses dance, rhythm, and movement to give structure
to his disorder. As Maggie reminds him, when words are inadequate, you can always dance.

As Jack enacts this in the background, reminding us of both the limits of language and
the need for corporeal communication, Michael describes the dance that defined his parents’
“marriage.” This particular dance is still some three weeks away, but it is representative of much
of Chris and Gerry’s relationship (corporeal, not linguistic; dance, not words) and in some way
Jack’s embrace of the language of the body reminds Chris of Gerry. She is described in the stage
directions in exactly the same words Michael uses in his monologue: he says that she had danced
with “her head thrown back, her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open” (52). Gerry and Jack both
live a shuffle-dance to their own tattoo, outside the expectations and control of society and of
Kate’s world. But their dancing is beautiful, and it speaks to the body that which the voice and
mind are forbidden to name. From its space outside of polite society, it is able to alter the fabric
of that society. It changes everyone, even Kate. Watching Chris and Gerry dance, she becomes
aware that they are beautiful together; watching Jack’s rhythmic shuffle, she becomes gentler,
even tender, toward him. These dances bring acceptance, even peace: dancing with Gerry, Chris
understands that it is all the marriage she will have; watching Jack dance, Kate can allow him to
be who he is, not who she wishes he would be. “Leaping around a fire and offering a little hen to
Uka or Ito or whoever is not religion as I was taught it and indeed know it,” she insists, then
acknowledges, at last, that “Jack must make his own distinctive search” (72). In dance, ritual
allows the silenced and excluded to say and be that which binaries, society, and language forbid.

Three weeks later, Jack is “sprightly and alert,” but wearing a “garish-coloured –
probably a sister’s – sweater. His dress looks now even more bizarre” (56). He reports:

I feel stronger, too. Now! Off for my last walk of the day[…]. Number four!
[…]. And when that’s done Kate won’t have to nag at me – nag? – nag? – sounds
funny – something wrong with that – nag? – that’s not a word, is it? […] Yes?
sounds a bit strange. (57)

By engaging in the daily rituals that are part of Kate’s control, the walks and reading, Jack is
being reincorporated into the society of the household, physically grounded back into Kate’s
reality. Nonetheless, even with his English vocabulary, he is still an outsider, clinging to his dual
role: it is only a page later that he describes the Ryangan harvest festivals. He can speak English
and adjust to the weather, but he cannot fully be part of the society again. He is too Ryangan to
be allowed into Irish Catholicism, and therefore dangerous to the stability of the system. He still
calls Ryanga “home,” expects to return to Africa shortly, and hopes to take Maggie with him when he goes (81). When Kate insists, he promises to say Mass soon, but it will be “a harvest ceremony,” too much like the sacred-and- secular festivals of Lughnasa or the New Yam to be decidedly, safely Catholic (60). As Kate realizes, “He’s changed[…]. Completely changed. He’s not our Jack at all. And it’s what he’s changed into that frightens me” (60). By forcing Jack to reenter her world, Kate has made him even more dangerous to her closely guarded order. At first, he could be dismissed as an outsider, unwell, confused, and not accountable to the logic of language. Now that he begins to seem like an insider, his refusal to fully conform points to the system’s instability. As his health and vocabulary improved, “he still talked passionately about his life with the lepers… And each new anecdote contained more revelations. And each new revelation startled – shocked – stunned poor Aunt Kate” (72). Both Irish and Ryangan, both insider and outsider, in both the past and the present, Jack’s return to the English language is as disturbing as it is comforting.

Although Jack adjusts to Ireland in some ways, he cannot truly return to it. For him, the past is more real than the present:

(FATHER JACK enters. He shuffles quickly across the kitchen floor, hands behind his back, eyes on the ground, as if he were intent on some engagement elsewhere. Now he becomes aware of the others.)

JACK. If anybody is looking for me, I’ll be down at the bank of the river for the rest of the …

(He trails off and looks around. Now he knows where he is. He smiles.)

I beg your pardon. My mind was…. It’s Kate.

KATE. It’s Kate.
JACK. And Agnes. And Margaret[…] And this is – ?

CHRIS. Chris – Christina.

JACK. Forgive me, Chris. You were only a baby when I went away. I remember Mother lifting you up as the train was pulling out of the station[…]. It’s like a – a picture? – a camera-picture? – a photograph! – it’s like a photograph in my mind. (48)

Jack still lives in a world that is more past than present, and rituals allow him to connect to that past. When Agnes and Rose go off to the quarry to pick bilberries, he remembers doing the same thing in his youth: “Mother and myself; every Lughnasa; the annual ritual. Of course I remember. And then she’d make the most wonderful jam[…] I must walk down to the old quarry one of these days” (57). The ritual connects Jack, and the rest of the family, to a mother and a past that are long gone. Such daily tasks are valuable because they help the family remember and reembody all that they have lost; they also connect the family members to each other, creating and reaffirming community.

Jack’s final ritual is performed just before the close of the play. The family is in the garden, setting up for a picnic. He enters through the kitchen:

(JACK is wearing a very soiled, very crumpled white uniform – a version of the uniform we saw him in at the very beginning of the play[…] The uniform is so large that it looks as if it were made for a much larger man: his hands are lost in the sleeves and the trousers trail on the ground. On his head he wears a tricorn, ceremonial hat; once white like the uniform but now grubby, the plumage broken and tatty. He carries himself in military style, his army cane under his arm.)
JACK. Gerry, my friend, where are you? […] There you are. (To all.) I put on my ceremonial clothes for the formal exchange. There was a time when it fitted me – believe it or not. Wonderful uniform, isn’t it? […] Isn’t it splendid? Well, it was splendid. Needs a bit of a clean up. Okawa’s always dressing up in it. I really must give it to him to keep[…]. Now, if I were at home, what we would do when we swap or barter is this. I place my possession on the ground – (He and GERRY enact this ritual.) Go ahead. Put it on the grass – anywhere – just at your feet. Now take three steps away from it – yes? – a symbolic distancing of yourself from what you once possessed. Good. Now turn round once – like this – yes, a complete circle – and that’s the formal rejection of what you once had – you no longer lay claim to it. Now I cross over to where you stand – right? And you come over to the position I have left. So. Excellent. The exchange is now formally and irrevocably complete. This is my straw hat. And that is your tricorn hat. Put it on. Splendid! And it suits you! (80-1)

Jack’s ritual is overtly performative: it embodies and creates the change between what was and what will be. For the sisters, the men are little more than “a pair of peacocks,” overtly corporeal, in costume, irrational, amusing, and exotic. Nonetheless, the men believe in what they are doing, and the ritual allows both to be their ideal selves: Jack, an African, a leader of ceremonies, and Gerry, a performer, a “Charlie Chaplin” (81). At the very end of the play, they reminds us that ritual and ceremony do have meaning and can effect change.
ROSE’S SELF-ASSERTION

By her very nature, Rose is the least like her sisters. Friel tells us that she is “‘simple.’ All her sisters are kind to her and protective of her. But Agnes has taken on the role of special protector” (8). Of the women, she is the most in her body: she is quick to dance, to laugh, and to cry. Our first understanding of her, before she speaks at all, is when she “suddenly and unexpectedly […] bursts into raucous song[...]. As she sings the next two lines she dances – a gauche, graceless shuffle that defies the rhythm of the song” (11-12). When Rose becomes confused by the words of her song, Maggie begins to sing to her and they dance together for a moment:

MAGGIE. I’ll tell you something, Rosie: the pair of us should be on the stage.

ROSE. The pair of us should be on the stage…! (13)

As is often the case, Maggie’s parodic dancing cheers up Rose more than anything else can. Because these two women live so fully in their bodies, unconstrained by Kate’s fear of physicality and emotion, they are free to exploit dance’s humor and its power. They recognize that the uncontrolled body is comedic, so they can laugh at themselves. By choosing to loosen civility’s restraint on their bodies and allowing for parodic corporeality, they can claim power over and even enjoy the situations that their minds might otherwise find embarrassing and even oppressive. Because of Rose’s freedom to enjoy the physical, it is not surprising that she, like Gerry, is thrilled by her own theatricality.

Rose returns to this dance when Agnes suggests that they all go to the harvest dance:

ROSE. I love you, Aggie! I love you more than chocolate biscuits!
(ROSEkissesAGNESimpetuously,flingsherarmsoverherhead,begins
singing[...]anddoesthefirststepsofanbizarreandabandoneddance.ATthis
KATEpanics.) (22)

Rose is in her body, but she is not in full control of it. She is “gauche, graceless” (11). In her
dance, she reminds Kate that she (like dance itself) is corporeal, uncontrolled, and unreasoned.
Rose lives an unpredictable “shuffle” of a life, one that does not submit to logic, order, or even
rhythm. By her very presence, she challenges the stability of Kate’s careful control.

Rose takes her uncontrolled corporeality one step further: she has a man. The household
is exclusively female – Jack and Gerry are both disruptive, and even Michael proves unstable.
But Rose is in love with a man from town.

ROSE. He wants to bring me up to the back hills next Sunday – up to Lough
Anna. His father has a boat there. And I’m thinking maybe I’ll bring a bottle of
milk with me. And I’ve enough money saved to buy a packet of chocolate
biscuits.

CHRIS. Danny Bradley is a scut, Rose.

ROSE. I never said it was Danny Bradley!

CHRIS. He’s a married man with three young children.

ROSE. And that’s just where you’re wrong, missy – so there! (To AGNES.) She
left him six months ago, Aggie, and went to England[...]. And who are you to
talk, Christina Mundy! Don’t you dare lecture me!

MAGGIE. Everybody in the town knows that Danny Bradley is –

ROSE. (To MAGGIE.) And you’re jealous, too! That’s what’s wrong with the
whole of you – you’re jealous of me! (To AGNES.) He calls me his Rosebud. He
waited for me outside the chapel gate last Christmas morning and he gave me this.

*(She opens the front of her apron. A charm and a medal are pinned to her jumper.)*

‘That’s for my Rosebud,’ he said.

AGNES. Is it a fish, Rosie?

ROSE. Isn’t it lovely? […] I wear it all the time – beside my miraculous medal.

*(Pause.)* I love him, Aggie.

AGNES. I know.

CHRIS. *(Softly.*) Bastard.

*(ROSE closes the front of her apron. She is on the point of tears. Silence. Now MAGGIE lifts her hen-bucket and using it as a dancing partner she does a very fast and very exaggerated tango across the floor as she sings in her parodic style the words from ‘The Isle of Capri.’)* (14-5)

Rose’s relationship with Danny Bradley exists “outside the chapel,” a threat to the decency of the Church. Danny is outside the bounds of civility, both-married-and-not-married, as “everybody in the town knows” – and so he reaches out to another outsider, Rose. Perhaps he is a “bastard,” preying upon Rose’s innocence; perhaps he likes Rose because he believes he can control her more than he could his wife; perhaps he is simply lonely, and knows that Rose can understand him in a way that those who are fully accepted as part of the community cannot. But despite its cause, his mere presence is a threat to the order of the household, and her sisters fear that he is a threat to Rose herself. Aware that she is the only one of the sisters to have a man interested in her, and that she is subverting the structure of the household, she interprets their concern as jealousy, a heartless attempt to control her and maintain her within their rigid spinsterhood. But
their concern is not with Rose’s disruption, but with Danny’s. Chris, above all, knows how destructive an unstable man can be. (She does not know it, of course, but if Gerry himself is not already a “married man with three young children,” he will be soon.) Upset by this perceived attack, these harsh words, Rose is “on the point of tears” until Maggie begins her song and dance. Both the sisters’ words and Maggie’s dance mean, literally, the same thing: “Rose, love, we just want [you to be happy]” (14). In words, this comes across as an attack; in dance, it is a comfort, a gentle escape from the harshness of language.

Rose can be placated by dance, but she is subversive because she cannot be fully controlled. She is aware of the expectations of her household, but she does not understand their logic, and so refuses to submit. Halfway through Act II, Rose goes bilberry-picking with Agnes but leaves early, claiming to be ill; when Agnes arrives at home, she discovers that Rose has disappeared. The sisters quickly realize that she has gone off with Danny Bradley, which throws them into fearful confusion. They are all worried about Rose, but Kate is especially desperate to regain control over the situation:

   KATE. I’ve often seen you and Rose whispering together. What plot has been hatched between Rose and Mr. Bradley?

   AGNES. No plot … please, Kate –

   KATE. You’re lying to me, Agnes! You’re withholding! I want the truth! … I want to know everything you know! Now! I want to –

   MAGGIE. That’ll do, Kate! Stop that at once! (Calmly.) She may be in the town. (67-8)

Just then Rose appears, “unaware of their anxious scrutiny [...]. She walks slowly, lethargically, toward the house [...] Her face reveals nothing – but nothing is being deliberately concealed.
She sees AGNES’s cans of fruit [... and eats] a fistful of berries [...] not dreamily, abstractedly, but calmly, naturally” (68). She evades their questions and Maggie quickly changes the conversation to talk of dinner, but Kate will not let Rose escape.

KATE. I want to know where you have been, Rose.

(ROSE stops. Pause.)

You have been gone for the entire afternoon. I want you to tell me where you’ve been[...].

ROSE. (Inaudible.) Lough Anna.

KATE. I didn’t hear what you said, Rose.

ROSE. Lough Anna.

CHRIS. Kate, just leave – [...]

KATE. Had you arranged to meet somebody there?

ROSE. I had arranged to meet Danny Bradley there, Kate. He brought me out in his father’s blue boat[...]. We had a picnic on the lake. (To AGNES.) Then the two of us went up through the back hills. He showed me what was left of the Lughnasa fires. A few of them are still burning away up there. (To KATE.) We passed young Sweeney’s house – you know, the boy who got burned, the boy you said was dying. Well, he’s on the mend, Danny says. His legs will be scarred but he’ll be all right. (To all.) It’s a very peaceful place up there. There was nobody there but Danny and me[...]. Then he walked me down as far as the workhouse gate and I came on home by myself. (To KATE.) And that’s all I’m going to tell you. (To all.) That’s all any of you are going to hear.

(She exits, her shoes in one hand, the poppy in the other. MICHAEL enters.)
KATE. What has happened to this house? Mother of God, will we ever be able to lift our heads ever again…?

(Pause.)

MICHAEL. The following night Vera McLaughlin arrived and explained to Agnes and Rose why she couldn’t buy their hand-knitted gloves any more[…]. The Industrial Revolution had finally caught up with Ballybeg. They didn’t apply, even though they had no other means of making a living, and they never discussed their situation with their sisters[…]. Perhaps the two of them just wanted … away. (70-1)

Rose is more connected to Lughnasa than any of her sisters: she is the one that tells them about what happened during the festival, and it is to the back hills and Lughnasa fires that she escapes with Danny Bradley. The back hills are a liminal place, located within the parish but not accepted by it. Kate fears them as a place full of drunken savages and uncontrolled, pagan revelers; Rose finds them “peaceful” and safe. In the back hills, amid the smoldering reminders of Lughnasa, she and Danny can escape from the criticism and control of proper society. At home, Kate can correct Rose’s “unchristian” behaviour; in town, the parishioners can gossip about Danny and his wife. In the back hills, “anything goes.” Away from the town, there is nothing to mark this couple as subversive or instable, because the location itself is defined by the absence of order.

By asserting her individuality and her authority over herself, outside of Kate’s control, Rose upsets the order of the household. Kate recognizes the disruption, but her fear is for the family’s reputation: first Chris, and then Jack, and now Rose has marked them as outcasts,
outsiders, pagans. Catholicism and propriety are rigid, with no tolerance for challengers. How much longer before they are cast out of society entirely?

Michael answers his aunt’s question. Ten days, and then the home will break up for good. Rose has actively asserted her independence; she has refused to mask, silence, or conceal the “impropriety” of her life; she has put her foot down to Kate – and so she can no longer be contained within Kate’s structure. Agnes too has finally spoken her mind to Kate, naming aloud the self-righteousness she is “forbidden to speak,” and so she can no longer submit to the order of the household. Their independence expels them.

MAGGIE’S SUBVERTION OF LANGUAGE AND BINARY CONTROL

The first character Michael introduces is his “Aunt Maggie – she was the joker of the family” (9). Maggie loves to sing and dance, “in her parodic style,” and to tell jokes; fully corporeal, she is also the smoker of the family: “Wonderful Wild Woodbine. Next best thing to a wonderful, wild man” (15, 32). However, it is reflective of her relationships with physicality and with language that, while Maggie’s dances can make Rose laugh, her jokes only bore and annoy the Boy. Maggie uses words to fill uncomfortable silences – not for the meaning of the language, but to distract from the meaning of the silence, the not-being-said. After Kate reprimands Rose for talking about Lughnasa, there is a pause, then: “All the same it would be very handy in the wintertime to have a wee house boy to feed the hens: ‘Tchook-tchook-tchook-tchook-tchook-tchook-tchook-tchookeeee …’” (26). In the same way, she speaks “quickly” after Chris tells her sisters that Gerry “sends his love to you all. His special love to you, Aggie; and a big kiss” (47). Maggie, aware of the subtext of the moment, does not allow for silence. Silence would be too painful, so she immediately changes the conversation – not to say anything
important, but to distract, with words, from meaning. Language is subverted, made to be a
meaningless escape from the truth of other “ways of saying.” Not surprisingly, Maggie admits
that she “always hated school,” and her dancing overwhelms and subverts writing when she
makes the Boy spill his ink (54). Because language is not fully meaningful for her, she can mock
the binary that controls it: “Tell me this, Jack: what’s the Swahili for ‘tchook-tchook-tchlok-
tchook-tchook’?” (76). There is no Swahili because there is no English, either; Maggie is not
speaking in words, but in noises. For her, language is an amusement, something to be played
with and used as needed. It is not, primarily, a means of communication. Corporeality is
expressive; words are inadequate. The last lines of the play, before Michael’s final monologue,
are:

MAGGIE. I’ve a riddle for you. Why is a gramophone like a parrot? 3
KATE. Maggie!
MAGGIE. Because it … because it always … because a parrot … God, I’ve
forgotten! (82)

Words fail – and the play ends.

Maggie exists between dance and language; she also exists in the space between Kate’s
and Jack’s worlds. She is like the Ryangans, Jack tells her, with “their capacity for fun, for
laughing, for practical jokes – they’ve such open hearts! […] You’d love them, Maggie” (59).
She can joke with Jack about Ryanga (“Could you guarantee a man for each of us?”) because she
is interested in his stories, and sees value in his rituals (75). When Jack tells them that “what’s

3 One solution to Maggie’s unanswered riddle is that both gramophones and parrots can “speak,” but their words
have no meaning to the speaker. Perhaps this is a suggestion that the naturally corporeal Irish can “parrot” English,
but, like parrots themselves, can communicate much more meaningfully and honestly in ways other than language –
that phonocentrism is undermined when language can be so literally meaningless, and other means of
communication so meaningful. Gramophones, parrots, and Maggie all use the spoken word for amusement or
entertainment, or out of habit, not for meaningful communication.
so efficient about that system [polygamy] is that the husband and his wives and his children make up a small commune where everybody helps everybody else and cares for them,” Maggie can recognize that, in large part, “Sure that’s what we do anyway” (75). She acknowledges the parallel to their own household, while Kate only sees the conversation as upsettingly outside of Catholicism.

But at the same time, Maggie is the “housekeeper,” and shares Kate’s sense of responsibility. Kate rules the household by Catholic domination; Maggie runs the house by making people laugh. Maggie understands her family in ways that the others do not. She seems to be the only one who knows that Agnes loves Gerry; she can keep Rose from crying, and understands that she must be protected both from Danny Bradley and from Kate; and she can talk easily with Jack. She, too, is the only one privy to Kate’s fears about Jack, Rose, and the family breaking up, and so the only one able to comfort Kate: “[KATE] slumps into a seat and covers her face with her hands. MAGGIE watches her, then goes to her. She stands behind her and holds her shoulders with her hands. KATE grasps MAGGIE’s hands in hers” (61). She can also take control when Kate becomes too upset, hysterical, or aggressive, as she does when Rose is missing.

MAGGIE. That’ll do, Kate! Stop that at once! (Calmly.) She may be in the town[...]. (To KATE.) You go to the old well and search all around there. I’m going into the town to tell the police.

KATE. You’re going to no police, Maggie[...].

MAGGIE. I’m going to the police and you’ll do what I told you to do. (68)

Kate’s order can be shattered because she does not realize how rigid it is, how much it depends on the binaries of proper society and expectations and Catholicism. Maggie, in contrast, does not
believe in binaries. She understands that life does not fit into ordered columns, and that communication exists outside of language.

This is not to say that Maggie has an idealized view of life. On the contrary, she sees life for what it is and helps it become what it should be, through rituals and dances that “are often not about what is, but what could be, might be, or ought to be” (Rothenbuhler 15). Maggie is not a dreamer. Her love life, she knows, is over. She admits that “if I had to choose between one Wild Woodbine [cigarette] and a man of – say – fifty-two – widower – plump, what would I do, Kate? I’d take fatso, wouldn’t I? God, I really am getting desperate” – but she does not bother waiting around for or dreaming of “fatso”; she relishes her cigarettes instead (74). Her sisters are all tied to false hopes: Rose is running around with a married man, while Chris is still emotionally tied to Gerry (as is Agnes). Even self-controlled Kate is embarrassingly keen on a man in town who, during the course of the summer, marries a local girl. In contrast, Maggie knows such hopes are long past; the very mention of her youth surprises and upsets her. Kate comes home from town with news that she saw Maggie’s “old pal, Bernie O’Donnell! Home from London! First time back in twenty years! […] Absolutely gorgeous. The figure of a girl of eighteen[…]. And beside her two of the most beautiful children you ever laid eyes on” (27-8). Maggie is struck nearly speechless, and then begins to describe her memory:

When I was sixteen I remember slipping out one Sunday night – it was this time of year, the beginning of August – and Bernie and I met at the gate of the workhouse and the pair of us off to a dance in Ardstraw. I was being pestered by a fellow called Tim Carlin at the time but it was really Brian McGuinness that I was – that I was keen on[…]. But of course he was crazy about Bernie. Anyhow the two boys took us on the bar of their bikes and off the four of us headed to
Ardstraw, fifteen miles each way[…]. And that’s the last time I saw Brian McGuinness[…]. And the next thing I heard he had left for Australia[…].

(MAGGIE stands motionless, staring out the window, seeing nothing.) (29-30)

It is then that she hears the radio’s music and explodes into raucous dance, enjoining her sisters to dance with her. She knows there will be no Brian McGuinness for her, no twin daughters, no elegant return from abroad. But there will be dance. Later, when Kate admits that Chris, dancing with Gerry, is “as beautiful as Bernie O’Donnell any day,” Maggie “moves slowly away from the window and sits motionless” (43). At thirty-eight, she is old now. With only her cigarettes for comfort, she allows herself a moment of quiet reflection. She accepts the loss of her youth with regret, but she does not allow it to colour the rest of her life now. Maggie does not live in the past, and these unexpected reminders are the only times she is quiet.

Maggie knows that “Lughnasa’s almost over, girls. There aren’t going to be many warm evenings left” (79). They are, indeed, at the end of their Lughnasa: summer is long gone, harvest is over, and winter is upon them. The women are only in their thirties, but the hopes and enchantment of youth are gone, and harsh reality is nearer than they expect. But instead of allowing fear or regret, Maggie takes them all outside for a picnic in the garden.

CHRIS’S “LOVE-CHILD”

Chris does not fit well among her sisters. She seems to have no place. Like Maggie, she has no income, but Maggie is the “housekeeper”; Chris is simply “Michael’s mother” (6). She is much younger than her sisters. The older four are all between thirty-two and forty; she is only twenty-six. Michael is seven, so she was probably pregnant at eighteen. Even then, she was somehow different from her sisters. Gerry is thirty-three, much closer in age to Agnes and Rose,
but young Chris won him. Now, she is still more childish, concerned with her hair and appearance, doing little around the house but ironing and helping Gerry fix the radio. Perhaps the irony is that, in a family of misfits, she is the most “normal,” and yet the most outcast. By having Michael “as it was called then – out of wedlock,” Chris brought “shame” on the whole household (17). Michael’s, and therefore Chris’s, liminality is upsetting, embarrassing, subversive; they are shameful because they disturb the propriety of the parish and the expectations of society. The family, too, subverts the sensibilities of the town by continuing to exist, by accepting Michael, and by creating a tiny society of its own in which an out-of-wedlock child is cherished and valued – and men, in general, are not. The women exist on their own, challenging the necessity of strictly defined gender roles by filling all the roles themselves. Maggie even laughs that, if a job needs done, “I’m your man” (13). But when Gerry first appears, Kate tells Chris that “you’ll send him packing – yourself and Michael are managing quite well without him – as you always have” (35). This home is a microcosm, carefully ordered in its own way, and Gerry is an outsider, unnecessary, transgressive, and disturbing. If Michael is upsetting to them at all, it is in that he is a trace of Gerry, a silently present reminder of his father’s absence and of how liminal they all are.

The “shame” of Michael’s birth, a subversion to the order of the town, is contrasted with the value he would have within Ryangan society.

JACK. […] I have still to meet your husband.

CHRIS. I’m not married.

JACK. Ah.

KATE. Michael’s father was here a while ago … Gerry Evans … Mr. Evans is a Welshman … not that that’s relevant to …
JACK. You were never married?

CHRIS. Never.

MAGGIE. We’re all in the same boat, Jack. We’re hoping that you’ll hunt about and get men for all of us.

JACK. (To CHRIS.) So Michael is a love-child?

CHRIS. I – yes – I suppose so …

JACK. He’s a fine boy[...]. You’re lucky to have him.

AGNES. We’re all lucky to have him.

JACK. In Ryanga women are eager to have love-children. The more love-children you have, the more fortunate your household is. Have you other love-children?

KATE. She certainly has not, Jack; and strange as it may seem to you, neither has Agnes nor Rose nor Maggie nor myself. No harm to Ryanga but you’re home in Donegal now and as much as we cherish love-children here they are not exactly the norm. (51)

Michael’s liminality, so upsetting to Catholic society, is embraced in Africa. Love-children and lepers alike can be full members in the Ryangan community, in its worship and celebration. By disallowing such binaries as sacred/secular and legitimate/illegitimate, such a culture makes room for outsiders in a way that Irish society and the Church does not.

MICHAEL, PRESENT-AND-ABSENT

The play begins and ends in formal tableaux.
When the play opens MICHAEL is standing downstage left in a pool of light. The rest of the stage is in darkness. Immediately MICHAEL begins speaking; slowly bring up the lights on the rest of the stage.

Around the stage and at a distance from MICHAEL the other characters stand motionless in formal tableau. MAGGIE is at the kitchen window (right). CHRIS is at the front door. KATE at extreme stage right. ROSE and GERRY sit on the garden seat. JACK stands beside ROSE. AGNES is upstage left. They hold these positions while MICHAEL talks to the audience. (9)

Their positions reflect the characters: Kate is firmly within the house, presiding supreme. Chris and Maggie can see the outside world, but cannot leave the house; on the threshold, the *limen*, Chris is able to move between the inside and outside, but still cannot escape. Rose, Gerry, and Jack are outsiders, who do not fit within the control of the household. Agnes stands opposite of Kate – she has completely separated herself, she is on her way out of the picture entirely. The final tableau is similar:

AGNES and GERRY are on the garden seat. JACK stands stiffly to attention at AGNES’s elbow. One kite, facing boldly out front, stands between GERRY and AGNES; the other between AGNES and JACK. ROSE is U.L. MAGGIE is at the kitchen window. KATE is D.R. CHRIS is at the front door. During MICHAEL’s speech KATE cries quietly. As MICHAEL begins to speak the stage is lit in a very soft, golden light so that the tableau we see is almost, but not quite, in a haze[...]. And as MICHAEL continues everybody sways very slightly from side to side – even the grinning kites. The movement is so minimal that we cannot be quite certain if it is happening or if we imagine it. (83)
Agnes and Rose have switched places: Rose has moved herself further away from the family, and Agnes joins Gerry, as they both wish they could do. Kate is still the furthest inside the house, but she has moved downstage, closer to the door she cannot block, and is crying. The household is unstable, and she can no longer stand at its center. Chris and Maggie are where they were, and where they always will be. These tableaux serve as a ceremonial way to begin and end the play. As a ritual, they work through signs, not logic or words. As the characters play the role of their ideal selves, they are allowed to be, momentarily, more truly themselves than in “real life.” In this moment of embodied metaphor, they can escape the requirements of reality and place themselves where they wish they could be.

It is fitting that this play begins and ends in silent ceremony, ritually embodying all that will be said, but the sharp divisions of the closing tableau reminds us that ritual alone is not enough. It should create the ideal, safely bridging between worlds and transitioning between exclusion and full inclusion. Instead, Michael tells us that this summer was marked by “things becoming what they ought not to be” (10). In a world that allowed for “paganism,” that allowed ritual to be truly performative, and that broke free of binary control, the end might be different. Instead, ritual and “paganism” can challenge civility and even the very validity of the controlling system, but cannot truly upset the hegemony.

During these tableaux and throughout the play, Michael describes his memories to us, but his seven-year-old self is also a character in these memories. However, no boy is present on stage.

_The convention must now be established that the [imaginary] Boy MICHAEL is working at the kite materials lying on the ground. No dialogue with the Boy_
Michael, as narrator, is both-present-and-absent, both-past-and-future, both-real-and-imagined. The Boy is absent to us, because we exist with Michael in the present; he is present to the other characters, because they are all but shadows, memories of the past. If there were a physical boy on stage, we could read the play as little more than historical realism, a simple glance into the past, quietly navigated by Michael. But it is not that; even as a memory play, things are “what they ought not to be” (10). The mirror is cracked: after Michael’s monologue, the first line of the play is Chris’s, “When are we going to get a decent mirror to see ourselves in?” (11). In Michael’s presence/absence, we are constantly reminded that there is “a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was” (10). Michael is off-stage for much of the play, so how can we be seeing into his memory if he is not there to share it with us? More disturbingly, the Boy himself is often notably absent. After they dance in the kitchen, Maggie looks out the window:

MAGGIE. Where’s Michael, Chrissie?

CHRIS. Working at those kites, isn’t he?

MAGGIE. He’s not there. He’s gone. (32)

Near the end of the play, Chris notes Michael’s absence three times: “Michael! Where are you?”; “Where’s that Michael fellow got to? Michael! He hears me rightly, you know. I’m sure he’s jouking about out there somewhere, watching us. Michael!”; “Michael! He always vanishes when there’s work to be done” (73, 80, 82). Even when he is (invisibly) present, the

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4 In the film version of Dancing at Lughnasa, this is changed: there is a boy, and the adult Michael narrates in voice-over only at the very beginning and end of the film. Because of this, we do not watch the film as a “memory play,” but as a fully-formed glimpse into the past, and much of the sense of distortion is lost.
Boy is, with one brief exception, outside in the garden. If the play is Michael’s memory, how can he remember events which he was not present to see? How much can we believe? What is actually “true”? By upsetting the binaries of presence/absence and past/present, Michael’s narration challenge the very notion of true/false. The story is both, and neither, so that “we cannot be quite certain if it is happening or if we imagine it” (83). Instead, it is memory: “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,” he finally tells us (83). And, moreover, it is dancing.

DANCING A CONCLUSION: WORDS ARE NO LONGER NECESSARY

Michael brings the play to a close by describing the way that he remembers that summer: as dancing, concluding that communication through dance and ceremony renders words (even his own words) unnecessary.

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. It drifts in from somewhere far away – a mirage of sound – a dream music that is both heard and imagined; that seems to be both itself and its own echo; a sound so alluring and so mesmeric that the afternoon is bewitched, maybe

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5 See Kramer’s “Unexcused Absence” for further exploration of the meaning of Michael’s absence. She also connects this to Michael’s (and perhaps Friel’s) guilt about leaving the family a few years later: “in the selfish way of young men I was happy to escape” (Friel 83).
haunted, by it. And what is so strange about that memory is that everybody seems to be floating on those sweet sounds, moving rhythmically, languorously, in complete isolation; responding more to the mood of the music than to its beat. When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half closed because to open them would break the spell. 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. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary … (83-4)

It is perhaps startling to be told by the narrator, at the close of a relatively “realistic” (and even semi-autobiographical) play, that the memories he has described “owe nothing to fact.” And yet that is precisely the way that memory and dance and poetry and drama and ritual all operate. Dance works through “the restless movements which define the unconscious – moments which unfix and make consciousness itself tentative and insecure” (Foster xiv). Memory is always incomplete, isolating and even disordering events, so that we (not unlike Michael) can clearly “remember” moments we have only ever heard about but to which we could not have been present. In this way, the structure of Michael’s narration “supports one of the play’s major themes: the way fiction becomes fact in human experience. Removing the physical presence of the narrator as child reinforces the idea that our past is a fiction created by our imaginations” (Lowrey Dennis, qtd. in Faherty 195). It is the same in art as in life, so that stories told in fiction, coloured by mood, may be a more honest retelling than the facts could ever be. In
creating his poetic national mythology, W. B. Yeats referred to this, the importance of created meaning within a nation’s history:

> Under all these old legends, there is, without doubt much fact, though I confess, I care but little whether there be or not. A nation’s history is not in what it does, this invader or that other; the elements or destiny decides all that; but what a nation imagines[,] that is its history, there is its heart; than its legends, a nation owns nothing more precious. (qtd. in Faherty 26)

The idea of understanding the past through the corporeality of dance can be found in other cultures as well. “For the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, history – the taking of account of the various collective conflicts and actual individual tragedies of social life – is conceived of as a kind of dancing[…] Dancing, for the Apache, is a means of achieving lucidity. It allows an apprehension of the ‘makingness’ of the present” (Foster xiv). As a maker of (individual and cultural) meaning, Michael reminds us, language is limited, and it is through the silent, hypnotic, bewitching power of ceremony and dance that “private and sacred things” can be whispered into reality. In many of Friel’s works, he “suggests that the past is both what actually happened and, also[,] how we chose to remember what actually happened[…] To move too far in the direction of what literally happened cheapens the depth and complexity of the past by suggesting that there is one, simple past” (Faherty 217). In *Lughnasa*, it is as important to allow for the fictional elements of history and memory as to recognize the truth of that fiction

> In ritual, too, “everything is simultaneously actual and illusory.” As participants ceremonially move between roles or worlds, there is a moment when they are, impossibly, what they were, and what they are, and what they will be, all at once, and yet at the same time none of these, but “momentary anomalies, stripped of their former mode of being, in preparation for
something new” (Ray 59). It is in ritual that “the world as lived” can coexist with “the world as imagined” (Geertz qtd in Bell v). Interestingly, such a description would be equally apt if applied to Gerry himself, for whom, truly, “atmosphere is more real than incident.” Gerry’s (and Maggie’s) words are used to create mood, not fact; their “truth” is far more atmospheric than literal. The instability of Gerry’s language and the meaning of his dances points, in this context, to the inability of language to “be in touch with some otherness.”

In the midst of this metaphorical dancing, of memory and mood and dream, Michael brings us back – just barely – to a literal dance. As he describes “Dancing with eyes half closed,” we are reminded of his parents’ “marriage,” of the way that Chris danced, silently and with eyes shut, willing the ceremony to work its hypnotic magic but aware that looking at all the harsh truths of the moment would “break the spell.” Outside of literal “truth,” the meaning of this and the other ceremonies cannot be said in words; they work by being understood, not known, with the participants often consciously choosing to submit to the subconscious. In this moment, Chris shut her eyes to the expectations of proper society and allowed dance to create an alternate reality, one carefully chosen as preferable to civility. “No more words,” she told Gerry, choosing to see and not-see at the same time, allowing the moment to be actual-and-illusory. “Just dance” (44). It is, perhaps, the most representative example, as it is both-true-and-not-true, both-sacred-and-secular, both-real-and-imagined. The communication of the “marriage,” as in the other rituals, exists in the body, working symbolically to transition into the ideal. Relying on difference, the ceremony upsets the binaries (such as married/not married) that would ordinarily govern existence.

It is this moment to which Michael looks back, thirty years later, and with which he defines his memories. “Language had surrendered to movement […] language no longer existed
because words were no longer necessary …” In this world of dance-memory, there are, at last, no binaries. It is, without conflict, both “actual and illusory,” “both heard and imagined,” “both itself and its own echo.” As other “ways of saying” are acknowledged as deeply meaningful, the “civility” of language itself is upset, and its very validity as truth-maker is cast into question. If dance, ritual, ceremony, and silence are able to communicate in ways that language cannot, and, moreover, able to speak the ineffable, “private and sacred things” that evade language, then the phonocentric, hegemonic culture is no longer truly in control. The ability to “speak” without words challenges the Irish need for English itself. In part, perhaps, it is an acknowledgement of the ancient Ireland whose stories are told, not on proper British pages and stages, but in the wild revelry of Celtic, pagan ritual.

Moreover, it is a reminder that the “grumbling and dangerous beast” of humankind’s most “pagan” nature, as represented by the Celtic half of Ireland’s history and culture, must be neither lost and suppressed, nor allowed to run free (Friel, qtd. in Delaney 214). Friel, at last, calls his Irish audiences to dance between their two worlds, Kate’s closely guarded, British order and Gerry’s unchecked Celtic freedom. Both are invaluable parts of Ireland’s history, culture, and identity. But the warning against binaries stands: separating them and privileging one over the other will be necessarily inadequate, either way it is structured. To be truly Irish, then, is to be both-and, to dance between boundaries.
CONCLUSION

_Dancing at Lughnasa_ is a reminder that language is important, but inadequate, for communication. By consciously locating meaning outside of words – in dances, rituals, and silence – Brian Friel challenges the way we think about communication. Instead of allowing for a (British) phonocentric binary, the play works in moments that are _neither_-spoken-nor-written, but embodied; simultaneously _said-and-not-said_. The play upsets other binaries as well: Jack’s celebrations are both-sacred-and-secular, Chris and Gerry dance what _is-but-is-not_ a marriage, Michael is both-past-and-present, and Gerry and Maggie speak meaningfully through dance but not through words. In this way, Friel sets into unsteady motion those very systems which we and, especially, the controlling forces of colonization and Catholicism, accept as most stable. The text, therefore, becomes a site of opposition to and a critique of those cultures, such as his own, which have given unchallenged authority to the assumed “primacy” of the spoken word. Through nonverbal discourse, dance, ritual, and the movement of the body are able to communicate alongside language and reveal what the voice is unable or forbidden to name. Silence, then, is not a lack of communication, but “a state of grace … the very heart of the dance of life” (Jones 188).

Dance, ritual and ceremony are an important part of Ireland’s cultural heritage. In _Dancing at Lughnasa_, they are used throughout the play as a trope through which character and conflict are developed and inexpressible thoughts, emotions, and primitive instincts are revealed. These rituals, most explicitly the celebration of the Lughnasa Festival, serve as a reminder of Ireland’s Celtic past. Friel seems to be suggesting that this Celtic heritage, with its “pagan” fusing of sacred and secular beliefs, is a vital part of Ireland’s cultural fabric, and that it must not be silenced by the colonizing and Catholic systems which seek to eliminate it. However, the
contrast between Kate and Gerry is a reminder that neither extreme – complete control or complete freedom – is acceptable, and it would be worthwhile for future researchers to consider the opposite side of the binary. Conflict comes from a denial of the “grumbling and dangerous beast,” as Friel put it, but it also comes from denial of order, as is shown in the tragic ends of the uncontrolled characters, Gerry, Jack, and Rose. It is for future scholars to study the change in Friel’s attitude toward Catholicism, from an earlier emphasis on “the repressive and dogmatic aspect of the faith” to a more mature representation of the importance of the Church’s order as well as its frustrating control (Faherty 203).

It would also be valuable to study Friel’s connection to W.B. Yeats, and the correlation between their separate endeavors to establish a national theatre and history. Like Yeats, Friel has consciously intended to create a theatre and write plays for a truly national audience, as relevant to rural audiences as to those at the Abbey, and as present in the outlying countryside as in Dublin. Both playwrights have used forms other than the European model of the realistic, well-made play, preferring elements of nonrealism and poetry to speak to the Irish people. How is Friel, in Lughnasa, creating an Irish “way to speak”? How does Michael’s conclusions about memory and the past, as shaped by “dancing with eyes half closed,” contribute to a way of understanding Irish history? As with Yeats, his explorations of the past are as influenced by how and what we remember as by what actually happened.

In this study, Michael’s understanding of his past and the meaning that was made within it have been examined primarily through ritual and dance, physical means of communication that embodied and gave shape to that which is silenced or forbidden by Catholic and colonizing order and propriety. Derrida’s language theory and idea of difference extended the idea of ritual’s
liminality and allowed for an examination of the ways that dance, silence, and character all worked in the spaces between binary extremes.

Dancing at Lughnasa, Brian Friel wrote, was written about the need for “disrupting civility” (qtd. in Delaney 214). By coupling rituals that literally disrupt the society’s order with characters who refuse neatly structured binaries, Friel is able to vividly accomplish this disruption. The exuberantly parodic dances, the narrated structure that upsets true/false distinctions, the sacred-and-secular meaning given form in moments of silence, Maggie’s use of language to avoid meaning, and the Lughnasa fires burning in the background all work to reaffirm the value of the disorderly Celtic past. Ireland, Dancing at Lughnasa asserts, cannot properly exist if it insists upon unchecked “good order” (Friel 45). Only by accepting its pagan, Celtic heritage, as well as its British order, and freeing itself to dance between these worlds, can the Irish find their way to speak.
WORKS CITED


