“But It Was Changing,” “And Now I Can’t Go Back”: Reflections of a Changing Ireland In the Work of Conor McPherson

Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the plays of Irish playwright Conor McPherson in the context of the Celtic Tiger. This study first seeks to clarify McPherson’s work by distancing it from that of Martin McDonagh and others that are a part of a genre called “In-Yer-Face Theatre” as coined by theorist Aleks Sierz. The study then uses Kenneth Burke’s “cluster analysis” to describe two of McPherson’s plays—This Lime Tree Bower and The Weir—as artifacts of an Irish culture that is changing in response to Celtic Tiger. Next, McPherson’s plays Port Authority and Shining City are discussed as artifacts of a changed, or “new,” Ireland, that exists at the end of the Celtic Tiger. Finally, the conclusion makes a case for McPherson’s place amongst the great writers of Irish theatre—Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge, and Friel—because of the history revealed within the timelessness of his plays.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Allison and to my amazing children. Without them, this work would have been impossible. Their unfailing support and love were a constant force of strength, which drove me throughout my research. Thank you—I love you.
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Introduction

Irish playwright Conor McPherson has been called “the finest dramatist of his generation” by London’s *The Daily Telegraph* (Spencer) and his work has garnered similar accolades in New York and in his native Dublin. His play *The Weir*, commissioned by the Royal Court Theatre, won the Olivier Award for Best New Play in 1999. *Shining City* and *The Seafarer* were both nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play, in 2006 and 2008, respectively. Theatre Communications Group’s annual survey of its member theatres’ upcoming season reported that *The Seafarer* was the fourth most frequently produced play in America (amongst the survey group) in the 2008-09 season (“Top Ten”). McPherson’s film “The Eclipse” premiered to tremendous critical praise at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival, and became one of the first films to be purchased by a major distributor during the festival (Zeitchik par. 1). The film won the 2010 Irish Film and Television Academy’s awards for Best Film and Best Script, and McPherson was nominated for Best Director. In April 2010, McPherson was elected to become a member of Aosdána, an organization, whose membership is limited to 250 living
artists, “established by the Arts Council in 1981 to honor artists whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the arts in Ireland” (Ingle Par. 4). What is certain is that Conor McPherson has become one of the most significant playwrights of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Incredibly, with all of his success, McPherson remains largely ignored by the academic world. To date, there is only one published book dedicated to his work (Conor McPherson: Imagining Mischief by Gerald C. Wood), as compared to a handful about his contemporary, Martin McDonagh. There have been no dissertations or theses published that explore McPherson’s work alone; rather he remains in comparison with McDonagh, and others, when he is studied at all. My thesis will reflect an attempt to remedy this situation.

**The Problem**

As mentioned above, when Conor McPherson’s work has been written about at all, he is frequently compared to Martin McDonagh. This comparison seems to make some sense; there is less than a year’s difference in their ages, they both emerged onto the theatrical scene at approximately the same time, and both men write plays about Ireland. The similarities are enough to have caused some theorists to consider them part of the same genre of theatre. In an eponymous book, theorist
Aleks Sierz lays out his class of “In-Yer-Face Theatre.” This genre is described by Sierz as a British movement that came of age in the 1990s:

In-yer-face theatre shocks audiences by the extremism of its language and images; unsettles them by its emotional frankness and disturbs them by its acute questioning of moral norms. It not only sums up the zeitgeist, but criticizes it as well. Most in-yer-face plays are not interested in showing events in a detached way and allowing audiences to speculate about them; instead, they are experiential - they want audiences to feel the extreme emotions that are being shown on stage. In-yer-face theatre is experiential theatre. ([inyerface-theatre.com])

Sierz counts McDonagh and McPherson amongst his “In-Yer-Face Theatre A-Z,” and certainly seems to consider their work to fit the genre.

Sierz is accurate in his inclusion of Martin McDonagh in his genre. McDonagh’s work contains the requisite extreme language and imagery that Sierz describes. The inclusion of McPherson’s work into the classification, however, is simply wrong. While it is true that McPherson’s work contains harsh language, and discusses some unsettling subjects, these aspects do not define the work, but are a part of something much bigger. The time has come for a definition of Conor McPherson’s work that allows for a broader understanding of it, as opposed to a misfit and forced application into a preexisting genre.
The Solution

This thesis examines McPherson’s work autonomously and on its own terms, bringing in the work of others only when appropriate as counterpoint or reinforcement. As units of analysis, I look at four of McPherson’s most financially and critically successful plays: This Lime Tree Bower (1995), The Weir (1997), Port Authority (2001), and Shining City (2004). This work examines McPherson’s plays as artifacts of a changing and changed Ireland.

Over the past twenty years Ireland has seen a dramatic paradigm shift. This shift has seen periods of tremendous economic growth—a surge known to economists as the “Celtic Tiger.” Partially as a result of the Celtic Tiger, there has been a dynamic movement away from the agrarian roots of Irish culture, and towards an urban and modern Ireland. In consort with this urbanization, the Catholic Church has seen a waning of its once tenacious hold over the Irish people. The young Irish (what in the United States of America we would call “Generation X” and the following generation) have become further disenfranchised by the Church, detached from their rural heritage, and even suspicious of alcohol as a means of escape. Many regard this twenty-first century Ireland as “New Ireland,” which is presented in contrast to the notion of “Old Ireland.”

A native of Dublin, Conor McPherson is a member of Generation X
Ireland. Born in 1971, McPherson has experienced the changes in Ireland firsthand. Brought up attending Catholic schools, McPherson has himself renounced the Church, preferring instead to be what he describes as pagan. He no longer drinks, although this is due as much to the terror caused by a drink-induced bout of pancreatitis in 2001 as to an ideological decision. Ideological and philosophical questioning is right up McPherson’s alley, however—he holds a Master’s Degree in philosophy from University College Dublin. His plays, which he began writing while an undergraduate at UCD, reveal the depth and breadth of his philosophical thinking. A self-defined utilitarian, his plays to date all focus on one underlying general theme—loneliness, sometimes even in a crowd.

Through a close reading of these plays, I suggest that McPherson’s work reflects the complex relationship between “Old” and “New” Ireland, the changed relationship between the young Irish and the Church, the new attitudes towards “the drink,” and the invigorating, yet problematic, relationship to money that undergirds post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

**The Plan**

In Chapter 1, I examine Sierz’s genre of “In-Yer-Face Theatre” in relation to my units of analysis. Using the process of generic participation, I apply the framework of the genre to McPherson’s plays, to
see whether they fit inside. Generic participation is defined as “a deductive process in which you test an instance of rhetoric against the characteristics of a genre” (Foss 200).

Generic application involves three steps: (1) describing the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies, and organizing principle of a genre; (2) describing the situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies, and organizing principle of an artifact; and (3) comparing the characteristics of the artifact with those of the genre to discover if the artifact belongs in that genre. (200)

Sierz has thoroughly accomplished step one of this process in his book. I use his assessment of the genre’s characteristics, and compare them to those of the four McPherson plays. It is my intention to demonstrate that these plays do not fit into the genre whatsoever. The overall aim of this chapter is to forever divorce McPherson’s work from the notion of “In-Yer-Face Theatre.”

Once I have clearly demonstrated what McPherson’s plays are not, I turn my focus to exploring what they are. In Chapter 2, I focus on *This Lime Tree Bower* and *The Weir*, defining them as both reflexive and reflective artifacts of changing Ireland. Both plays were written in the mid 1990s, in the strongest surge of the Celtic Tiger. Both plays struggle with the changes that were occurring in Ireland as they were written. In this chapter, I utilize Kenneth Burke’s cluster criticism. Burke explains cluster criticism:

> Now, the work of every writer contains a set of implicit equations. He uses “associational clusters.” And you may,
by examining his work, find “what goes with what” in these clusters. [...] In other words, the task of a critic using these methods is to note “what subjects cluster about other subjects.” (Foss 72)

Using these clusters of terms and ideas, I will explore how McPherson’s work explicitly discusses the changes at play in his country.

Chapter 3 will employ a similar methodology in an analysis of *Port Authority* and *Shining City*. The aim of this chapter is to define these plays, written in the mid 2000s, as reflective and reflexive artifacts of changed Ireland—that is to say, “new Ireland.” In doing so, I explain the ways that these plays display not only a ten-year long maturation in the playwright, but a discussion of the changed circumstances of his country.

By placing Conor McPherson’s plays in context with the changes in Ireland at the time they were written, I will be able to elucidate truths in them that go far beyond the apparent shock value and questioning of norms that led Sierz and others to consider McPherson’s work cognate with McDonagh’s. Conor McPherson does not write plays to provoke and affront his audience, he writes plays in a provoking and unsettling time and place. These aspects of his plays are artifacts of their circumstances, and not devices to create a reaction. While McDonagh sets out to complicate and question, McPherson writes to reflect and clarify his world.
CHAPTER 1
“I’d Take You In, I Don’t Care About Your Face”: Conor McPherson and In-Yer-Face Theatre

In his 2001 book of the same name, British theorist Aleks Sierz laid out the foundations of a genre that he calls “In-Yer-Face Theatre.” Included in this genre are such works as Mark Ravenhill’s Shopping and Fucking, Sarah Kane’s Blasted, and Harry Gibson’s Trainspotting. Although Sierz defines this as a chiefly British genre of theatre, a reaction to British issues and attitudes at play in the mid 1990s, Sierz includes in his “New writing A-Z” several Irish playwrights—including Enda Walsh, Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh, and Mark O’ Rowe. Confusingly, Sierz also lists Conor McPherson among these “In-Yer-Face” playwrights. While the former playwrights have all produced multiple works that cleanly fit within Sierz’s genre, McPherson has not. In this chapter, I will use the method of generic participation (Foss 200) to demonstrate that Sierz’s inclusion of Conor McPherson’s work within his genre of “In-Yer-Face” theatre is a mistake.

After defining the methodology of generic participation, I will move feature by feature through Sierz’s genre, explaining how McPherson’s work falls outside Sierz’s definition. It is my intention to prove that
Sierz’s application and, by extension, the systematic lumping together of McPherson’s work with that of McDonagh (and others) is based on a misreading or, at least a limited reading, of McPherson’s plays. This clarification of McPherson’s work is particularly important now, as McPherson’s plays continue to be highly regarded and widely produced. If we can establish the major differences between McPherson’s work and that of his contemporaries, we can begin to understand the work of this prolific and important playwright on its own terms, rather than as a misfit part of a larger group.

**Generic Participation**

Sonja K. Foss explains that “a rhetorical genre is a constellation, fusion, or clustering of three different kinds of elements so that a unique kind of artifact is created” (193). She goes on to say that the first of these elements include the “situational requirements or the perception of conditions in a situation that call forth particular kinds of rhetorical responses” (193). The second element is the “substantive and stylistic characteristic of the rhetoric—features of the rhetoric chosen by the rhetor to respond to the perceived requirements” of those situations (193). Finally, the third element is the “organizing principle” of the genre—an “umbrella label for the internal dynamic of the constellation” formed by the first two elements (194).
A generic critic, says Foss, can do several things with genre—one of which, and the one I will employ here, is the process of examining generic participation. Through generic participation, a critic can “determine which artifacts participate in which genres” (200). Essentially, this process allows a critic to bounce an artifact off the described features of a particular genre and see whether it sticks. Foss describes the process:

Generic participation involves three steps: (1) describing the perceived situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies, and organizing principle of a genre; (2) describing the situational requirements, substantive and stylistic strategies, and organizing principle of an artifact; and (3) comparing the characteristics of the artifact to those of the genre to discover if the artifact belongs in that genre. (200)

In my analysis, the genre will be Sierz’s “In-Yer-Face theatre,” and my artifact will be the collected published work of Conor McPherson, ranging from his *Rum and Vodka* (1992) to *The Seafarer* (2006). This type of analysis could be done individually for each of McPherson’s ten plays published between these two, discussing in detail the situational requirements, strategies, and principles of each text, and comparing them to those of Seirz’s genre. However, in this study, I will look at them collectively, putting them in conversation with the features of Sierz’s genre as a body of work. I firmly believe that the conclusions achieved through this look at McPherson’s corpus would be identical to those achieved through an analysis of each play separately, and that a broad
scope exploration of his work will yield a richer and more substantive result. Indeed, Sierz himself has looked at McPherson’s work in a collective manner, rather than examining the minutiae of each individual play, in his decision to include him in his genre.

Finally, before I begin my analysis, I would like to make clear that I do not dispute the existence of In-Yer-Face theatre as a genre. Sierz has uncovered something truly remarkable in his book. For the most part, Sierz strongly makes his case for these plays being a part of a single genre, and his argument for the situational requirements, stylistic features, and organizing principle of that genre are apt. While others may argue (and they have)\(^1\) against the inclusion of plays into any type of genre, calling it “pigeonholing,” that is not my intention here. I want only to remove McPherson’s work from this genre, and later, in subsequent chapters, to explore other ways to see his work.

\(^1\) “Defining genres may not initially seem particularly problematic but it should already be apparent that it is a theoretical minefield. Robert Stam identifies four key problems with generic labels [...] extension (the breadth or narrowness of labels); normativism (having preconceived ideas of criteria for genre membership); monolithic definitions (as if an item belonged to only one genre); biologism (a kind of essentialism in which genres are seen as evolving through a standardized life cycle)” (Chandler par. 9). In addition to this, in their report on the 2002 In-Yer-Face Theatre Conference, the editor of the website Writernet said “To be shackled to a specific era or genre places a responsibility on a play and creates expectations before a reading or performance. In essence, it disrupts the artistic integrity through preconceived notions of a play because of a simplified label” (2002: In-Yer Face?).
Situational Requirements

The situational requirements for In-Yer-Face theatre are described quite thoroughly in Sierz’s book. Sierz says In-Yer-Face theatre “only took off as a new and shocking sensibility in the decade of the 1990s. Just as the origins of provocative and confrontational theatre can be found in the theories of Alfred Jarry and Antonin Artaud, at the start of the 20th century, so it was that in the 1990s it gradually became the dominant style of much new writing” (“What is In-Yer-Face Theatre”). He continues

In-yer-face drama has been staged by new writing theatres such as the Royal Court, Bush, Hampstead, Soho Theatre, Finborough, Tricycle, Theatre Royal Stratford East, and even the trendy Almeida, all of which are in London. But experiential theatre is not an exclusively metropolitan phenomenon. The Traverse in Edinburgh was really important - as were Manchester, Birmingham, Bolton, West Yorkshire, and so on. (“What is In-Yer-Face Theatre”)

Sierz explains that the conditions in 1990s Britain were ripe for a theatrical revolution. He says “the decade was characterized by a new sense of possibility that was translated into unprecedented theatrical freedom” (36). The political changes seen by Generation X Brits, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Thatcher administration for example, had shown them that there was a chance for progress (36). This new spirit of revolution had also shown these young writers that they could challenge the status-quo in a different way than their predecessors (36).
Unfortunately, however, according to Sierz, British theatre had gone stale. It was hopelessly out of touch with the young people to the extent that plays by non-Brits (the Irish, the Americans for example) dominated the English stage (37). The situation was ripe for an explosion of new and ground-breaking plays by British playwrights—and for innovative and hard hitting imports by others. In-Yer-Face theatre was born of this need for innovative and shocking material to shake up the British theatre scene.

The situational requirements for Conor McPherson’s plays, even those written during the 1990s, are very different. Although it may sound superfluous, it needs to be emphasized that McPherson is not British. Unlike several other Irish playwrights that Sierz includes in his genre, McPherson was born and raised in Ireland, and continues to live there today. Martin McDonagh has Irish parents, but was born and raised in London. Enda Walsh moved to London in 2003, and eight of his thirteen plays were written after that move. Marina Carr, who is Irish born and raised, and whose work I believe is more similar to McPherson’s than, say, McDonagh’s, wrote her most “in-yer-face” play *Low In the Dark* in 1989—outside the boundaries of Sierz’s genre.²

² Although I won’t do it here, I think a strong argument could be made to divorce Carr’s work from Sierz’s genre. Indeed, he only mentions her in his book once, and there in passing. She is included on his website.
It is true that McPherson was first produced by one of the definitive theatres in Sierz’s study—the Royal Court. While this might be part of the rationale for including him in the genre, it should be pointed out that Sierz acknowledges the presence of Irish imports at the Royal Court at the time, saying “the best plays at the Royal Court were often American or Irish imports” (37).

More significant than geography, though, are the socio-political conditions in 1990s Ireland. As I mentioned in my introduction, and will discuss more in subsequent chapters, the Celtic Tiger was an unprecedented event in Irish history. For a country that had been economically weak for centuries to suddenly have the type of surge brought on by the Tiger, for Ireland’s economy to become, for one moment, one of the world’s strongest, was a radical change in Irish life as a whole. Some Irish playwrights responded to this new economic and political freedom by using their plays to make political statements (Walsh’s *Sucking Dublin* for example) or for examining conceptions of gender (Marina Carr) or class (McDonagh). McPherson took, and takes, a different approach. He says, “Irish politics is not very interesting. We don’t have political debate in this country. We've a number of very similar looking and sounding parties, with an illusion of choice” (qtd. in Murphy).
To consider McPherson’s plays as a part of this British movement, Sierz apparently ignores the socio-political differences between England and Ireland in the 1990s. The Irish had endured centuries of poverty and oppression by the British, and had recently emerged into an era of prosperity and influx, both of population and of cultural capital. A country that had seen huge amounts of emigration was suddenly seeing large-scale immigration. Ireland was becoming an in vogue European nation. England resisted wholesale inclusion into the European Union, and while it was economically rebounding from the Thatcher years, the rebound was not creating unprecedented wealth as the Celtic Tiger did in Ireland. The situational requirements of Sierz’s genre and those of McPherson’s plays are simply different. The cultural conditions in Ireland in the 1990s, and into the first decade of the 21st century, called for a different rhetorical response than those in England.

**Substantive and Stylistic Strategies**

As with the situational requirements, Sierz explicitly lays out the features of an In-Yer-Face play:

How can you tell if a play is in-yer-face? Well, it really isn't difficult: the language is filthy, there’s nudity, people have sex in front of you, violence breaks out, one character humiliates another, taboos are broken, unmentionable subjects are broached, conventional dramatic structures are subverted. Expect tales of abuse; don’t worry about the subversion of theatre form; expect personal politics, not ideology. Above all, this brat pack is the voice of youth. At its
best, this kind of theatre is so powerful, so visceral, that it forces you to react - either you want to get on stage and stop what’s happening or you decide it’s the best thing you’ve ever seen and you long to come back the next night. As indeed you should. (“What is”)³

In the next few pages I will go feature by feature through Sierz’s description, bouncing each off of McPherson’s work to see if it fits.

**Feature 1: Language**

Regarding the use of explicit language in a play, Sierz says:

Because humans are language animals, words often seem to cause more offence than the acts to which they refer. Taboo words, such as “fuck” and “cunt,” work because we give them a magic power, which makes them more than simple signs that describe a real-life event or thing. Like all taboos, they are a way of guarding against imagined infections, a way of drawing a line that must not be crossed. In every case, the words tell us all we need to know about what a culture is embarrassed by, afraid of, or resentful about. The violent impact of sexual swearwords in British culture says much about what we feel about sex or women. Because they refer to sex, but are violent in intent, those words pack a double punch. Unlike euphemism, which is a way of defusing difficult subjects, of circling around a meaning, the swearword aims to compact more than one hatred, becoming

³ This section of the website is nearly identical to pg. 5 in Sierz’s book. I opted for the web version because it has been updated since the book was printed and is likely to more accurately reflect Seirz’s guidelines.
a verbal act of aggression, a slap in the mouth. In theatre, “bad language” seems even stronger because it is used openly. (8)

In-Yer-Face writers, then, use bad language to shock and challenge their viewers, to provoke them to think about a subject, or to elicit a visceral response. These writers expose taboos, holding them to the light and demanding an answer. Language is one medium for this provocation.

McPherson’s characters use profanity and obscenities. It is not uncommon for his characters to say “fuck” (although this is often Hibernicized to “feck”), “shit” (frequently “shite”), or “cunt.” McPherson’s characters often use religious expletives such as “Jesus” (frequently “Jaysus”), or “God,” and *The Seafarer* (as at least one example) gives us the colorful “Jaysus-fucking” (26).

This use of language is complex. A conservative viewer may call it gratuitous, while a more liberal one may not. In the abstract for her paper “‘Taboo or not taboo?’: swearing and profane language use in spoken Irish English,” Dr. Fiona Fall describes that in Ireland, the use of profanities:

4 It may appear, from the language in this quote, that the viewpoint of these plays represents a male perspective, and that the plays assume a male-centric British society, but it should not be forgotten that one of the leading voices in the In-Yer-Face movement was Sarah Kane. In fact, Seirz explicitly discusses the reaction that Romanian audiences had to the language in Kane’s *Blasted* (*In-Yer Face Theatre*105). In-Yer-Face theatre is not simply a masculine movement.
automatically prompts inferences about the social class, psychological or emotional state, education, or religion of the user. Ironically then, thought not surprisingly, such cultivated disdain seems neither to have thwarted nor frustrated the use of offensive language, as it is still pervasive in contemporary spoken language, despite the lingering moral and ethical objections. (Fall)

What is clear is that McPherson uses language in a way that is similar to many playwrights that are a part of the In-Yer-Face genre, and far less than other playwrights that are not. David Mamet, for example, uses language that is far more extreme and pervasive than McPherson does, and yet Sierz makes no effort to call Mamet’s plays In-Yer-Face. As Fall indicates, many Irish people use more colorful language than McPherson has written, and his usage is, simply, realistic. As a unit of determination for inclusion into the genre, language is indeterminate at least.

**Feature 2: Nudity and Sex**

Another strategy that Sierz says is common to In-Yer-Face plays is the staging of sexual acts and the use of nudity. He explains:

> Theatre is a deliberate act, and can cause offence because the representation of real life is invested with more power than real life itself. When it comes to showing sex onstage, its public performance immediately raises questions about privacy, voyeurism, and “realistic” acting. We may suspend disbelief about many emotions in theatre, but we know that most sex acts in public are not the real thing. Nevertheless, showing sex in public is often unsettling because it is a reminder of intimate feelings, and of what we most desire to keep secret. Images of sex cause anxiety because they refer
to powerful and uncontrollable feelings. When sex is coupled with emotions such as neediness and loneliness, the effect can be immensely disturbing. (8)

The same can be said of nudity, which Sierz says has more power onstage than in a film (8). The end desire, though, from an In-Yer-Face playwright, is that discomfort. These writers are using sex and nudity to shock and provoke their audience.

To date, there has been neither explicit sex nor nudity in a McPherson play. In most of his plays, This Lime Tree Bower, Rum and Vodka, Port Authority, and Come On Over for example, his characters talk about sex. Frequently they talk about it in rather explicit terms. Rape, adultery, child abuse all come up in these plays, but—and this is the key—never on stage. McPherson has yet to dramatize a sexual act in any way. While in Shining City, Ian brings a male prostitute home, the scene ends without us even knowing if they completed their transaction.

Certainly this contrasts with other In-Yer-Face plays, such as Sarah Kane’s Blasted. This even contrasts with some other Irish writers whose work is more in fitting with the genre. Enda Walsh’s Sucking Dublin, for example, features a young girl raped during a drug-laced party. The rape happens on stage, in full view of the audience. By comparison, even McPherson’s most graphic descriptions, like the rape described in This Lime Tree Bower seem tame. Certainly it could be argued that a graphic description of sex, painted in the minds of the
audience, could be shocking. In fact, in productions of This Lime Tree Bower, Joe’s description of the rape should be shocking to the sensibilities of the audience. However, when compared to the depiction of a sex act on stage, frequently including nudity, no description—however graphic—can be as vivid. Even if we do not suspend our disbelief, the fact remains that what we see on stage are real bodies doing intimate things.

If the graphic depiction of sex and nudity is a requisite for inclusion into the In-Yer-Face genre, then McPherson’s work does not meet the condition.

**Feature 3: Violence**

In-Yer-Face playwrights tend to use fully staged violence in their plays. Sierz explains:

> Violence becomes impossible to ignore when it confronts you by showing pain, humiliation, and degradation. Sometimes it is a question of showing violent acts literally; at other times, the suggestion of extreme mental cruelty is enough to disturb. Violent actions are shocking because they break the rules of debate; they go beyond words and thus can get out of control. Violence feels primitive, irrational, and destructive. Violence onstage also disturbs when we feel the emotion behind the acting, or catch ourselves enjoying the violence vicariously. (8-9)

Whether by the depiction of violence in front of the audience’s face, or through descriptions of extreme cruelty, these playwrights push the envelope of acceptability in the eyes of their audience. Frequently,
characters commit the acts of violence without guilt and without awareness that their behavior is wrong.

McPherson’s plays, on the other hand, are not explicitly violent. They frequently discuss violence (a robbery at gunpoint in *This Lime Tree Bower*, a fistfight in *The Seafarer*, a near brawl at a party in *Rum and Vodka*), but to date, McPherson has never staged an act of physical violence. The closest he has come is in *The Seafarer* where the stage directions say, “Sharkey enters an inarticulate rage and throws a punch at Nicky. Nicky defends himself with the Christmas tree, pushing Sharkey backwards. Ivan manages to get a hold of Sharkey and restrain him” (65). Immediately, Sharkey retreats to the kitchen only to return several minutes later “sheepish” (66), and with a heartfelt apology to Nicky. This is hardly the shocking guiltless violence that Sierz describes.

A quick comparison to other In-Yer-Face writers demonstrates further the relative innocuousness of McPherson’s use of violence. Take, for example, the physical brutality between brothers in Martin McDonagh’s *The Lonesome West*, the onstage dismemberment of a body in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, or the pervasive and terrifying scenes of torture and brutal murder in *The Pillowman*. McDonagh is not alone, even amongst Irish playwrights. Consider the onstage mugging of a Little Lamb in Enda Walsh’s *Sucking Dublin* or the extreme physical and psychological cruelty in his *The Walworth Farce*. Clearly, McPherson’s plays are nowhere near as shocking as these.
Coupled with this lack of onstage physical violence is the pervasive self-consciousness and guilt that McPherson’s characters feel. After a near fistfight in *The Weir* (50-51), Jack and Finbar quickly make amends. After his robbery of the local bookie in *This Lime Tree Bower*, Frank says “sometimes you have to decide that principles will only fuck you up, because no one else is ever moral./ I wanted to give Joe some cash./ I didn’t know what I wanted” (*TWAOP* 186), demonstrating his knowledge that what he had done was wrong, and rationalizing his actions to himself. McPherson’s most violent character, the narrator in *The Good Thief* directly addresses his own morality in a similar way saying, “I wonder about the type of person I am, but not for long./ I’m no good” (*TWAOP* 238).

McPherson’s characters do not live in hermetically sealed moral worlds like those created by Neil LaBute or David Mamet. His plays do not show violence onstage. There is none of the “extreme mental cruelty” designed to provoke or upset an audience. Any violence in a McPherson play, then functions differently than that of an In-Yer-Face play.

As I have demonstrated, McPherson’s work does not fit within the strategies of the In-Yer-Face genre. Sierz says, “Even Conor McPherson’s *This Lime Tree Bower*, a great yarn about a robbery, is spotted with teenage sexual fantasy, casual adult sex, and rape. Guilt
ridden and surreal, arid and ridiculous, the effect is both wildly humorous and rather sad” (181). What Sierz has failed to do, when looking at this play, and others by McPherson, is explore the reasons behind the material. Sierz seems to suggest that, because McPherson was produced at the Royal Court, is a member of Generation X, writes some controversial material into his plays, and did so in the 1990s, he must be an In-Yer-Face playwright. The major factor separating McPherson from the members of Sierz’s genre, apart from the strategic differences and the differing situational requirements, is built upon a question that Sierz never thought to ask. The final nail in the coffin for Sierz’s inclusion of McPherson’s work is the organizing principle of the genre itself: a desire to be provocative and shocking.

Organizing Principles

As mentioned above, Sierz uses as an organizing principle of his genre the idea that the plays are shocking and designed to provoke an audience. He says:

The widest definition of In-Yer-Face theatre is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both the actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive
feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are. Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative. (4)

Add to this comprehensive principle the fact that, to Sierz, these plays are not ideological (“What is”), and you have a clear picture of the guideline Sierz used to gather artifacts of his genre. While Sierz makes a good case for the inclusion of most of his choices, with McPherson, he has missed the boat. McPherson’s plays are not about shock and provocation. They are not designed to stun an audience into some type of action. McPherson says of his audience “I think instinctively I just want to entertain them. Also communicate with them. And give them the opportunity (though I don’t mean this in any vocational sense) to communicate with each other as an audience, too” (qtd. in Wood 133). He goes on to explain that he is “respecting the audience to make of [his plays] what they will” (Ibid).

When McPherson has been asked what his agenda is with his plays, his answer is clear. He says

I really don’t think I have an agenda or a message. All I can say is my work is a battle against loneliness. It’s an acknowledgement that we all have a fundamental loneliness even though you may not be alone. But all that loneliness can be eased by admitting and sharing that fact. Having said that, it does not necessarily mean that my work is bleak. I don’t think it is. I think it is quite optimistic because its intention is to make contact, to make connection. It’s really that simple. (Qtd. in Wood 147).
This represents the organizing principle of McPherson’s work. His work is centered on a desire for connection, a fight against separation and loneliness.

Whereas In-Yer-Face playwrights “question moral norms,”

McPherson’s characters are mired in moral questions of right and wrong. He says,

> I think my characters always tend to find an innate sense of what’s right and wrong, or at least worry about it and come back to traditional moral law, which is basically utilitarian: if I don’t treat other people well, I may not be treated well myself. The characters come back to the fear of not being loved. But my plays always have characters who are shown the opportunity to break out. The whole play is about whether they do or don’t. In my plays, they usually don’t, or they do for a little while and they come back. And nobody can answer that for them; everyone learns different ways of dealing with it. (Qtd. in Wood 136)

Not only are the organizing principles different between McPherson’s work and In-Yer-Face theatre as a genre, they are incompatible. It would be impossible for McPherson to create connections between audiences and his material, and between audience members, if he was trying to provoke and shock. McPherson says

> I think all stories have a healing function, because what they say is that you’re not alone. If a play or a production works, what it does is it defines the community. Because at the beginning of the night everyone goes in and they’re all separate people, and the actors are separate to the audience. But by the end of the night, if the thing has worked, everyone comes out feeling they’re all on the same team. You feel human, and that it’s OK to be human. It’s trying to give you a sympathetic view of people that you may even consider your enemies. (Qtd, in Wood 117)
It would be impossible for him to shock and provoke an audience if he was focusing on loneliness and healing as a central theme within his work. Provocation causes disconnection, not connection; In-Yer Face plays thrive on polarization.

**Conclusion**

As I have demonstrated, Conor McPherson’s work does not fit into the genre of In-Yer-Face theatre. It does not fit the situational requirements, the substantive and stylistic strategies, or the organizing principle. Sierz even admits this fact, at least about McPherson’s work that followed *The Weir* in 1997. He quotes a critic saying that the success of *The Weir*, in fact was “a sign that people have had enough” In-Yer-Face theatre (249). What Sierz fails to see, however, is what I’ve explained here—that McPherson’s plays never fit into the category to begin with.

To couple McPherson’s work with that of Martin McDonagh or Enda Walsh would be an error. All three men are Irish, and wrote plays at the same time. All three men came to popularity at the same time—the mid 1990s. All three men write gritty plays about Irish people. The main difference between them is intentionality. Enda Walsh and Martin McDonagh set out to accomplish precisely what Aleks Sierz is describing in his book—to shock and provoke an audience, to produce a visceral
reaction. McPherson’s plays are designed to cause a reaction that Sierz has explicitly forbidden for In-Yer-Face plays—speculative contemplation. McPherson wants his audience to think about their lives, to find themselves in his characters and situations, and to determine the ramifications of that discovery. To echo Margaret’s line in Come On Over (that I used in my title for this chapter), “You’re no good. I’d take you in. I don’t care about your face” (“Plays Two 203). For McPherson it’s not about being In-Yer-Face—it’s about being together.

It is true that McPherson’s plays include material that may be construed as provocative or shocking, but he does not include the material to cause that reaction. McPherson’s plays are cultural artifacts of his time, and of his place. In my next chapter, I will begin to redefine Conor McPherson’s work in terms that reach beyond the confines of a misapplied genre. I will explain how his work functions as an artifact of a changing Ireland that McPherson has lived in throughout the Celtic Tiger.
CHAPTER 2
“But It Was Changing”: McPherson In the Tiger’s Mouth

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, there remains some misconception about Conor McPherson’s work. Part of the reason for this is that his corpus of plays does not fit into one tidy box. They could be differentiated from each other in many different ways, for example the monologues (*Rum and Vodka, St. Nicholas*) from the dialogic plays (*The Seafarer, Shining City, Dublin Carol*); or by biographical concerns, for example before McPherson stopped drinking alcohol (in 2001, following an alcohol induced bout of pancreatitis) from those written after. While these categories would provide insights into McPherson’s work, I choose to situate his writing in relationship to the Celtic Tiger, and the complicated and life altering changes that it brought about.

In this chapter, I will look closely at two of McPherson’s plays—*This Lime Tree Bower* and *The Weir*—as examples of one set of plays sharing the same worldview. *This Lime Tree Bower* and *The Weir* were written in the mid 1990s (1995 and 1997, respectively), and both are set at that same time. These plays are not the only plays by McPherson that hold as artifacts of Celtic Tiger Ireland, nor the only ones that include
elements that comment and reflect the changes that Ireland underwent
during that period. *Rum and Vodka, The Good Thief,* and *St. Nicholas,* all
written in the 1990s, would also fit into this analysis. I have decided, for
the sake of space and focus, to limit my discussion to *This Lime Tree
Bower* and *The Weir* because these are two of McPherson’s most popular
and critically acclaimed plays.

Using Kenneth Burke’s cluster criticism as my primary analytical
method, I will demonstrate that these plays stand as artifacts of the
complex societal changes happening during the Celtic Tiger. After
explaining cluster criticism, I will examine both of these plays
individually to reveal the worldviews being presented within them.

**Cluster Criticism**

Kenneth Burke has been called “a specialist in symbol-systems
and symbolic action” (Foss 69), and he is considered one of the most
influential figures in the contemporary practice of rhetorical criticism
(ibid). While Burke’s work is well known and widely used in the study of
communication, use of his work in theatre scholarship is less common.
The lack of attention to his theory by theatre scholars is particularly
puzzling due to the fact that Burke was well aware of, and interested in,
theatre. He wrote both about theatre text as literature, and about
theatre in performance. One of his better known and most frequently
used methodologies is called *dramatism*, which Sonja K. Foss describes as “the label Burke gives to the analysis of human motivation through terms derived from the study of drama” (383). More significant than Burke’s awareness of drama, and use of theatrical concerns in his work, is the clear efficacy of his theory in the study of theatre.

Burke’s theories can be applied to theatrical texts, just as they may be applied to rhetorical ones. In his *Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke repeatedly analyzes theatrical texts. Some of his theories are more applicable than others, as Bruce McConachie explains:

Burke himself, in fact, provides easily accessible strategies for understanding the legitimating function of formulaic drama on the stage (or on film or television, for that matter) in his notions of "conventional form" and "cluster analysis." Briefly, theatrical events following the pattern of "conventional form" involve audience expectations that are anterior to the performances itself. Spectators, in other words, go to the theatre mostly knowing what to expect instead of allowing their major anticipations to arise during the show. The theatre historian may then identify formulaic groupings of performances through "cluster analysis," (486)

As McConachie stated, Burke’s notion of cluster analysis is a particularly useful tool, allowing a text to be explored for both intentional and latent meanings in a playwright’s work. Burke describes this idea, saying “Now, the work of every writer contains a set of implicit equations. He uses ‘associational clusters.’ And you may, by examining his work, find ‘what goes with what’ in these clusters” (qtd. in Foss 72). Foss elaborates “in other words, the task of a critic using these methods is to
note ‘what subjects cluster about other subjects’” (72). Using this method, a critic may discover connections and clusters that the playwright may be completely unaware of. Burke explains that, while a writer is

perfectly conscious of the act of writing, conscious of selecting a certain kind of imagery to reinforce a certain kind of mood, etc., he cannot possibly be conscious of the interrelationships among all of these equations. (Qtd. in Foss 72)

As Foss puts it, “a cluster analysis, then provides ‘a survey of the hills and valleys’ of the rhetor’s mind, resulting in insights into the meanings of key terms and thus a worldview that may not be known to the rhetor” (72).

In practice, a cluster analysis requires several steps. First, a critic will identify key terms within the text. “Significance of terms is determined on the basis of frequency or intensity” (Foss 73). As Foss explains, “a term that is used over and over again by a rhetor is likely to be a key term in that person’s thought and rhetoric” (73), so a term that appears frequently should probably be looked at as a key term. Also, if there is a term which, if removed, “would change the nature of the text significantly” (Foss 73), it too is a potential key term.

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5 By “rhetor,” Foss means simply the person creating an act of rhetoric, in this case the playwright. I will consider “rhetor” interchangeable with “playwright.”
After identifying the key terms, the critic will “chart the clusters around those key terms” (Foss 73).

This process involves a close examination of the artifact to identify each occurrence of each key term and identifications of the terms that cluster around each key term. Terms may cluster around the key terms in various ways. They simply may occur in close proximity to the term, or a conjunction such as and may connect a term to a key term. A rhetor also may develop a cause-and-effect relationship between one key term and another term, suggesting that one depends on the other or that one is the cause of the other. (Foss 73)

The cluster terms are then listed and evaluated in step three.

Finally, then, the cluster terms are evaluated in an attempt to “find patterns in the associations or linkages discovered in the charting of the clusters as a way of making visible the worldview constructed by the rhetor” (Foss 74). Again, the idea here is to reveal meanings that may, or may not, be intentional on the part of the playwright. One specific means of analyzing these clusters advocated by Burke is the use of an “agon analysis,” that is to say, an analysis of terms that appear to be in direct conflict.
Part 1: This Lime Tree Bower

Conor McPherson’s *This Lime Tree Bower* was first produced at Crypt Arts Centre in Dublin in 1995 (McPherson *The Weir and Other Plays* 134) as part of the Dublin Fringe Festival (297). The play, set in Dublin, features three men, each providing a narrative centering on one single event. Gerald C. Wood describes the narrative as “a shared story, presented as a group project among actors/characters who inhabit a limbo between the monologue and traditional theatrical performance” (34). As Wood suggests, the play, McPherson’s first featuring multiple characters, blurs the line between actor and narrative persona to such an extent that the only line of dialogue in the play is a meta-comment on the way the story is being told, rather than a connection between the men.

All three men are on stage the entire play, and the stage directions indicate that they “are certainly aware of each other” (*TWAOP* 134). The first to speak is Joe, a seventeen year old. He tells about his attraction to a schoolmate named Damian, about skipping school one afternoon with Damian, and about his family situation. We learn that Joe lives at home with his father, brother Frank, and sister Carmel. We learn that Frank works in their father’s “chipper,” and that Carmel has a boyfriend.

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6For simplicity, I will abbreviate the title of this volume in citations as *TWAOP*. 

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Ray, who is a lecturer at the college. We also learn that Joe, like so many seventeen-year-old boys, is sexually frustrated, and perhaps a bit confused.

Next we meet Ray, the lecturer in philosophy. We learn that he is not faithful to Carmel; that he, in fact, is prone to sleeping with his students. He describes his exploits with his most recent conquest, whose name he says he does not remember. We also learn that Ray drinks to excess, and that his drinking is a frequent precursor to his sexual escapades.

Finally, we are introduced to Frank, Joe and Carmel’s brother. He is in his twenties. Frank tells us about a particular Friday when Simple Simon McCurdie came into the chipper for his usual meal. McCurdie is a local politician and bookie, to whom Frank’s father owes money. This debt is taking a physical and emotional toll on Frank’s dad, and McCurdie takes pleasure in exploiting their relationship. We also learn that Frank and Joe’s mother has died. At the end of this section, Frank asks a hard-nosed customer for a gun.

Following these introductions to the characters and their individual situations, the plot shifts to Frank’s reason for wanting a gun. As it turns out, he has decided to rob Simple Simon McCurdie’s business. He does so, mainly in the spirit of revenge for the way that McCurdie has treated Frank’s father. He ends up with a surprising
£30,000, getting away only because Ray happened to show up at exactly the right moment. Frank jumped into Ray’s car and eluded the pursuit of McCurdie’s men.

The narrative then follows Joe going to a nearby dance club with Damian, and watching Damian rape a young woman he meets there. Joe describes his disgust, both at Damian and his actions, but also at his own arousal at the sight the sexual act. We also hear of Ray’s next encounter with a student (the same student as before), and his getting caught in the act by the woman’s boyfriend (who also happens to be Ray’s student). Following this, Ray returns home and passes out in the bathtub. The following day Ray is scheduled to have an opportunity to publically question a rival (and very highly respected) philosopher at a lecture the other man is giving on the campus. However, because Ray chose to “cure” his hangover from the previous night’s adventure with a few more drinks, instead he vomits all over the philosopher.

Finally, we revisit Joe and learn that Damian has implicated him in the rape of the young woman from the dance club. Both Joe and the girl point the finger at Damian, and Joe gets off the hook. Joe relates a memory of his late mother and tells us that this memory helped him to feel safe. Lastly we learn that Ray’s book has been published, and that Frank has taken his ill-gotten gains and moved to Chicago. Frank continues to send his father money. The final moment of the play is a
message of hope and optimism, but this is tempered with a hearty dose of reality. Joe says, “so in the end, it was like things started off good, and just got better. Is that cheating? I don’t know. It’s hard to say. I can still see the girl” (TWAOP 193).

**Cluster Analysis of This Lime Tree Bower**

Since *This Lime Tree Bower* premiered in 1995, in the early years of the Celtic Tiger, it makes sense that the play would reflect the anxieties of change, and aspects of both the previous and the emerging social circumstances. In fact, this is exactly what the play does. This is not to say that these social anxieties are what the play is about, or that they are what drive the action of the play, but they are a central feature in the play, and one that bears enormous weight when put into context. *This Lime Tree Bower* highlights, intentionally or not, conflicted and binary visions of three of its key terms: school, sex, and money. Each of these key terms was chosen due to the frequency of their appearance in the play. Using Burke’s cluster criticism, I will unlock these terms and demonstrate how they reflect the greater social context of the early Celtic Tiger.
KEY TERM: School

The play has a complex relationship to matters of school and academia. Some of the terms that cluster around the term are on the mitch, bonk off, both slang terms for truancy, which could get a student kicked out or killed but “it felt brilliant” (138). Joe’s school is presented as a place that “had pity on [Damian] because he needed somewhere to do his leaving” (138), and Damian is said to be “lucky to get into our school” (137), but the school itself is described as a dump. The adults in the play are alternately indifferent to their children’s schooling—Damian’s mother “couldn’t give two shits” (140) about his truancy—and interested—Joe says his father “asked me how school was” (142), but even Joe’s father is satisfied with a “shouted fine” (142), and doesn’t press for more information. Frank calls Joe great and says he is always studying. Joe describes reading books in school “where nobody said what they meant and you had to work out what everybody wanted” (157), and says that he prefers “thrillers and westerns” (156).

7 All italicized cluster terms are direct from the script and found in close proximity to uses of the key term. In keeping with Burke’s model, only longer passages are cited by page number, allowing the terms to be discussed with greater fluidity. All page numbers are from The Weir and Other Plays (TWAOP) 134-193. Quotations that are not italicized are found relating to the cluster terms themselves, and not to the key term, and are included for context.

8 A “leaving certificate” is granted after an examination, and culminates secondary education in Ireland (“Leaving Certificate Programmes”)
The play also references higher education and college. Ray’s job as a lecturer is called a really good job which Ray boasts about frequently, but Ray says “the thickest people he ever met were all in third-level institutions” (143). Ray drinks in the student bar because “I hate academics” but he continues, saying “I don’t really like students either, but there you are” (144). After realizing that his affair with a student could cost him his job, Ray says “I couldn’t give a fuck” (146), he waffles through lectures, but the students that don’t show up for them are ingrates. Academic discussion is called useless and academics “just a bunch of selfish children” (161), and yet, the philosophy department is “near heaven so that when the questions become too unbearable we could lean out the window and ask God” (161).\(^9\) Academics corrupt the kids in lectures, and the students are morons slobbering all over the guest lecturer Konigsberg, but this makes Ray jealous. Students are know-it-all shitbrain friends, and “nobodies out for as much enlightenment as their little heads can handle” (183), but still Ray prefers their company, even to that of his girlfriend Carmel.

Clearly, there is a great deal of conflict within the clusters surrounding the key term school. A cluster analysis reveals that school is shown to be a positive thing and a burden, something to be desired

\(^9\) Obviously this statement is ironic, but the repetition of it by Ray indicates at least a modicum of acceptance. In some way, Ray believes in the importance of his “Ivory Tower,” while he constantly pretends not to.
and something to be avoided, something necessary and something useless. It might be tempting to imply that these binaries reflect an internal struggle with schooling on the part of McPherson, which is somewhat true. McPherson has said:

I really came into my own in college. I think I'm one of those people who flourishes with not a lot of discipline. If I hadn't been told what to do I probably would have got on much better; I was very resentful of having all my time taken off me and my teachers found it frustrating because they could tell I was doing nothing and if I applied myself I could have done very well in school. I was much better suited to third-level education. I think I liked playschool and I liked university but I didn't like all the normal school in between. (“Standing” par. 11)

This conclusion, however, would be insufficient. McPherson’s own ideology seems to differ from that of his characters; Joe craves the discipline of school, he is always studying, and is uncomfortable with truancy, and Ray seems to dislike most everything about third-level education. What the clusters surrounding the idea of school in *This Lime Tree Bower* reflect is a societal anxiety about schooling and education.

In his book *After the Ball*, Fintan O'Toole explicitly discusses the state of Irish education in the context of the Celtic Tiger. He says:

Ireland likes to think of itself as a witty, literate and learned society. It sells itself to tourists with the images of great writers. It collects Nobel prizes for literature. But it is also a country with shocking levels of illiteracy. At the start of the 20th century, about 12 per cent of the Irish population was regarded as illiterate. Now, a century later on, the OECD International Adult Literacy Survey published in 1997 found that 23 per cent of those tested did not have the literacy skills necessary to function in contemporary society. (71)
To this overall decline in literacy, add an anxiety about ownership of the schools that was present in the first part of the 1990s. In 2004, Ivana Bacik noted that “in total, excluding specialty schools, there are 3,156 national schools in Ireland, the vast majority of which (2,919 or 92%) are Roman Catholic” (34). That is to say, that the overwhelming majority of state-funded schools are owned and controlled by the Catholic Church.

As Bacik explains:

> When one belief system is given the priority over all others, it creates an unhealthy balance: when this is allowed to occur in a pluralist society, it can create resentment and the isolation of certain sections of society. Catholic Church-owned and run schools do not promote an integrationist approach, and therein lies the problem. (39)

This became an increasing problem because of the Celtic Tiger.

> As the Celtic Tiger grew, Ireland became an increasingly cosmopolitan European country. As I will discuss later, this shift brought with it increased immigration, increased social diversity, and a broader awareness and interest in matters outside of Ireland. Many Irish started to question the efficacy of Church-operated state-funded education.

> When she was Minister for Education between 1992 and 1997, the Labour party’s Niamh Bhreathnach attempted to reduce the control of religious denominations over the education system through legislative reform of the composition of boards of management of schools. (Bacik 41).

Nor was this the only hot-button issue on Bhreathnach’s desk. During her tenure issues such as the need to make higher education more
accessible (Cullen) and sex education (Reuters) (the latter will be discussed in some detail in relationship to the key term) were widely discussed and debated. Schooling and educational reform were very much in the cultural consciousness when McPherson wrote *This Lime Tree Bower*.

**Key Term: Sex**

Not surprising for a play featuring a 17 year-old as a major character, the play is deeply concerned with matters of sex. And like the key term of school, the clusters around this key term are varied and conflicted. Some of the cluster terms reflect sex as a good thing, something to be desired and sought after, while others reflect it as a negative thing, the cause of guilt or pain, as something to be avoided. And frequently, these binaries are closely clustered within the script.

Terms discussing the act of sex include *shagged, screwed, had it off, giving her one, banging, do it, fuck, a quick shag, get my end away, getting off, get it in her, give her shed an extension*, and *attacked*. Sex is presented as a rather one-sided activity, one with more-or-less violent overtones, and one that should be discussed through slang terminology. Part of this conception of sex is surely based on the male-dominated world of the play, on the fact that one of the characters is an adolescent boy (and another, Ray, behaves like one), and on the fact that this
construction of the act of sex is highly realistic in such a situation. Another part of this conception, however, is based on the larger anxiety about sexual activity present in Ireland in the mid 1990s.

This anxiety is reflected in the dialectical tensions surrounding the key term. As I said above, the play presents a confused and conflicted ideology about sex. The positive cluster terms\textsuperscript{10} include \textit{good}, \textit{vigorous}, \textit{nothing to worry about}, \textit{experiment}, “quickly the first time/the next was slow and leisurely” (TWAOP 157), \textit{refreshed}, and \textit{content}. The negative terms surrounding sex include \textit{guilty}, sex described as \textit{a punishment}, as a \textit{passing yen}, as \textit{stupid}, as \textit{shite}, and as something compulsory—“they had to share me/they had to take turns” (142). Ray describes feeling both \textit{guilty} about his infidelity to Carmel, and \textit{proud} because he \textit{was getting away with it}. Perhaps the play’s construction of sex is best summed up by Joe’s reaction to seeing Damian rape the girl from the bar: “\textit{the horrible thing was that what I saw made me sick to my stomach, but at the same time it was really turning me on. And that upset me}” (174).

The anxiety and tension surrounding sex in the play are reflective of the same forces in Irish culture during the mid 1990s. As Tom Inglis explains, during the Celtic Tiger:

\textsuperscript{10} In the cluster of “positive” terms, I have also included several that are more neutral. These neutral terms still stand in opposition to the negativized view of sex that is discussed later.
Irish culture is going through an unsettled period, caught as it is between the Catholic morality on which modern Ireland was founded in the nineteenth century and a sexual/moral revolution that has been taking place throughout Western society. This led to a fragmentation of the monopoly previously exercised by the Catholic Church over morality in general and sexual morality in particular. The development of education, the growth of the media, and the gradual easing of censorship facilitated the emergence of resistant discourses about sex, the fulfillment of desire, and the pursuit of pleasure. (32)

At just the time McPherson was writing *This Lime Tree Bower*, as Inglis indicates, Ireland was deeply embroiled in a dramatic cultural shift in the views of sexuality. The Minister for Education, Niamh Bhreathnach, was dealing with a new structure for sex education. Also, in 1992, the Irish Supreme Court allowed the first legal abortion, and, in the same year, contraception became fully legal (Bacik 21). In 1993, homosexuality was decriminalized, and in 1995, divorce became legal (ibid). These decisions were controversial, and caused a great deal of unrest in the culture.

Inglis explains:

> The transition from the old to the new regime has not been easy. Ireland is, in the terms of Ann Swidler, an “unsettled culture” in which there is deep ideological conflict about sex and sexuality. Anything having to do with sex is usually cast as a social problem, hotly debated and discussed in the public sphere. (33)

It is not surprising, then, that *This Lime Tree Bower* contains both sides of this cultural debate. In the play, sex is both god and devil; something

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11 See Bacik 116 for a detailed account of this trial.
good and something guilty, “nothing to worry about” (TWAOP 147) and something dirty. The same could be said about the conceptions of sex in Irish culture during the Celtic Tiger.

**Key Term: Money**

The final key term that I will discuss from *This Lime Tree Bower* is money. This term, and the resultant clusters, is more frequent in the play than any other and, as with the two previously discussed, its usage is fraught with anxiety and tension. The terms that cluster around money are alternately positive and negative. Positive terms include lots of money, pretty fucking amazing, plush, luxury, we could afford it, excited, relieved, laughing, and happy. Those with money are said to swagger. Frank describes his father as lucky to get £200 for the sale of the car. Money, then, is a good thing, something someone is lucky to get, and something that can provide relief from problems.

The negative terms, however, outnumber the positive. Negative cluster terms such as debt, problems, owed, borrowed, pressure, wasn’t much, guilty, and fucking quid, demonstrate the play’s general uneasiness about the subject. Throughout the play, people are offered money that they don’t want, and they are forced to take it anyway. Frank says his father “couldn’t afford to pay me a fortune” (TWAOP 149). Simple Simon is “calling in the loan” that he had given the boys’ father, and “it was
killing my dad” (151). Frank’s father had taken that loan “Like a fucking gobshite” (151) and “as if friends could never let money upset them” (151). Ray calls the boys “typical nouveau riche, all money and no taste” (190).

The play’s negative view of money is perhaps best demonstrated by

Frank’s reaction to the money that he stole:

I wasn’t sure what to do about the money, though. I didn’t want to bury it in case it was too hard to get when I needed it. / And I was afraid to lodge it in case some case I knew at the bank got suspicious. / I was even afraid to look at it. / So it just lay there under my bed. (185)

Frank wonders, “What good had it done? How could I pay Dad’s loan off? Everyone would know it was me” (186). Clearly, money is a subject of suspicion, a cause of problems and anxiety, a source of guilt for those that have it, and of debt for those that do not.

As discussed in the introduction, the Celtic Tiger was a period of tremendous economic growth resulting in considerable prosperity, and in increased poverty. These forces, operating simultaneously, resulted in increased tensions about money. The rich and middle class were getting richer, and the poor were growing ever poorer. This polemic has been increasingly discussed by social and cultural critics. Ivana Bacik laments the economic values which have generated such immense wealth for a relatively small number of individuals and have reduced the numbers of those in poverty overall, yet have made this Tiger society so deeply polarized, allowing the gap between rich and poor to widen as the cost of living creeps higher and higher. (243)
On the subject, Fintan O’Toole says “in general, the gap between rich and poor had been rising in Ireland since the mid-1970s. The boom years did nothing to change the trend in any significant way” (69).

However, conscious consideration of this tension is not simply a result of a decade of historical distance. There was widespread debate about the tenacity of the economic surge, even in the Tiger’s early years. Particularly contentious was the issue of unemployment and its relationship to the economy overall. In December of 1994, Cliff Taylor—Finance Editor of The Irish Times—wrote:

It is hard to find a blot on the economic landscape. All forecasters expect it to be a strong year and where there are differences in forecasts for GNP growth, they normally relate to technical factors affecting the figures. Perhaps the most encouraging forecasts relate to job creation. Total job numbers are expected to rise by well over 30,000 in 1995, with a similar increase seen in the year just ended. Irish economic growth is not, after all, jobless growth and the rate of job creation now in evidence has also been seen once before in recent years in the 1989/90 period. Because of the numbers of young people coming onto the jobs market, the increase in employment may not be enough to put a major dent in the dole queues. But unemployment should continue on a steady downward trend, helped also by expanded Government jobs programmes. (1)

To Taylor, the economy seemed sure to bring new jobs, and the Government would be poised to help.

Just over nine months later, in September of 1995, and in the same newspaper, Siobhan Creaton wrote “another rise in the number of
people out of work coupled with weaker than expected retail sales in the first half of 1995 have raised serious doubts about the strength of the Irish economy” (22). She notes:

The Irish National Organization of the Unemployed chairman, Mr. Barrie McLatchie, criticized the Government for turning a blind eye to the unemployment crisis. "The Government can no longer afford to hail victory for its success in bringing the Irish economy back to life," he said. "It now blatantly appears that economic growth is at the expense of the unemployed and no efforts are being made to create education, training, and job opportunities for the unemployed," he added. (ibid.)

If the discourse in The Irish Times about jobs and the economy can vary this much in just nine months, it suggests that the cultural discourse was tumultuous as well.

The Celtic Tiger was both a boon and a burden, financially speaking. For working class people, like those in McPherson’s play, the love-hate relationship with money was incredibly strong. Poor families needed the new income but good paying jobs were hard to find. Even those employed, like Frank, frequently worked for a paltry wage. The clusters that surround the key term “money” in This Lime Tree Bower reflect the larger cultural anxiety on the subject.

As suggested by Burke’s notion of cluster analysis, each of these terms, “money,” “sex,” and “school,” and the meanings associated with them in the play, reveals the worldview of the playwright. McPherson’s
worldview, as demonstrated in *This Lime Tree Bower*, resonates strongly with the social consciousness of its time. Each of the key terms reflects a cultural tension in Ireland in 1995. While these issues are still at play in Ireland today, and the play remains quite relevant, when read as an artifact of Celtic Tiger Ireland, *This Lime Tree Bower* opens doors for understanding those cultural tensions anew. Conversely, a failure to examine these societal anxieties, made so clear through a cluster analysis of the key terms in the play, would be a detriment to any production of the play.
PART 2: The Weir

Written in 1997, under commission by London’s Royal Court Theatre, The Weir is set in a small pub in rural Ireland. McPherson is intentionally vague about the exact setting, but he says it is set in County Sligo, or County Leitrim (TWAOP 5). The action of the play centers on a single night in which a new resident has moved to the area, and is being shown around by local businessman Finbar. The new resident’s arrival has caught the attention of the locals, Jack, Jim, and the owner of the pub, Brendan, for one reason. This new resident is “a fine girl. Single. Down from Dublin and all this” (10). Finbar brings Valerie to the pub to meet the locals, and they engage in a nice evening of “craic” (Irish for lively conversation and community).

Throughout the evening, the inhabitants of Brendan’s pub take turns telling ghost stories. Jack, the oldest of the characters, goes first (30-33), having been goaded into telling a story about a fairy road that travels straight through the house that Valerie has just moved into.

The next story McPherson gives us is told by Finbar (36-40)—widely considered a blow-hard by his friends in the pub. Finbar reluctantly relates his personal experience in which a young neighbor girl allegedly summoned a demon with an Ouija Board. In his story, he did not see a ghost himself, but was a casual observer to one affected by having seen one. Finbar went to help the neighbor girl, arrived, called
the doctor and the priest (the logical ways to fix the situation), and went home. When he got home, he thought he felt something behind him, and refused to turn around or light another cigarette.

Jim gets his turn to tell a story next (44-48). His story is based on a personal experience in which he saw a ghost with his own eyes. While helping a priest from a neighboring town dig a grave, the ghost of the man he was helping bury walked over and asked to be buried in another grave. The other grave belonged to a young girl who had recently died. Later, Jim found out that the man had a reputation for being a child molester. Dramatically, this story also serves to set up a row between Finbar and Jack, over the nature of their interest in Valerie.

Valerie’s story (53-57) happens next in the play. She relates the events of the death of her young daughter, and tells of a phone call in which she believes she heard her daughter’s voice. This story is much more telling about Valerie than the others are about themselves. We learn why Valerie has left Dublin, we learn of her broken marriage, we learn of her heartbreaking loss.

Finally, Jack tells a very personal tale about the loss of the love of his life, not through death, but through bad decisions. The story is not a ghost story; but one of loneliness and pain. The meaning found here seems to be a lesson for Valerie to not throw her life away and for Brendan, the young pub owner, to keep looking for love, however painful.
The final moments in the play show Brendan tidying up and preparing to take Valerie and Jack home. As the three decompress from their emotional evening, talk turns to the German tourists that are going to start arriving in the area in the next few weeks. As we have learned throughout the play, these tourists who will frequent Brendan’s small pub, are seen as an intrusion by Jack and Jim. After promising to return to the pub, even while the Germans are there, Valerie says that she “might even learn some German” (71). Jack and Brendan tell her that they doubt that she will, because the tourists are actually from Denmark, or Norway, or somewhere, and that they only “call them the Germans” (71). The last line in the play, as Brendan turns out the light in his pub, is “Ah, I don’t know where the fuck they’re from” (72).

**Cluster analysis of The Weir**

*The Weir* is a complex and powerful play. When it was new, McPherson himself said “the play is a bunch of people sitting together in a pub telling each other ghost stories” (qtd. in Wood 143), which he says “didn’t sound like a good idea. It sounded like a pretty bad idea. But I thought it could really work” (ibid). In reality, however, the play is about much more than ghosts. McPherson has said that the play is about death (Costa 83) and, perhaps more profoundly, “it is about fundamental fear. And the powerful need people have for community, between two
people, or three people, or a hundred and three people” (qtd. in Wood 143). Certainly, the overtones of loss, death, loneliness, and fear ring throughout the play but so do those of hope, community, compassion, and healing.

But underneath all of the philosophical themes in the play, there lurk heavy reflections of Celtic Tiger Ireland. I am not the first to point these out. McPherson says:

I once heard an academic remark that the popularity of *The Weir* was due to its representation of Old Ireland meeting New Ireland [sic]. The men who drink in the bar are the remnants of Old Ireland. They are comfortable with superstition. They are secure in their community and each knows his place in the pecking order. Then a woman from Dublin arrives and she is representative of the newer, changing, modern Ireland. Expected to fend for herself as an individual, she feels abandoned and has become dysfunctional. She’s lonely and confused. The men in the bar take it upon themselves to console her. They accept her belief that she has had a terrifying supernatural encounter and they don’t judge her. And, just as all of us often feel like we’d like to take off somewhere for a while and sort ourselves out, this reading of the play suggests that New Ireland is a cold, alienating place where you are supposed to make decisions in a climate of uncertainty, and Old Ireland was a place where we’d like to go now. Even for a little while. Hear the old stories. Sit by the fire. Share your troubles. I can see why, especially in urban environments like London and New York, people see the play as some kind of consolation. And perhaps more so with ex-patriates and people of Irish descent. As I say, I don’t know if this is why the play has been so popular. It’s fairly plausible. (“Old Ireland Bad, New Ireland Good”)

While I am not willing to join this unnamed academic in suggesting that the representation of old versus new Ireland accounts for the play’s
success—indeed, I believe that the play’s success lies in its emotional and philosophical explorations of humanity, as in all of McPherson’s work to date—I am in complete agreement that this representation is there. In fact, a careful examination of the play reveals three key terms that represent major social attitudes present in 1997 Ireland, none of them pertaining to ghosts, death, or fear.

Again using Burke’s cluster analysis, I will unpack these three key terms: rural Ireland, urban Ireland, and the Germans, to reveal the worldview of the playwright at the time he was writing. I will explain each of these terms and the clusters of meaning that surround them in the play, and will put each in context with McPherson’s Ireland in 1997. Unlike the previous analysis (of This Lime Tree Bower), I will discuss the context of the first two terms, rural Ireland and urban Ireland, together, as they are in significant conversation with each other. The third term, the Germans, I will discuss on its own.

**Key Term: Rural Ireland**

Associational clusters around rural Ireland begin even before the play itself. In the Author’s Note (*TWAOP* 3), written in January of 1997,

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12 I am not alone in this belief. See Grene (304) for an expanded discussion on this topic.
McPherson makes it very clear that rural Ireland was on his mind when he wrote the play. In the note, McPherson says:

This play was probably inspired by my visits to Leitrim\textsuperscript{13} to see my granddad. He lived on his own down a country road in a small house beside the Shannon. I remember him telling me once that it was very important to have the radio on because it gave him the illusion of company. We’d have a drink and sit at the fire. And he’d tell me stories.

McPherson continues:

And then when you are lying in bed in the pitch black silence of the Irish countryside it’s easy for the imagination to run riot. I always felt different there. I can still see him standing on the platform at the station. He always waved for much too long. Much longer than a person who was glad to have his privacy back. (3)

Again before the play actually starts, in the place-setting stage directions, McPherson mentions the key term, this time using the word \textit{rural} twice in the space of twenty words. The stage directions say “the play is set in a rural part of Ireland, Northwest Leitrim or Sligo. Present day. A small rural bar” (5). McPherson says that he thinks the play is set in the “tiny hamlet” of Jamestown (305), which is about 3 miles from Carrick-on-Shannon. Rather than saying this outright in the stage directions for the play though, McPherson leaves the exact setting vague and ambiguous. The operative word in McPherson’s text is not “Jamestown,” which is never mentioned or even eluded to in the play, it is \textit{rural}.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} In the northwest part of the Republic of Ireland, approximately 120 miles from Dublin.
\end{flushright}
Within the play itself, the word rural is not used directly, but several terms associated with the notion of rural life are used. These terms become connotative key terms, each relating back to the key term rural. These connotative terms include farm, Brendan’s top field, and country. Rather than examining these separately as smaller key terms, I will analyze them together, and somewhat interchangeably, as part of the discourse surrounding the term rural.

Some of the terms that cluster around rural include positive ones such as reasonable, quiet, lovely, filled with old folklore, settling in, and grand spot. Brendan’s sisters are criticized for having no attachment to the place (9), for wanting to sell the top field, and for seeing his farm only as new cars for the hubbies. Valerie is praised as a good girl for her country ways when she refuses a fresh glass for a refill on her wine (33). Repeatedly Valerie is reminded that she is welcome even though she has come to the country alone and has no one in the area (16). Jack describes life in the country as follows:

You can come in here in the evenings. During the day you’d be working. You know, there’s company all around. Bit of a community all spread around the place, like. (40)

And Valerie insists that she has come to the country for some peace and quiet.

The play also includes several clusters that are more negative and critical of rural Ireland. These terms include quiet, loneliness, bypassed
by the main road (64), hicks, and cold. While Valerie is welcome, other outsiders are called blow-ins, 14 and the locals are the natives. Old men, a category that apparently includes anyone over 40, are described as perverts, headers, dreadful fellas, desperate men, and old grannies. Old women are described as grand, sprightly, on the ball, characters, and as pieces of machinery, for example everything’s going on her, and built like a fucking tractor. And everybody is a drinker.

Finbar tells Valerie not to “mind these country fellas” (21) who “all stayed out here on the bog picking their holes” (21). He says of Brendan’s pub that “half the townland used to nearly live in here” (19), but it is clear that now they do not. Similarly, Jim says that “this townland used to be quite important back a few hundred years ago” (29), but clearly time has moved on. Even if Jim wanted to sell his house, and the full acre of land it is sitting on, he’d only get £20,000 for the whole thing and, as he says, “sure, where would you be going with that?” (15).

Jack warns Valerie that “there’s no dark like a winter night in the country” (31), and tells her that she might have a “peace and quiet overload” (41). Finally, Jack says to Valerie that being out in his garage in the country “stops you thinking about what might have been and what you should have done. It’s like looking away” (67). He goes on to “wonder if being out here in the country is the best place for you to...you

14 A common slang term with a derogatory connotation.
know…”(68), and explains that being in the country constitutes “hiding yourself away. Listening to old headers like us talking about the fairies. Having all of your worst fears confirmed for you. Tuh. Ghosts and angels and this” (68).

Like the road to Jack’s garage, this part of the world has been bypassed by the main road into town. There are few opportunities to grow, few opportunities for money, and few chances for love. Life in the country is presented as an escape, and the country as a place to hide from modern life. I will discuss this more in contrast to the second key term, urban Ireland, below.

**Key Term: Urban Ireland**

As with the word “rural”, the word “urban” is not used in *The Weir*, but can be situated through connotative terms such as city, Dublin, town, and townland,\(^\text{15}\) and I will consider these interchangeable with each other and with the notion of urban Ireland.

The terms that cluster around urban Ireland vary depending on who is speaking. Valerie, who is from Dublin, Finbar, who moved to...
town to “seek my fortune” (21), and Jack’s old girlfriend, who moved to Dublin, have a more positive view of the urban. Terms from them include good job, working, school, machine, engineering, shrewd investment, lights, married, and kids. Valerie was married, had a child, and had a good job in Dublin. Finbar, after moving to town (Carrick, in his case), moving “down into the lights” (40) because he “didn’t want the loneliness” (40), “bought the whole town “ (22), got married, and is a successful businessman. Jack tells us that the love of his life “wanted to go up to Dublin, you know. She would have felt that’s what we should have done” (64). He continues, “and she did in the end, anyway, like. And she was working in there waiting for me to come” (64). For this lot, the urban presents opportunity, companionship, the possibility of marriage and children. The urban offers jobs, money, and industry.

The other view of urban Ireland comes primarily from Jack, but also from Jim and Brendan. The terms that Jack clusters around the city include mad, freezing, damp, dark, and dirty. Jack describes his irrational fear that kept him from running off to the city with his girlfriend (64). He says he “thought it was a thousand fucking miles away” and that he “hated going up” (64). He says that, even when he was in Dublin, he “couldn’t stand being away” (64), and calls the demise of his relationship

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16 Which I take to be Carrick-on-Shannon in County Leitrim, and not the tiny village of Carrick about 3 miles southeast of Jamestown. The former would be large enough to support Finbar’s hotel.
“her fault for going up in the first place” (65). Jack also describes the city as dark, and says that the weather made it seem “like there was a roof on the city,” as he “found himself in a labyrinth of streets” (66).

The other men discuss the urban indirectly. There are several mentions of Finbar’s hotel and pub called “The Arms.” In The Arms, in the town of Carrick-on-Shannon, men and women have affairs (43), priests from nearby towns come to look for help in burying pedophiles that those in the priest’s own town will not have anything to do with (45), and the Germans get poisoned by the drink (41). While this last is said in jest, the contrast between the urban pub and Brendan’s rural pub is quite clear. In the city, vice happens. It is telling, also, that when the Germans are in town, frequenting Brendan’s pub, Jim and Jack flee to “The Pot”—a pub in Carrick—because the presence of the Germans seems like less of an intrusion there.

Perhaps the most complex cluster pertaining to the city comes during Jack’s final story, as he is telling about being at the wedding of his former lover. He says that he grinned at her as she was coming down the aisle—a grin that said in part “the future’s all ahead of me” (66). He continues, saying:

And she just looked at me like I was only another guest at the wedding. And that was that. And the future was all ahead of me. Years and years of it. I could feel it coming. All those things you’ve got to face on your own. All by yourself. And you bear it ‘cause you’re showing everybody that you’re a great fella altogether. (66)
This cluster is complex in that it does not directly reference the city, or urban Ireland. It is significant, though, that this realization happened in Dublin. This significance becomes clear when contrasted with Jack’s statement about the country being a place where one can *look away*. In the country, Jack could ignore the young woman’s letters, blaming her for the relationship ending. In the city, though, Jack was forced to face his future—not his past, as one might expect. What bothers Jack at the wedding is not guilt over what he has done, or the pangs of loss as his ex was married, it was the sudden and vivid picture of his future.

The play makes us believe that Valerie has left Dublin in order to *turn away* from her future. She has come to the country by her self, with designs on some *peace and quiet*. This is in stark contrast to the future ahead of her in the city. Her husband had explicitly told her to get treatment to help her deal with the loss of her daughter (57). Instead of getting treatment, though, Valerie came to the *quiet* and *lonely* countryside—a place, perhaps, where she can *turn away* and keep from facing the question of, as Jack says, “what might have been, and what you should have done”(67).
Rural versus Urban Ireland In Context

The Weir was written at a time caught in a major cultural shift in terms of its thinking about matters rural. In 1993, John Waters wrote the following in The Irish Times:

One way of describing what has been happening to Ireland in the past 20 years or so would be to say that the country has been going out of fashion. I do not mean that it has become unfashionable to be Irish, but that the realities of what it is like to live in Ireland and the aspects of Irish life which might ensure the health and stability of future life here have all been rendered unfashionable within the public imagination of the State. Although the word “imagination” itself conjures up notions of ephemerality and superficiality, I believe that the condition I speak of is a dangerous one and might even prove fatal. The entity we have come to know as "rural Ireland" provides the most basic example. Even the most well-intentioned and sympathetic public responses to the situation of this entity can be observed to make the assumption that rural Ireland is, so to speak, a couple of bales short of a trailerload. We have come to characterize rural Ireland as a "problem" area undergoing a "crisis" of some kind. The tone of concern with which such diagnoses are delivered suggests that something will have to be done by someone or other, if this place is not to disappear altogether. (par. 1-3)

This attitude towards rural Ireland, coupled with the increased urbanization of the nation as a result of the Celtic Tiger, is a part of the cultural atmosphere surrounding McPherson’s writing.

In addition to these factors, the economic changes in Dublin had created a new breed of Irish young. Fortune magazine’s Rob Norton wrote in 1999:

Striding through the streets of Dublin these days is an entirely new species of Irishman and Irishwoman: educated,
optimistic, and affluent—unaffected by the twin demons of poverty and despair that hounded their ancestors for the last several hundred years. "They are the first Irish generation," says historian J.J. Lee, "that has never known defeat." (Par. 1)

McPherson himself, Master’s degree in hand and new-found success as a professional playwright, certainly fits into this description.

It is not surprising, with the balance between urban and rural Ireland changing, and with his memory of his grandfather, that McPherson wrote a play set in rural Ireland. It is also not surprising that rural and urban become key terms in the play. What is remarkable about this play, however, is that it does not pit these key terms against each other as god/devil terms. That is to say, McPherson neither glorifies the urban nor romanticizes the rural. He presents a complicated and considered view of both. In both cases there are criticisms apparent—the fast pace and confusion in the city, the loneliness of the country—but neither is presented as better than the other. Valerie has chosen the country for her own reasons, and they may be precisely the opposite of the reasons that Finbar chose the town.

This treatment of rural and urban Ireland differ from Martin McDonagh’s *Leenane* trilogy, for example, where rural Ireland is presented as backwards and remote, and from Enda Walsh’s *Sucking Dublin* where Dublin is presented as filled with drugs, crime, and violence. McPherson is not making a political statement about class or
power, he is not decrying the plight of the Irish youth. McPherson is reflecting, in his philosophical way, the attitudes of his countrymen, in all their complexity.

The presence of this commentary on urban and rural Ireland reflects the complex relationship that McPherson’s Ireland had with the issue in 1997, when the play premiered. The topic was certainly on his mind, and on that of others who had an emotional attachment to the Irish countryside.

**Key Term: The Germans**

While references to the Germans in the play do not appear with nearly the frequency that references to urban or rural Ireland appear, the status of the Germans as a key term stems from the intensity of the uses of it. References to German tourists, who are set to arrive in the small townland, occur throughout the play, and the final line in the play is a comment about the tourists.

Cluster terms that surround the Germans include *first, work, revenue, families, turning, leaving, trekking up here, poisoned, coming, noisy, and bother*. Brendan is not interested in clearing his top field for some campsites to accommodate the Germans because, he says, “*they do be around anyway*” (*TWAOP* 17), he is not “*chasing the extra revenue*” nor “*the work*” (17). He’d rather “*leave the campsites to Finbar, ha? He’ll sort them out*” (17).
Brendan’s main concern near the beginning of the play is that if he allowed the Germans to stay so close to his home, the contrasting silence when they are gone would be too much to bear. He says:

If you had all…the families out there. On their holliers. And all the kids and all. You’d feel the evenings turning. When they’d be leaving. And whatever about how quiet it is now. It’d be fucking shocking quiet then. (17-18)

After this, no more is said on the subject for a long while.

The next mention of the Germans comes in relation to the folklore of the area surrounding Brendan’s pub. Finbar explains to Valerie that “you get all the Germans trekking up here in the summer” (28), he says:

They do come up. This’d be the scenic part of all around here, you know? Em. There’s what’s? There was stories all, the fairies be up there in that field. Isn’t there a fort up there? (28)

After a confirmation from Brendan that there is a fairy fort reputed to be in the field, Finbar explains that “the Germans do love all this” (28). Here the men are demonstrating the seemingly authentic interest that the Germans have in the local folklore and stories. This mention of the Germans causes Jack to tell his first story.

Later, Finbar returns from the bathroom into the middle of a conversation about himself. In an attempt to deflect whatever Jack, Jim, and Brendan have been telling Valerie about him, Finbar jokes that Jack

17 Irish slang for holidays, or vacation.

18 A verbal stall— the equivalent of “um” in American English.
must have been telling Valerie “about how twenty Germans were poisoned by the drink in here, last summer” (41). Jack quips back that Finbar’s pub, The Arms, is the sort of place where something like that would happen. (41). While this exchange is primarily a joke, it may be read as setting up the distaste that Brendan actually has for the Germans, which will be revealed later. But, before this is revealed, Brendan tells Valerie that his ladies restroom is broken, but he’s “getting it fixed for the Germans, but I haven’t done it yet” (48). Once more, the Germans are causing Brendan unwelcomed work and expense.

Finally, decompressing at the end of the evening following Jack’s final emotional story, the talk turns again to the Germans. Brendan tells Valerie that Jack and Jim will be “fierce scarce around here for the next few weeks” (69) because “the Germans’ll be coming and they love it in here” (69). Brendan explains that Jack thinks the Germans are “too noisy” (70), to which Jack explains that the real problem is the language barrier: “see, you don’t know what they do be saying or anything” (70). Instead of coming to Brendan’s pub, Jim and Jack will frequent one in Carrick called “The Pot.” Although Jack acknowledges that, as Brendan says, “there do be just as many of them down there” (70), “it doesn’t seem as bad down there” (70). Valerie explains that the reason it does not seem as bad is that “this is your place” (70). Here the Germans are being painted as intruders on the countryside.
Jack agrees with Valerie, and says that he avoids Brendan’s pub “out of respect for this place” (70). This statement prompts an eruption from the otherwise quiet Brendan. Brendan reprimands their brand of “respect,” saying:

The two of yous leaving me standing behind that bar with my arms folded, picking my hole and not knowing what the hell is going on. And them playing all old sixties songs on their guitars. And they don’t even know the words. And nothing for me to do except pull a few pints and watch the shadow from the Knock\(^{19}\) moving along the floor, with the sun going down. I’m like some fucking mentler,\(^{20}\) I do be watching it! Watching it creeping up on the Germans. And they don’t even notice it. I must be cracking up if that’s my entertainment of an evening. (70)

Here the Germans are oblivious to the realities of Irish life. They do not know the words to the songs they play, they do not notice the shadows of the countryside.

Valerie says she will come into the pub, even with the Germans, and she “might even learn some German” (71). Surprisingly, Jack and Brendan doubt that she will learn any at all from these Germans because they are not actually Germans. Jack says “Are they from Germany, Brendan? [...] We call them the Germans” (71). He continues, “where are they from, is it Denmark, or Norway? It’s somewhere like that” (72). And to this, Brendan’s reply, and the last line in the play, is “I don’t know

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\(^{19}\) An Irish term for “hill”.

\(^{20}\) A common slang term for a crazy person.
Finally, it becomes clear that theproblem that the men have with the Germans is nothing racially based, or culturally based, it is strictly xenophobic. The problem is not that they are Germans, the problem is that they are outsiders.

It may sound strange, in a play about creating community, to have xenophobic discourse, but the issue of tourism was a hot-button topic in Ireland in the late 1990s. Moya Kneafsey writes:

> It is widely recognized that tourism has become an industry of major importance in the Republic of Ireland, with visitor numbers rising from 2.5 million in 1990 to over five million in 1996. European Union funds and public and private sector investments totaling 388.84 million ECU during the period 1989-1993, have helped to improve the roads, infrastructure and accommodation base, and have raised the number of visitor attractions whilst accessibility has been enhanced through the liberalization of air travel in the late 1980s. (111)

And, of these European tourists coming to Ireland, Germans are the most numerous. *Tourism Ireland*’s website says “A record 470,000 German visitors came to the island of Ireland in 2008. Germany is the island’s largest tourism-generating market from Mainland Europe” (par. 1). This trend in tourism, both from Europe in general, and Germany in particular, was growing throughout the Celtic Tiger. Kneafsey explains:

> Irish tourism over the last decade or so has been characterized by rapid growth, with particular emphasis on the use of cultural or heritage tourism to promote ‘bottom-up’ development in rural areas. The emergence of this kind of all-encompassing tourism has implications for the people who live in tourist destinations, people who themselves become part of the tourist product. For instance, O’Connor
suggests that one of these implications is that “Irish people become inscribed within tourist expectations. Tourists expect a certain type of behavior and are disappointed if these expectations are not met. (112)

The result of these expectations to perform their Irishness has been the cultivation of xenophobic instincts. These, in turn, have been exasperated by increased immigration into Ireland as a result of membership in the European Union. Roisin Ni Mhaille Battel writes “Ireland now finds itself in the surprising and unsettling position of being a magnet for immigrants instead of the more accustomed generator of emigrants” (104). Bacik explains further:

Few welcomes are offered to those who come here seeking asylum, or to those who simply have a different skin color from the majority “white” population. The myth of the hundred, thousand welcomes masks what different guidebooks have memorably summed up, in a warning to those intending to visit these shores, as “peculiarly naïve” and even “particularly lurid” brands of racism. (199)

This attitude is hinted at within The Weir’s seemingly placid tranquility at two times in addition to the commentary on the Germans.

First, Jack describes his betting on horses with “Kenny down in the shop, the Knacker” (23). “Knacker” is a derogatory slang term for an Irish “Traveller,” a nomadic people. Bacik says “those born into the Traveller community in Ireland have long been treated as second-class citizens” (202). The casual identification of Kenny as a Knacker demonstrates a certain desire to relegate him to the confines of that second-class status.
The other hint about the xenophobic attitude of the characters in the play comes when Finbar describes the Walsh family, those with whom he interacts during his story, as “blow-ins” (35). This term, as I mentioned earlier, is a derogatory term for outsiders who have “blown into” an established community.

I am not trying to imply that Conor McPherson is, in any way, racist or xenophobic. It is to McPherson’s credit, and indicative of his own philosophy, that the men in *The Weir* accept Valerie so wholly. There does not appear to be any reason to doubt the veracity of the tenderness and acceptance Valerie is shown. The fact that these attitudes have crept into *The Weir*, which McPherson describes as a play about community, demonstrates their presence in Irish society as a whole.

Like *This Lime Tree Bower*, *The Weir* includes, lurking under its surface, as it were, elements that make it clear that the play is an artifact of mid-Celtic Tiger Ireland. The play’s exploration of death and loneliness renders it timeless, but the focus on the key terms—rural, and urban Ireland, and the discourse surrounding the Germans—places this play in a context that is very revealing in terms of Irish history.

The key terms found through a cluster analysis reveal a major aspect of Irish culture in the mid 1990s. In *This Lime Tree Bower*, there is a particular amount of anxiety and disquiet within each of the key
terms. In *The Weir*, this tension has given way to a calm conversation about the key terms. *The Weir* begins a movement away from discord about the Celtic Tiger, and towards acceptance of it and of the resulting reconfiguration of Irishness. *The Weir* is a perfect bridge between *This Lime Tree Bower* and the plays that to be discussed in Chapter 3—*Port Authority* and *Shining City*. 
CHAPTER 3
“And Now I Can’t Go Back”: McPherson’s Changed Ireland

Conor McPherson’s country was changing right around him. This change created, demanded even, a new worldview. Andrew Kincaid writes that after the turn of the 21st century:

Contemporary Dublin is bursting at the seams. Simultaneously crowded and sprawling, the city tosses up new upscale apartments as fast as the suburbs can absorb more countryside. Industrial cranes are everywhere. The city’s streets are jammed with tourists and consumers. Something new has been happening to the city, to the nation: but what exactly? There has been a wave of unprecedented economic growth, immigrants from many different foreign countries are arriving, the Irish "diaspora" is returning, multinational companies are setting up factories, and Irish popular culture, whether on the big screen, theatre or music, is making some people very rich. To make sense of Ireland’s putative success, politicians and cultural commentators have enthusiastically adopted the language and policies of economic globalization—privatization, free-trade, and cuts in public spending—along with the attendant cultural vocabulary of cosmopolitanism and post modernism: upscale worldliness, mobility, urbanism, and cultural hybridity. Ireland, it would appear, is now part of the wider European project of national fragmentation and continental consolidation, its economy no longer mired in the so-called dead-end of nationalism. (16)

The Irish had to adapt their thinking to allow for their place in the globalized world.
There were many facets of society that had changed, and many long-held institutions that were being challenged, daily, by the necessary worldview. The Catholic Church, wracked by scandal, began to lose power. The Irish propensity for alcohol was garnering international attention. Even the physical appearance of the Irish came under a global microscope. The Irish were no longer a society that could afford to be anxious about the state of change, resisting where they could, adapting where they must. Instead, Ireland began to feel a sense of comfort with its new place in society. Ireland was no longer “changing”—it had changed.

In this chapter I will discuss *Port Authority* and *Shining City* as artifacts of the changed Ireland that existed during the second half of the Celtic Tiger.
Part 1: Port Authority

_Port Authority_ premiered in February 2001. It was “first produced by the Gate Theatre, Dublin” (_Port Authority_ 3), but first performed at “the New Ambassadors Theatre [in London], in association with Ambassador Theatre Group and Old Vic Productions” (_ibid._). In April of 2001, the play opened in Dublin at the Gate Theatre (_ibid._). Following on the heels of _Dublin Carol_, and before that _The Weir_ which were both dialogic plays, in _Port Authority_, McPherson returned to the extended monologue. Like _This Lime Tree Bower_, _Port Authority_ features three men telling stories, and the monologues are interwoven with each other. But, unlike _This Lime Tree Bower_, these men are not narrating their part in a single event. In _Port Authority_, the stories are unrelated, except for a few details that cross over from one story to another.²¹

The men in question are, in the words of Ben Brantley, “Dubliners of three generations” (“Three Dubliners” par. 3). Joe is described in the script as “seventy-odd” (_Port Authority_ 5), Kevin is said to be “maybe twenty” (5), and Dermot is in his “late thirties? Mid-Thirties?” (5), and a member of McPherson’s own Generation X. McPherson’s playful ambiguity about the ages of the characters sets a tone for the play and hints at unanswered questions to come. The play, according to its author, is “set in the theatre” (5).

²¹ See page 75.
Kevin, the youngest character, is the first to speak. He explains that he has just moved out of his parents’ house for the first time. He will be moving into a house with three friends—the frequently drunk Davy, who is known throughout Dublin as “Mad Davy Rose”(8); a friend of Davy’s called Speedy, whom Kevin dislikes; and Clare, with whom “everybody in Dublin was in love” (9).

The rest of his narrative follows about one month of his life. He tells of going to a pub to hear Davy’s band The Bangers (38-42). At the concert, he meets Trish, whom he dates. He talks about a house party that his roommates throw that gets somewhat out of hand, and results in his moving back home with his parents (75-79). Mostly, though, Kevin’s story centers around his affection for Clare, and their relationship with each other. He says that even though they both seemed to know that they belonged together, they “didn’t trust it”(80), so they “soldiered on off down different roads” (80).

Dermot speaks next and tells about his experiences with a new job. He explains that he is embarrassed about his wife, who is overweight, and does not fit in with the image he is trying to create (13-16). Then Dermot tells several stories about his new job. The first story centers around a dinner party during which he gets very drunk and gets caught staring at his new boss’s wife’s breasts (28-34). Dermot (43-47) says he is unexplainably forgiven for this transgression, and invited to travel with
the company to America to see a band called The Bangers who Dermot describes as “the biggest thing out of Ireland since The Cranberries. They were going to be as big as U2” (47).22

While in America, Dermot finally learns that his suspicions that he got a job he did not deserve are correct (58-65). His boss, O’Hagan, explains that he was hired instead of someone with the same name, who had come highly recommended (64). Dermot flies home to his wife, dejected, and is comforted (82-85). Mary, Dermot’s wife, cradles his head in her lap and explains that she chose to love him because he needed someone to look after him (85).

Joe, the oldest character in the play, is the last to begin. From his first narrative we learn that he lives in a rest home with twenty other people. He says that Sister Pat, one of the attendants at the home, is “the closest thing I had to a friend, really” (17). Joe tells us that Sister Pat has brought him a present that arrived in the mail at his son’s house, and that his son’s wife had dropped it by on her way to work (17). This confounds both Joe and Sister Pat, because “who’d be sending an old curmudgeon birthday presents? And not on his birthday”(18). Joe

22 This parallel with Kevin’s narrative complicates the play somewhat. If this is the same band, the stories being told can no longer be seen as contemporaneous, because Kevin’s version is certainly not successful. The question of the relationship with time in the play is never answered in the text, and McPherson is somewhat evasive about the question in interviews.
tells Sister Pat that he will open his gift after breakfast, irritating the nun who is quite curious about the package and its contents. Joe goes to the dining room, greets some of the other residents, eats, and finally opens his gift. Inside the box are a picture and a note. Joe says, “it was a small photo that I recognized. And I knew at once what had happened and I didn’t need to read the note” (21).

Joe’s story unfolds, and we learn that he had been married to Liz, and had two children (35-37). Joe discusses some of the differences between Ireland in the 1960s and Ireland today, concluding that things are neither better nor worse than they were then, only different (37). About halfway through his story, Joe offers a word of advice for the audience:

You want a tip? When you dream in the night, just wake up, forget about it, get on with it, get up in the morning and have your breakfast and go to work. / Be courteous in your job and use your manners. / ‘Cause if you dream that someone’s loving you and you wake up looking for them and sending signals to all and sundry around you in the daytime, saying, “Was it you? Was it you who loved me?” / You’ll fucking find them, mark my words. (48)

This unusual moment leads to the heart of Joe’s story, as he tells of his encounter with Marion Ross, his new neighbor. Marion and her husband invited Joe and Mary over to their home for a birthday party, and Joe and Marion found themselves in the kitchen together, talking (51). While the conversation was entirely innocent, Joe had had a dream the previous night about a woman that loved him unconditionally, and
while Marion looked nothing like this dream woman, Joe became convinced that it must have been her (51). When he went home that evening, he says, he felt terrible guilt about the whole thing, even though nothing happened (52).

After that jarring experience, Joe did not see or speak much to Marion until Liz had to go into the hospital to have an ovarian cyst removed (66-73). While Liz was gone, the Ross couple invited Joe over for a drink, and while there, Joe had admired a small picture of Marion as a child (71-72). Joe wanted the picture, but did not take it when offered. It was this picture that arrived at the beginning of the play; Marion had died (87). At the end of the play, Joe lies down on his bed with the picture in one hand, and, in the other, rosary beads that Liz had bought in Lourdes (89-91). Joe never got over the guilt of his uneventful encounter with Marion, nor did he love his wife any less because of it.

McPherson weaves these narratives together, each man speaking in turn. There are things in each story that resonate with the others—people living in the same neighborhoods, but at different times; the Bangers showing up in both Kevin’s and Dermot’s stories; Kevin also talks of rosary beads, purchased at Lourdes by his grandmother; Dermot’s boss describes his late mother asking him to send a picture of herself as a child to a former neighbor—but the relationships between
the men remain unclear. McPherson says that the characters have nothing in common “except they are in the same play” (qtd. in Wood 129).

**Cluster Analysis of Port Authority**

*Port Authority* could be said to be about many different things, ranging from loneliness, to regret, to aging. McPherson says “*Port Authority* is about love” (qtd. in Csencsitz 83). As with his other plays, the potential for multiple readings exists with *Port Authority*. A cluster analysis of the play reveals several key terms that resonate with the cultural conditions of the late Celtic Tiger, which I described above. The tree key terms are clothing, alcohol, and change.

**Key Term: Clothing**

The first key term in *Port Authority* that I will examine is clothing. For the sake of analysis, I will look at any references to apparel, fashion, clothing, and accessories, and at any mention of changeable aspects of physical appearance, such as hairstyle. Although this key term may seem unusual in light of the synopsis and description of the play, I selected it because of the frequency of appearance within the script, and for the connections to Celtic Tiger Ireland in 2001.
Terms that cluster around this notion of clothing range from those which are merely descriptive to those that are loaded with additional meaning. Descriptive terms include *three suits*, *cotton shirts*, *silk ties*, *trousers*, *some tops*, *trainers*,23 *runners*,24 *jacket*, *anorak*, *coat*, *jet black hair*, *short fair hair*, *curly hair*, *gray vest top*, *jeans*, *silver bracelet*, *sporty stripes down her pants*, *cool combat shorts with big pockets on the side of them*, *blond*, *nightie*, *big woolly hat*, and *pajamas*. Most of these terms result from McPherson’s knack for vivid storytelling but, as noted above, they are remarkable in their frequency.

The loaded terms vary in context, but mostly they center on the connection between clothing and identity. Kevin talks about moving out of his parents’ house “*with all my clothes in black bin-liners (7)*,”25 offering this up as both an example of his hasty desire to leave his parents’ home and of his own disorganization. Later, after Kevin and Davy search Speedy’s *pockets* for cigarettes, Kevin says that Clare is generally dating “*some spiky-haired crusty who you could see was from Dublin 4*”26 or

23 Athletic shoes made for “cross-training.”

24 Athletic shoes made for running.

25 A bin-liner is a bag used inside a garbage can.

26 A largely affluent postal code in Dublin, the residents of which are widely considered elitist and snobbish. Crusty is slang for ill-tempered, or for dirty.
somewhere, putting on a bit of an accent. They were all rich and spoiled and better looking than any of us” (9).

A number of times in the play characters are identified specifically by their choice of fashion. Dermot first refers to his new colleagues as “clean-shaven tailor made suits” (13), the synecdoche meant to indicate the fact that Dermot, in his own words (also related to clothing), clashes with these people. At his first meeting with his co-workers, Dermot notes that they are all “what I presumed was Armani. All ex-rugby” (14). Most telling about this last quote is the fact that it is the people themselves described as Armani, there is no wording to indicate that he is referring to the clothing worn by the men; to Dermot, wearing Armani and being Armani (in value, in status, in worth) is the same thing. Dermot, by contrast, was there “in my Penny’s blazer and my loafers from Dunnes” (14); both Penny’s and Dunnes are budget clothiers in Ireland. In reaction to this experience, Dermot “whined at Mary,” his wife, that he “needed to dress better”(15), and she “took me from shop to shop” (15).

When Dermot was invited to his new boss’ home, he notes that, on the train, “all the kids [are] in the latest gear”(27). He notes that the clientele of his new employer included “all the big fashion designers and all” (29). Upon arriving at the party, Dermot is greeted by “a little blondie yoke27 with no straps on her dress and her tits held up with wire” (30).

27 Irish slang for “thing.”
This woman is identified by her hairstyle and her clothing, and otherwise disregarded. Later, Dermot is greeted by his boss’ wife who he says is “basically wearing what looks to me like a piece of pink tissue paper and her tits are basically hanging out” (31). Dermot again sees the woman’s clothing and body, and fails to see her as a person.

Dermot gets lost in drunken thought and says:

For some reason I’m thinking about when I was nineteen and I used to cycle around on my sister’s bike, and my clothes were old. Not old like you Saying Who You Were [sic]. But old like you’d had them a few years and the fibers were old in them. And they were all a bit gray and even though you didn’t, you probably felt like you were probably into little girls. That you felt like you looked like you liked little girls. (32)

With this rant, Dermot implies that pedophiles have a specific look, and that people in older, worn-out clothes tend to have the same look. While sitting around the dinner table, Dermot looks at the wives of his colleagues. He says, “and I realize that all the women at the table are like what I see in Mary’s magazines. All dressed like they always are, just before it all has to come off. Because it just has to” (33). As he elides to earlier, clothing bears the foundations for certain assumptions; clothing reveals who people are, and how they likely behave.

Dermot is not the only character in the play preoccupied with clothing and appearance. Kevin describes Clare’s new boyfriend as “into that whole suede jacket, jeans and boots vibe. Big sideburns on him” (39). He identifies people at The Bangers’ concert as punk or goth, both groups
well known for their easily identifiable clothing. Most of Kevin’s thoughts about these matters, though, center on Clare herself:

Clare was very much sort of up to the minute. / When you saw her it took you a second but you knew she was special. She cared about her appearance but in a very discreet way. She wore makeup but you couldn’t see it. / She was definitely sexy but at the same time she was one of the gang and very easy to be with. (22-23)

Later Kevin describes being in the supermarket with Clare and noticing “she had no socks on. And just, her stupid ankles there. Like she’d never need to wear socks if she was with me or something” (57). As with Dermot, clothing implies certain rules. Kevin thinks that Clare would have to adapt to norms with everyone else. With him, however, Clare knew she had no need to comply.

Joe, too, has something to say about appearance:

I’m going tell you something, right? I was always just like everybody else. Do you get me? There was simply no question about it. You saw me with a bunch of people, you wouldn’t notice me. I never thought about myself. (35)

Later, when Marion comes to his house to bring him dinner while Liz was in the hospital, he says that he

was trying to work out if she’d done anything to her appearance before dropping in. Anything to make herself in any way more appealing than she otherwise might’ve needed to. And I was sitting there, deciding she hadn’t, she was wearing Scholl sandals and a scarf on her head. And she suddenly stopped and said, “Is that bay rum?” which was something I usually used in my hair in those days. I said, yes, it was. And she was slightly miles away, like the smell or me or both or whatever reminded her of something. (70)
To Joe, one has to deliberately try to be noticed, but the slightest aspect of one’s physical appearance can create memory and emotion.

Clothing and personal appearance play a significant role in *Port Authority*. Each of the play’s three characters is concerned with outward appearance and what it might say about inward emotions. This attention to fashion and clothing within the play reflects a dramatic cultural phenomenon happening throughout Ireland in general, and Dublin in particular, in the first years of the 21st century. This cultural shift had two parts—a runaway boom in retail sales and spending on fashion, and a struggle for identity as a cosmopolitan European country.

In April of 2000, *The Irish Times* economics correspondent Jane Suiter wrote:

> The State is experiencing the biggest consumer spending spree in its history, according to the latest figures released by the Central Statistics Office. In January, consumers shopped like never before [...] The value of retail sales was up 17.1 per cent in January compared with the previous year, while the volume was up some 16.5 per cent, which is an "extraordinary figure", according to Dr. Dan McLaughlin, chief economist at ABN Amro. (19).

In the same month, the publication *Retail Week* printed a commentary on the retail boom in Ireland:

> The Republic of Ireland is experiencing unprecedented levels of demand from domestic and overseas retailers. [...] Retailing in Ireland continues to be very buoyant. The market reflects the strong fundamentals of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy and an increased confidence in the country’s newfound European stability. (“Ireland Report” 29)
Part of this surge in retail was due to the fact that Ireland was in the middle of a change in its money. The website for the Euro Changeover Board of Ireland explains:

On 1 January 1999, eleven Member States of the European Union formed Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and created a single currency, the euro, which came into being on that date in cashless form. On 1 January 2002, euro notes and coins will be introduced into circulation and Irish pound notes and coins will begin to be withdrawn. By 9 February 2002 the changeover in Ireland will be complete. ("What is the ECBI")

And the upshot of this changeover, according to *Retail Week*, was stability due to the fact that “Ireland's decision to join the euro has brought about significant interest rate cuts” ("Ireland Report" 29).

However, this retail boom was not without its problems. An unprepared infrastructure created a shortage of affordable retail space. The *Retail Week* article explains:

Against this healthy economic backdrop, there is considerable pent-up retail demand for space throughout the country, while the supply side is being severely impeded by the planning process. Not surprisingly, therefore, record retail rents are being achieved on the very rare occasions that prime property comes to market. ("Ireland Report" 29)

The result of these climbing prices, and the desire by retailers to increase sales, was the expansion of retail shopping districts into the more rural areas in Ireland. *Retail Week* points out:

It is not just Dublin that it is benefiting from the economic boom that sights on major provincial towns and cities as they expand their Irish presence on the back of success in Dublin. ("Ireland Report" 34)
In addition to the rocketing retail market in Dublin (and surrounding areas) at the time McPherson was writing *Port Authority*, there was a fair amount of self-consciousness in Ireland about fashion in general. In 1998, in *The Sunday Times* of London, Irish fashion designer Paul Costelloe took a swipe as Irish women and their sense of style.

Responding to a report in the Irish magazine *Image*, Costelloe noted:

> The October issue of Image magazine has captured what it considers to be the "style of the Irish." That is, the 90 women who best define style in the new "confident, modern" Ireland. It is an impressive project by editor Jane McDonnell and her staff, involving almost three months of research, and the final selection is mostly impressive. Some of the women exude style, others bring to mind ambitious mutton. But, sadly, it is not representative of Irish women. Because a lot of them in this country wouldn't know style if it tottered up to them in 10 inch heels. (Par. 1)

He continues:

> Irish women are the most charming, warm and beautiful in the world, but they have a big problem with major labels. They exist in a very natural way, not unlike the wild heather growing on the side of the Wicklow mountains. Its beauty remains constant. But take that heather off the mountainside and plant it in some urban garden in Foxrock or Carrigaline and it will eventually blend with all the other plants, lose its lustre and fade into oblivion.

This is what has happened to Irish women. They probably now know more about designer labels than their counterparts elsewhere, but they can't carry it off. The whole function of Irish women is to be relaxed, easy and laid-back. So what have they done? They have become structured, tailored and heavily made-up. Ten years on, Irish women have rediscovered the 1980s. They have embraced power dressing almost a decade after it ceased to be taken seriously in America or elsewhere in Europe. They are dressing with a degree of pretentiousness and lack of humour that would
embarrass their mothers. Gulping down lungfuls of self-possession and affluence, they have mistaken them for sophistication and style.

It has come to this because, deep down, Irish women are scared of fashion. They feel confident only if they are wearing a label. Worse, they will wear something hideously safe in the knowledge that it has a label. I see parallels with Princess Diana. Early on, she was very laid-back and dressed simply and elegantly. That was before she got into her Versace mood. Then she started showing her breasts, and her labels became more vulgar as the years went by. She came to rely more on the name than on the look. Now Irish women are doing this more and more, particularly with tacky accessories. They think it's power dressing, but it is nothing of the sort. It is self-indulgent, boring and middle class. And it's out of control. (Par. 3-5)

This assault, as one might expect, was not well received in Ireland.

Costelloe’s harsh words were also not quickly forgotten. As recently at 2006 Jan Battles published a story in The Sunday Times of London discussing Costelloe’s statement and Ireland’s reaction to it:

Costelloe, whose creations were once worn by Princess Diana, stands by what he said about Irish women’s lack of fashion sense. He believes that they were "squeezing into a size too small, gilding the lily, wearing labels head to toe and showing too much skin," according to an interview he gives to an Irish fashion magazine that is to be launched this week.

"I didn't mean to say it. I was caught at my most cynical ... I was feeling quite anti-Celtic tiger. Every time I came to Dublin I observed that the cappuccino society was in full swing and everyone was very excited about the economy growing so quickly. I thought it was all a bit mad," the designer tells The Gloss Magazine in an article entitled "What was I thinking?" "I was being sarcastic, flamboyant, risque. Everyone knows that what I love and admire about Irish women is their natural beauty."

Costelloe says the reaction "took over the country", which was in itself an indication of "what Celtic tiger priorities were
all about”. While provoking the ire of Ireland's female population, Costelloe says he suddenly became popular among men. "Every husband in the country became my friend. I got the male vote. It was quite fun because, once or twice, when dining alone in Dublin, I was approached - usually by a blonde in a black suit - who wanted an immediate explanation of my quite inexplicable remarks." (Battles 3)

For the Irish, this issue appears to have hung in the cultural consciousness.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the presence of the clusters of meaning surrounding the key term clothing in *Port Authority* are a result of the cultural tension and significance being put on the issue at the time McPherson wrote the play. I am not implying that the play is “about” clothing, or even “about” the relationship between appearance and identity. I do not think that this aspect of the play defines even the character of Dermot, inarguably the most concerned with clothing and appearance. Instead, the presence of clothing as a key term in *Port Authority* helps to position the play as an artifact of late Celtic Tiger Ireland.

**Key Term: Alcohol**

The next key term I will discuss was also selected for the frequency of its appearance in the play. In *Port Authority*, there are dozens of references to alcohol, and to other terms that are related to it. In this cluster analysis, I will consider all references to alcohol in addition to
those concerning drinking and drunkenness. In the play, the cluster terms surrounding alcohol reveal a complex and dynamic relationship with the key term. The clusters demonstrate three different systems of meaning surrounding alcohol: positive, negative, and neutral.

The clusters terms revealing a positive attitude towards alcohol include descriptions of drunkenness as being *medicated, fully equipped, nicely oblivious*, and *in great form*. One can “numb all my fears by drinking vodka” (*Port Authority* 62) or use “a few stiffeners at home to sort myself out” (71). It is possible to be “too drunk to feel it” if kicked in the face (76). Cocktails are a way “to say hello” (14); and the offer of a drink at an unexpected time is an exciting prospect, as Joe explains:

> Jackie Fennel thought it was bloody Christmas when I suggested we go and get a bottle of stout at one o’clock in the afternoon. And of course it was a big event now, and everyone was clucking around that the three of us were turning into alcoholics. But what can you do? (86)

When Joe and his confederates return from the bar intoxicated:

> Mary Larkin was singing “You Are My Sunshine, My Only Sunshine,” but she shut up when Sister Pat hoved into view. / Jackie Fennel was doing a little dance and rubbing his hands together. / “We’re home from the fields!” he says to Sister Pat. / And we sat down and had our dinner. / And of course we were the talk of the bloody town. / “Who’s birthday was it?” and all this. (88-89)

The chance to drink is a welcome treat.

_____________________

28 Strong alcoholic drinks.

29 Short for “hovered”
Other clusters surrounding alcohol do not indicate that there is anything welcome or desirable about drinking. In these negative clusters, drunkenness is described as being *in a stupor, hammered, out of it, plunging, fairly pissed, pissed, swaying in the door, staggering home,* and as having *overdone it.* Drunkenness causes bands to take the stage at the pub and play songs they don’t know (24). New drinks are pressed into fists; wine is being pumped into everybody; both sets of imagery implying an imperative to consume regardless of will.

Alcohol causes significant trouble for the men in *Port Authority.* Dermot, very intoxicated, behaves terribly at O'Hagan’s party. He says:

> O'Hagan’s wife plunks down right opposite me. / And I try to distract myself by working out if we’re on benches or seats, but if I check I’m a goner. / So I just silently place my hands on the table. / My head is the moon and I’ve got to keep it away from the earth. / I use my arms to do this. / And I use O'Hagan’s wife’s mostly visible tits to keep the astronauts from panicking. / We panic and we’re gone. / So we’re using O'Hagan’s wife’s tits as a vital NASA supply to balance our brains. Because we can, in our distraction, act automatically, and just use our reflexes, which are nature’s cause-and-effect certainties. / And slowly I notice that everything has gone very quiet. / And I hear someone say, “Dermot?” And I realize that someone must have just asked me a question. / And everyone’s just twigged why the fuck I can’t answer. (33-34)

In his drunken state, trying to avoid passing out, Dermot has been caught staring at the breasts of his new boss. Dermot blames his behavior on the drink, telling Mrs. O'Hagan “*how sorry I was and too much to drink and so on* (45).
Joe also blames alcohol for his surprising emotional connection with Marion Ross. When the two first chat in her kitchen Joe is drinking Smithwicks, an Irish ale, in excess because “there was no water in my mouth” (51). Later, considering his behavior and the strong feelings that he had had for Marion, Joe says, “I put it down to the drink” (52). Drinking, then, is presented as a compulsory thing, and one that causes bad behavior.

Finally, there are clusters of meaning surrounding alcohol that are neither expressly positive nor negative, or where the meanings are somewhat mixed. An example of this mixed meaning comes when Dermot is approaching O’Hagan’s house for his cocktail party. He says:

And I was veering up his driveway, up to these steps going up to his door, thinking maybe I’d overdone it on the G&T’s,30 ‘cause there’d be plenty of booze inside, and I had this great revelation—that it was too fucking late to do anything about it now! I didn’t even care anymore. (30)

Dermot’s concern was not that he had gotten overly intoxicated, and that his behavior and judgment may be impaired, his concern was that there would be more alcohol available inside.

All of the characters talk about alcohol in a nonchalant way, revealing that drinking is simply a part of their lives. Only once does the term “alcoholic” come up, and that usage (mentioned above) is highly ironic. In this play, old men drink in empty bars, but so do drunk

30 Gin and Tonics.
crusties. A hotel minibar is something to be played with “like it was a minibar on the Titanic and we were divers from some crazy museum” (63). A band’s gig in a pub is something to go to “because you could have a few beers and a bit of a laugh” (24).

In the play, certain types of alcohol represent different social categories. Kevin and his friends drink mainly Scrumpy Jack, an alcoholic cider produced in the United Kingdom, and at the Bangers’ concert in the pub, Kevin orders Bulmers, another label by the same manufacturer as Scrumpy Jack. Later, Kevin says that “someone’s dad was at the party, standing in the hall, calm as you like, drinking a can of Royal Dutch” (75), a beer known far better for its low price than its quality. In addition to these labels, at their party, Kevin’s roommate Davy serves “homebrew” from a “plastic dustbin” which “was supposed to ferment for two months. But he’d only started making it on Tuesday and everyone was milling it” (75). Obviously, Kevin and his friends are more concerned with the effect of the alcohol than the taste. There is no indication that this group has developed a discerning understanding of alcohol.

Joe, on the other hand, has a strongly developed palate. Referring to the 1960s, he says “in those days, I drank bottles of Smithwicks” (50).

31 “Milling it” is a phrase built on the slang term milling, meaning fighting. The sense here is that everyone was struggling to swallow the horrible concoction.
At the party at Marion and Tommy Ross’ house, “there was all six-packs of Smithwicks and Guinness and Harp all stacked up in the garage” (50). Yet, even with such a selection, Joe still drank Smithwicks, preferring the Irish Ale to the other beers. Later in his life, Joe apparently changed in his tastes, preferring a “bottle of stout” (86), probably Guinness.

Dermot associates champagne, Glenmorangie,\(^{32}\) and Chardonnay with his new upper-class colleagues. One can drink as much chardonnay as one likes in first-class on an airplane (31). His drink of choice is a gin and tonic (28), but at O’Hagan’s party, he drinks the wine as offered. Drinking is too social an event for Dermot to stand on the laurels of his personal preference.

The existence of alcohol as a key term in Port Authority is not surprising. In 2000, McPherson wrote Dublin Carol, which is explicitly about alcoholism and the impact that it has on a family; Alcohol has played prominently in most of McPherson’s plays,\(^{33}\) including This LimeTree Bower and The Weir. In an interview with Maddy Costa, McPherson discussed his own alcoholism, which he thinks began in 1997. He said:

> I was tasting independence and freedom, but I was irresponsible, and probably the wrong person to have it. I

\(^{32}\) A very high quality Scotch whiskey.

\(^{33}\) Although the degree of prominence varies from a central issue in Rum and Vodka, to nearly non-existent in Come on Over.
became dependent on drinking: you think it makes you feel better, but all you’re ever doing is keeping withdrawal at bay. (Qtd. in Costa par. 13)

In an interview with Chris Jones, McPherson explains further:

I developed bad habits. Alcohol relieved my feelings of gloominess. I got to the point where I was using alcohol to stop feeling worse. I felt very insecure. I was one of those guys who stumbled around in the dark for a long time. (Qtd in Jones par. 20)

McPherson, like so many of his characters, was a drinker; he drank to escape, he drank to feel better.

But McPherson’s drinking days have come to an end. As Maddy Costa explains:

Whisky didn’t keep him from writing Dublin Carol and Port Authority; it just soured the hours when he wasn’t writing. And he might have carried on, until one February night in 2001 - the night Port Authority opened in the West End - he collapsed and was rushed to hospital. His pancreas had ruptured and he was unable to return home for more than two months. "My body gave way," he says simply, "and that was it." He’s been sober ever since. (Par.15)

The distance from the drink has given McPherson the chance to look back on his alcoholism, and the use of alcohol in Ireland. He says “drinking is everywhere, it's like nothing happens without it. Courtships, weddings, funerals, going to the theatre, everything: it's always alcohol, alcohol, alcohol” (qtd in Costa par. 14). Continuing on this theme, McPherson says “Ireland has always had this strong culture of alcohol. I’ve always been aware of the hunger of Irish men to get into a bar and lose themselves in pub culture. They transcend into a kind of traumalike
state. It’s very seductive” (qtd. in Jones par. 23). Colin Murphy nicely
sums up McPherson’s relationship with alcohol:

> Drink is a recurring motif in McPherson’s plays; that’s perhaps not surprising given the fact that he was an early alcoholic and by the time he turned 38 was 10 years off the bottle. McPherson, though, proves to be not just a brilliant chronicler of Irish drinking culture, but a fervent critic of it. He cites the footage of Brian Cowen in Offaly, following his elevation to Taoiseach, standing on the back of a truck with a pint in his hand” as symptomatic of our attitude to drink. "It’s crazy when that is tolerated." Is that not simply Irish, I venture. "If that's Irish, then we've got to change what Ireland is, what Irish means. Our society is alcoholic. Of course, people don't want to hear that because no alcoholic wants to hear it. And I didn't want to hear it when I was drinking. It's addiction, it's sick and it's in our culture. There's a psychological problem there. In Ireland, the person standing at the bar drinking a Ballygowan is an alcoholic."

McPherson’s plays have always been deeply moral, an inclination that goes right back to a masters in philosophy at UCD. (Par. 13)

McPherson’s thinking about alcohol use in Ireland is borne out by statistics. The website for Alcohol Action Ireland says “Ireland continues to rank among the highest consumers of alcohol in the 26 countries in the enlarged EU. We drink about 20% more than the average European” (“How Much Do We Drink”). The website also says “alcohol consumption in Ireland increased by 46% between 1987 (9.8 litres [per person, per year) and 2001 (14.3 litres) when our consumption reached a record high. Consumption has been falling from this peak in 2001, to 12.4 litres in 2008” (ibid).

34 The prime minister of the Republic of Ireland.
The issue of alcohol was certainly in the cultural consciousness when McPherson was writing *Port Authority*. In 2000, RTE, Ireland’s national television broadcaster, presented a well received prime time episode devoted to the subject of alcohol abuse in Ireland (“Abuse of Alcohol”). In April of 2000, the laws governing the hours of operation of pubs in Ireland changed (Hodson). The Irish were thinking about their use of alcohol in relation to the rest of Europe, and McPherson’s play reflects this social awareness, as well as his own.

**Key Term: Change**

The final key term in *Port Authority* that I will discuss is change. Several times in the play, the topic comes up, generally with comparisons being made between the current time and some time earlier. Unlike the other key terms in *Port Authority*, which became clear as key terms due to frequency of use, this term was selected on the basis of intensity. The clusters surrounding change tend to happen at the beginnings and endings of speaking turns, and are frequently echoed in adjacent narratives.

The first hint that change will be an important part of this play comes in the first line. Kevin says “*I moved out in the summer […] My folks were not happy about it*” (*Port Authority* 7). From the first moment of the play it is clear that the change happening in Kevin’s life is both
something he is acutely aware of and something causing his parents unrest.

Joe talks explicitly about the differences between Ireland in the 1960s and Ireland today:

In those days in Ireland like, you didn’t have a lot of the issues that you do now. She cooked the dinner and packed in the job and I earned the spons. That was it. There was none of your everyone’s on valium because they’re all confused about who they are. Listen, I’m not saying that things were better then than now, only different, and you didn’t need to be asking all the questions you do now. And to tell you the truth that suited me. That suited me down to the ground. Because when the time came for me to have to start asking questions, let me tell you at the time, I could’ve done without it. Or maybe I’m glad it happened. You see? I’ve no idea about myself. (37)

A few lines later, Joe says “oh, the times they were a changing, for sure” (37). Joe is acutely aware that the current Ireland is different than the old Ireland he knew.

The next explicit comment about change comes as Dermot is discussing his interview with O’Hagan:

I don’t think they even asked me about three questions. Three maybe. And they were general what do you make of the present state of affairs as they stand at the moment type of questions. Rhetorical, even, like, “Who can say what way the bloody country is going, ha?” I mean how do you answer? You know? You just sort of go, “Well it’s very hard to say, isn’t it?” That’s all I could do. (46)

While this narrative is meant to highlight the simplicity of Dermot’s

35 Slang for money.
interview, and how he should have guessed something was wrong, the inclusion of a discussion about the current state of affairs in Ireland calls further attention to the shifting cultural landscape.

Joe brings up the subject while talking about the decision to attend the party at the Ross’ house, even though they did not really know one another. He says “and even though we didn’t know anyone at all, you see in those days you just spoke to people. Even though then it was like it was now and people had a few bob” (50). Here, “old Ireland” is presented as a friendlier place where those that were working had enough money that they did not need to worry about it.

Dermot’s boss, O’Hagan, tells him about his late mother’s wish to have a photo of herself sent to an old neighbor. Even though this bothered O’Hagan, “the past is over, isn’t it?” (65). Dermot repeats this statement just three lines later. Immediately following Dermot’s repetition, Joe steps forward with a commentary on the way life was for working men in Ireland in those days. He says:

In those days, a lot of us could just about boil an egg. Those of us who worked a lot. There just wasn’t the time. There just wasn’t the need. Breakfast with the kids. Soup and sandwiches at your lunch. And off home to your shepherd’s pie or your few chops for your tea. Sure you spent half your time trying to get it into the kids, any way you could. (66)

Clearly, to Joe, the past is over, but dearly remembered.

36 Bob is a slang term for money.
This conscious awareness of change was present throughout Ireland when McPherson was writing *Port Authority*. The cultural changes caused by the Celtic Tiger are well noted and documented. In 1999, *Fortune* magazine’s Rob Norton painted a picture of this new, changed, Dublin. He said:

Dublin this summer was teeming with these young Irish people, as well as with kids from all over Europe—th ey spilled out of the offices and shops and restaurants and cappuccino bars and pubs. For Dublin has become a trendy destination for eurokids—a hip, cosmopolitan place to hang out and practice your English for a summer or a year, and an easy place for anyone with an EU passport to get a job. And are there ever jobs to be had! Ireland in the 1990s is far and away the most dynamic, successful, fastest-growing nation in Europe. Total output has grown at a rate of 8.5% for the past five years, three times the European average and almost three times as fast as GDP has risen in the U.S. You feel the economy’s vibrancy the instant you set foot in Dublin. There are storefronts being renovated left and right, and construction sites galore—with a new hotel, office block, or apartment building going up on just about every street in town. Everyone seems to have money, nice clothes, and a cell phone. Every other shop sports a HELP WANTED sign in the window, many with beseeching messages such as NAME YOUR OWN HOURS and NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED. In fact, the Irish government was obliged to import Swedish students en masse this past summer to fill the many openings in the hotel and restaurant industry. (There are twice as many hotel rooms in Dublin today as there were five years ago.)

If all this doesn’t jibe with your mental picture of Ireland, you probably haven’t been there in a while. Or maybe you just haven’t been there in the last year and a half. (Par. 2-4)

Norton later discusses the attitude of the Irish concerning the past and the future. He says that, while it might be tempting to assume that the Irish cling to the past and fear cultural change:
to Irish thinkers, though, nothing could be further off base. Declan Kiberd, a literary scholar at University College, Dublin, argues that the Irish are one of the most ruthlessly future-oriented of all peoples. He cites their quick abandonment of Gaelic in the mid-19th century as one example, and Ireland's thorough embrace of business as another. "Far from being obsessed with the past," he writes, "what the Irish really worship is their own power over it, including (if need be) their power to liquidate seemingly sacred traditions."

Anyone walking around Dublin this summer would have found it hard not to side with Kiberd. The New Ireland will be something very different. (Par. 44-45)

This seems to be exactly the worldview reflected in *Port Authority*. The past is over, but remembered. The future is unclear, but this change is a comfortable one; the Irish are looking ahead.

Clothing, alcohol, and change are key terms in *Port Authority*. They function, as key terms do, to reveal the worldview of the playwright at the time the play was written. Although this play is about love, loss, and missed opportunities, each of these key terms reflect an important aspect of Irish culture that help the play to be positioned as an artifact of “new” changed Ireland.
Part 2: Shining City

*Shining City* premiered in London in June of 2004 before transferring to Dublin in September of the same year (*Shining City* 2). The play later opened on Broadway in 2006. *Shining City* was a rousing success with critics and audiences in all three cities. *The New York Times*’ Ben Brantley described the play as “quiet, haunting and absolutely glorious” (“Shining City” par. 1), called Conor McPherson “the author of quintessentially Irish exercises in storytelling” (par. 2), and stated that “in terms of construction, *Shining City* is as close to perfection as contemporary playwriting gets” (par. 12). *The London Daily Telegraph*’s Charles Spencer called McPherson “the finest dramatist of his generation” (par. 1), and described the play as “moving, compassionate and gripping” (par. 1).

The story centers around two men; John, who is recovering from the sudden and tragic death of his wife (and keeps seeing her ghost), and Ian, John’s therapist who is a former Catholic priest who left the Church following a crisis of faith and sexuality. McPherson writes:

The play is set in Ian’s office in Dublin, around Phibsboro maybe, or Berkeley Road, an old part of the city which, while it retains a sense of history, is not a salubrious area. It has a Victorian feel, lots of redbrick terraced houses dominated by the Mater Hospital, Mountjoy Prison, and the church spires of Phibsboro Church and the church at Berkeley Road. It doesn’t feel like a suburb, if anything it feels like a less commercial part of the city center, which is only a short walk away. (*Shining City* 3)
The action of the play is presented in five scenes, with a two-month span between each. In total, the story covers eight months. Ian is the central figure in the play, and is on stage nearly the entire show. In the first scene (7-16), Ian is just getting settled in his new office when his first therapy patient, John, arrives. As the men get to business, John tells Ian that his wife has recently died in a horrible car accident and he is having trouble sleeping. We learn, also, that John and his late wife Mari\textsuperscript{37} have no children. Finally, John tells Ian that he has seen Mari in his home since her death. John says that he returned home from a drink with his estranged brother and as he came in the door of his house, he heard the music of an ice-cream van (12). He says:

But there couldn’t have been because they don’t go around at night. But I heard it when I got in the door. And I...didn’t think about it or...But eh...I was, I was just going into the living room and I put the lights on, and...when I turned around I could see that she was standing there behind the door looking at me. [...] I could only see half of her, behind the door, looking out at me. Eh...but I could see that...her hair was soaking wet, and all plastered to her face. And I, I fucking jumped, you know? (12)

As John continues his description it is clear that he believes strongly that he actually saw the ghost of his late wife. We learn also that, after a few nights in a bed and breakfast, John returned to his house and, while

\textsuperscript{37} An uncommon spelling of Mary in Ireland, the name Mari is of Welsh origin and means “uncertain” or “bitter.”
taking a bath, heard Mari bang loudly on the door to the bathroom. He has not been back to his house since.

In the next scene (17-27), Ian is embroiled in an argument with his girlfriend Neasa. It is revealed that the pair has a daughter together, Aisling, and that Ian has been staying at his office for the past four days following an argument. Ian tells Neasa that they are ending their relationship, but that he wants to be a part of Aisling’s life. Neasa recalls the concern of her father about her getting involved with a priest. Finally, Neasa asks if Ian’s leaving is due to Neasa’s infidelity early in their relationship. This infidelity is news to Ian.

Scene three (28-48) is another therapy session with John. He tells Ian about the breakdown of his marriage to Mari. He blames the failure on the fact that they could not have children together. He thinks that they simply drifted apart. At a party, John meets Vivien, a beautiful woman with whom he flirts for several months. Vivien and John arrange a tryst, but it does not go as planned. In his frustration, John turns to a prostitute, but, again, things do not go well. John laments having become somewhat violent with Mari, and blames himself for her death. Finally, John wonders if Mari has returned to hurt him (47), or, as he says, “maybe she’s just trying to save me” (48).

\[38\] This is the first time the audience learns that Ian had been a priest.
In scene four (49-56), Ian brings Laurence into his office. Laurence, we soon learn, is a prostitute. The men awkwardly talk about their lives, Laurence has a child that he does not see, and Ian tells him that he has not seen Aisling much, either. Ian puts on music and tries to set the mood. He tells Laurence that he has never been with a man before. As Ian nervously approaches Laurence and they embrace, the lights fade.

The final scene (57-67) shows Ian packing up the office. John comes to give him a thank-you gift of an antique lamp, and they discuss John’s therapeutic progress. John is doing much better, he is socializing, and moving into a new apartment. Ian is moving too, from Dublin to Limerick, and in with Neasa and Aisling. John has not seen or heard Mari again. Near the end of the play Ian tells John that he does not believe that John actually saw Mari’s ghost, but had instead a much-needed comforting experience of another (but indefinable) sort. Ian does not believe in ghosts. He says that he wishes that he could have an experience like John’s that “gave everything...some meaning, you know?” (65). Shortly afterwards, John has left, and Ian is alone in his office.

The stage directions read:

In the darkening gloom of the afternoon, we see that Mari’s ghost has appeared behind the door. She is looking at Ian, just as John described her; she wears her red coat, which is filthy, her hair is wet. She looks beaten up. She looks terrifying. Ian has his back to her at his desk, going through some old mail. But he seems to sense something and turns. Lights down. (67)
"Shining City" is a play about guilt and loneliness. At its heart, the play centers around the therapeutic process that can help one to heal from both of these conditions. Every character in the play has something to feel guilty about, and every character feels terribly alone, despite the constant insistence by others (frequently by Ian) that they are not. John feels a crushing guilt about the death of his wife and the events that led up to it. Ian struggles with his guilt over leaving the church, over leaving Neasa, over leaving Aisling (his daughter with Neasa), over his sexual confusion. Neasa struggles with her guilt over her adulterous relationship with another man. Lawrence feels guilty about not seeing his son enough. Every character in this play has been left by someone--Neasa by Ian, John by Mari, Lawrence by the mother of his son, and Ian by God.

What is peculiar about "Shining City", however, is that its world is not pessimistic and bleak. In fact, this is a “shining city” in a very literal sense—it is wonderfully optimistic and hopeful. In this play, we learn to heal. We learn to forgive others, and we learn the most difficult lesson of all—to forgive ourselves and overcome our guilt. About Ian, McPherson says,

That psychiatrist is a human being with too many choices. Like a lot of people who feel alienated, he felt special. Because he felt special he became a healer. He is that beautiful black [sic] canvas upon which everything can be projected. (qtd. in Jones par. 28-30)
Cluster Analysis of *Shining City*

While certainly *Shining City* deals with issues that make it interesting and relevant across many cultural and temporal borders, a cluster analysis reveals key terms that are directly linked to an Ireland changed as a result of the Celtic Tiger. An investigation into the key terms—church, children, and reality—reveal clusters of meaning surrounding the terms that make it possible to situate the play as an artifact of “new” Ireland.

**Key Term: Church**

The term church, and ideas that relate to it—such as God and Jesus—is a key term in *Shining City*, selected both for the frequency of usage, and for the centrality of the term within the play. References to the church begin in the description of the setting in the script. *Mater Hospital,*\(^{39}\) operated by the Catholic Church, and the “church spires of Phibsboro Church and the church at Berkeley Road” (3) are said to dominate the area. “One or two church spires loom outside” (3) the window in the set, visible to the audience throughout the play. The first sound the audience hears as the lights come up is “distant church bells” (7). The sound effect occurs again before scene four (49). For the

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\(^{39}\) Mater Misericordiae University Hospital
audience, the church *looms* and *dominates* the visual and aural landscape of the play.

The word *God* is used thirty times in the play. Most of these instances are expletive which, while common in Ireland, is less common in McPherson’s work. Several uses of note are *thank God*, *oh God*, *my God*. There are also a handful of instances of *Jesus* as an expletive. There is a cluster of uses of *God* that bears special attention. As John is discussing the day on which he and Vivien were to meet for their tryst, he says “it was a horrible day, you know? It never really got bright—didn’t rain, but it was...almost like GOD KNOWS WHAT YOU’RE DOING...you know?” (39, emphasis in original). McPherson punctuates this moment with two additional uses of *God* within the next few lines. This sudden burst of self-awareness is the first time John hints at his theology.

In scene two, it is revealed that Ian had been a Catholic priest, prior to his meeting and beginning a relationship with Neasa. Neasa says that her father had predicted trouble in their relationship; “*he said anyone who goes next to or near the priests is a fucking headcase to begin with*” (20). Neasa’s father, even though “he’s a drunk,” “knows things, you know” (20), and he indict Catholics as crazy if they trust a priest. Ian says “it was a huge thing for me—to *turn my back on the church*—that was a huge thing for me” (22, emphasis mine), implying not just a
decision to leave the priesthood, but renouncing his belief in Catholicism itself.

Finally, near the end of the play, Ian explains, perhaps, his reasons for leaving the Catholic Church. He explains that he has never had an experience that had shown him that God existed. Talking about John having seen Mari’s ghost, Ian says:

John, there was a time I would’ve given anything to see one. Just to know that there was...something else [...] just something else, besides all the...you know...the pain and the confusion. Just something that gave everything...some meaning, you know? I’m talking about God, really, you know?

John interjects here, saying, “I know, Where is He?” Ian continues, saying

I know, but don’t get me wrong. I think you had a real experience. I think you really experienced something—but I think it happened because you needed to experience it. [...] You were pulling all this...you felt maybe you couldn’t move on without being...punished somehow and [...] It happened! But I don’t believe you saw a ghost. Does that make sense? (65)

It is immediately following this exchange, after John has left, that Ian sees Mari. It seems clear that Mari is coming to Ian to help him, in the same way that she helped John. Perhaps Ian will realize that there is a God, or at least something “besides all the pain and confusion.” I think we can intimate that Ian will be put on the road (however long) towards recovery as a result of this visit, just as John was.

The clusters of meaning surrounding the key term church, in Shining City, reflects both McPherson’s personal religious stance and a
shifting religious landscape in Dublin when the play was written.

McPherson has talked explicitly about his relationship with Catholicism.

Maddy Costa writes

McPherson started writing in his teens, not long after he turned his back on religion. The only son of a middle-class Dublin family (he has two sisters, older and younger), he went to a strict Catholic school where, until the age of nine, he was regularly beaten for his sins. Not surprisingly, he began to wonder: "What's in this for me?" God, he felt, "seemed to be an evil being, who created a devil and a hell and wanted people to go there, who seemed to know everything but wouldn't give you a chance. It just didn't make any sense." By the age of 15, he'd decided that, "even if I was going to die and go to hell, I would prefer to be free in my life." (Par. 5)

In an interview with Cassandra Csencsitz, McPherson says:

I think we've evolved from animals—we can talk, for example—but it doesn't really make us holy. It doesn't put us in touch with God. It doesn't make us particularly special. I think we've got to get real. We're animals who can talk. That 10 percent—the rational and civilized part that keeps the rest in check—is, of course, the most impressive and interesting part of being human. That's why the Christian myth is so powerful. God becomes human, but in order to be human he really has to suffer, to the point where he says, "Why have you forsaken me?" He doesn't even believe in himself. I don't know that it's true, but it's an amazing story. That's why it's so resonant. (80)

Much of the journey of faith that Ian is on comes directly from McPherson himself.

As a result of the Celtic Tiger, and the resulting globalization of Ireland, the country was in a crisis of faith when Shining City was written. In 2001, Conor Ryan wrote “Young people are well educated and the
apparent strength of the Church has caveats too: attendance at mass is "very important" to only 14 per cent of young people compared with 76 per cent of pensioners" (par. 11). In February 2010, Patsy McGarry wrote an article in Foreign Policy magazine, detailing the Church’s waning power. McGarry says:

In the latter part of the 19th century, the church grew to become the most powerful civic institution on the island, controlling most of Ireland’s schools and the greater number of its hospitals. This allowed the church unparalleled influence throughout most of the 20th century in what is now known as the Republic of Ireland. That continued to be the case until the latter decades of the last century when its influence began to wane due to increased affluence and a better-educated population. With the events of the last few years, church leaders can no longer ignore the extent to which they’ve lost control of Irish society.

The most recent scandal has centered on a series of damning government reports into the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of children by clergy members. The Murphy Commission report, published last November, found that in Dublin’s Catholic archdiocese, by far Ireland’s largest, "clerical child sex abuse was covered up" by church authorities from 1975 to 2004. It also found that all four archbishops of Dublin over that period investigated sexual abuse complaints and that many of the auxiliary bishops handled these complaints badly. None of the four archbishops reported their knowledge of abuse to the police "throughout the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s."

The report also found that church authorities used the concept of "mental reservation," which allows clergy to mislead people without being guilty -- in the church's eyes -- of lying, and that, though some courageous priests had brought complaints to their superiors' attention, in general there was a "don't ask, don't tell" policy on the issue. The Murphy report was been the most widely publicized investigation of sex abuse in Ireland, but it wasn’t the first, and it won’t be the last. The first notorious sex-abuse case in Ireland hit the headlines in 1994, when it was disclosed that
church authorities had dealt with a serial abuser, Father Brendan Smyth, by moving him from parish to parish in Ireland, Scotland, and the United States -- over a period of 40 years. The attorney general’s mishandling of an arrest warrant for Smyth eventually led to the collapse of the Irish government.

More recently, the Ryan Commission report, published last May, found that thousands of children suffered physical and sexual abuse over several decades in residential institutions run by 18 religious congregations during the last century. To date, almost 14,000 of those victims have been compensated by the Irish state. (Par. 7-11)

As McGarry so adroitly explains, the crisis of faith in Ireland is multifaceted, deeply rooted, and ongoing.

In his play about “guilt” (McPherson qtd. in Csencsitz 83), Conor McPherson has reflected cultural anxieties about religion that were a part of Irish culture in 2004, when Shining City premiered.

**Key Term: Children**

The next key term in Shining City is somewhat surprising in a play about a single man and a widower. This term, children, was selected as a key term for the frequency of its appearance in the play. Terms that cluster around the key term demonstrate an anxiety and tension about the subject of children. Cluster terms include no children, miscarriage, about the baby, not about the baby, mother, father, want, leave it, too soon, your baby, shocked, our baby, out of the blue, and families.
Early in the play, John explains that he and Mari had no children, so, since her death, he’s been “on my own an awful lot” (10). Even before she died, this lack of children had been grating on John. He says:

But maybe I felt that when we were married, and all settled in and eh...maybe even before we found out that we couldn’t, that Mari couldn’t, have children, I think that maybe even before that...I felt that I had kind of settled for second best. (31)

But, while he professes that he had had these feelings before learning that they could not have children, his subsequent narrative indicates that this lack of children was a large part of their marital strife. He says:

You see, we’d, I think, we’d been slightly left behind, a little bit, you know? All our...all our friends, they, you know, they had families. And, that...that...bound them together, you know? And, you see, I think that that...that we were...we were slightly left behind a little bit maybe. And that we felt that there was something kind of wrong with us [...] I don’t know if you have children, and I don’t mean anything, because this is nothing about those people, but you know, I found, we found, that, okay, of course we were invited to places, you know, to parties and everything. But that’s what there was to talk about, you know? “Oh my sons are ten and eleven.” “Oh my son is eleven!” You know? And of course! Look, that’s what people talk about. Of course they do. life. [...] You know, you’d be trying to, waiting for the subject to change and then of course, some stupid fucker would turn around and go, “do you have any kids yourself, John?” And I’d be, and I know that this happened to Mari too, I’d be like, “Eh, no, no actually, I don’t.” [...] I felt that the whole thing should be different—not just that we should adopt some kid or something—but that I should change the whole...the whole fucking thing, you know? (32)

Clearly, the fact that he has no children is something that weighs heavily on John’s mind.
Other characters in the play do have children, yet they find that they are not the keys to happiness and contentment that John imagines them to be. Vivien, the woman that John attempts an affair with, has “had...a miscarriage, you know? And she’s telling me all this and she already has four kids who are teenagers and this pregnancy was out of the blue, and there’s been all this going on, and it hadn’t worked out” (35). Even with her children at home, Vivien still seeks attention outside of her marriage.

Laurence, the prostitute that Ian brings back to his office, also has a child—a son, who is six years old. Laurence explains “he’s with his ma. She’s nuts, you know, her mother looks after him more” (53), but unlike those at John’s dinner parties, Laurence isn’t interested in talking about his child.

And, of course, Ian and Neasa have their daughter Aisling. Neasa’s pregnancy was unplanned, Ian says “I was shocked when you got pregnant, we both were. I thought we both were” (25). Neasa says that when they found out that she was pregnant, “I even said then that we should leave it and we should wait until we have some more money” (21); she reminds Ian that he refused the idea to leave it because he “thought it was ‘wrong’” (21). Ian tells Neasa that, even though they are separating, “Aisling is our daughter. And I’m her father and you’re her mother. And I fully...you know? I want to be her father and...be, you
know…but you and I...are breaking up” (22), and he assures her that their split is “not about the baby” (21).

Later, when Neasa has revealed her affair with Mark Whelan, Ian accuses Neasa of “throwing the baby in my face” (24), and Neasa insists that her affair was “before the baby” (25). Ian responds predictably to this sudden revelation, and questions the paternity of Aisling. Neasa tells Ian that “she’s our baby” (25), and repeats “she’s your baby, she’s your baby, she’s yours and mine—this is crazy” (25). In this case, the child came after the infidelity, but still wasn’t enough to make the relationship last.

For a majority of the play, it seems that couples without children want them, but that the couples with children cannot stay together. Finally, though, at the end of the play McPherson gives a glimmer of hope for the children in his “shining city.” Ian tells John that he is moving to Limerick to be with Neasa and Aisling, and that he and Neasa are engaged to be married (58).

Some of the anxiety and tension reflected by the cluster terms stems from McPherson’s own life at the time he was writing the play. Maddy Costa writes:

His marriage in 2003, to a painter he met while still with his previous partner, has brought "a certain calmness" to his life; the couple share a three-story house in Dublin, working in separate rooms on the ground floor. He’s looking forward to having children: "I hope I would be a good dad, that I
would be an open, loving father," he says. "And I would like to learn from the mistakes." He’s discovered a new pleasure in “trying to be healthy and fit”, and he’s still playing his guitar, writing and recording his own songs at home. If that makes his life sound a little heavenly, he admits—not without embarrassment—that it rather is. (Par. 15)

Without mistake, the topic of children was very much on McPherson’s mind as he wrote *Shining City*.

However, the topic of children was a part of the larger social dialogue in 2004 Ireland as well. Ivana Bacik writes:

By the mid-1990s there was a slight rise in marriage rates, alongside increase in the number of couples cohabitating without marrying and in the number of births taking place outside marriage. [...] fertility rates have also fallen, from a birthrate of nearly twenty-two births per 1000 population in 1970 to 15.5 births per 1000 in 2002. Thus the Irish family has changed more over the years than we might perhaps think now, and has taken more complex forms over the past century than stereotypes, or the Constitution, would suggest. (63)

Also, consider that Ireland had been embroiled in an ongoing debate about abortion rights. Laury Oaks explains:

Dramatic social and economic changes in late-1990s Ireland, in addition to the outcome of a controversial 1992 case—in which the Irish Supreme Court ruled that a 14-year-old could seek an abortion in Britain on the grounds that she was suicidal—have posed new challenges to anti-abortion advocates who seek to keep Ireland “abortion free.” The greatest proportion of Irish women who seek abortion are unmarried yet in a “steady” relationship, in their early 20s, and broadly “middle-class” (employed in lower-professional or non-manual occupations or enrolled as students). Anti-abortion activists view the pregnancy decisions of such young, educated, career-minded women—many of whom have benefited from expanded work opportunities within
Ireland—as symbolic of larger problems around Irish social values. In anti-abortion advocates’ analysis, women who do not privilege motherhood as the most important activity in their lives both contribute to and reflect a rapidly decaying culture that is devaluing and making less time for children and family. (1974)

_Shining City_ reflects Bacik’s “new” Irish family, with unmarried parents and childless married couples. While abortion never comes up in the play, Ian’s assertion to Neasa that “leaving” their unborn child would be “wrong” reflects the societal privileging of motherhood that Oaks describes, and Neasa’s desire to put the child up for adoption seems to echo the attitudes against which the anti-abortion activists are fighting. Childhood is a key term in _Shining City_, because it is a key term in the cultural narrative of “new” Ireland.

**Key Term: Reality**

The final key term I will discuss is reality. The concept of reality, albeit somewhat abstract and ambiguous, is discussed throughout _Shining City_. Perhaps this is to be expected in a play about psychotherapy, ghosts, and death, but as I will demonstrate, the discourse on reality is also situated in the cultural dialogue of “new” Ireland.

In _Shining City_, the clusters surrounding reality reveal a conscious awareness of the relative instability of the term. Throughout the play, the word _really_, is used prodigiously, as is the phrase _you know_. While
these may be verbal pause between reticent characters, they imply an awareness of an abstract unknown and something that is less “real”—that is to say, the constant reminder that what is said reflects an actual “reality,” and the constant search for reassurance that the listener “knows” what the speaker means (regardless of their ability of say it clearly) are based in the notion of reality. Other cluster terms include lost touch with reality, believe, admitted, secret, dreaming, rationalized, pretending, bewilderment, mad, nuts, crazy, conscious, create, realized, normality, and normal.

McPherson hints at the presence of subjective versions of reality during his initial stage directions in the play. Describing Ian, he says:

He is a man who has struggled with many personal fears in his life and has had some victories, some defeats. The resulting struggle has made him very sharp. He is essentially a gentle man, but sometimes his desire to get to the lifeboats, to feel safe, drives him in ways that even he himself doesn’t fully understand. (Shining City 7)

There are elements of Ian’s reality that is unknown even to him. John’s character description reveals a similarly complicated relationship with reality. McPherson writes:

He has an air of confusion when we first see him, not just because of his recent experiences but also because he has yet to accept that the world is not as orderly and predictable as he thought. He has always found problems to arise from what he regards as other people’s ignorance. He almost regards himself as a benchmark for normality. (8)
John’s worldview has been shattered, his reality has been altered, and he has yet to find a way to process the change.

Reality itself is on John’s mind in the first scene. He says of Mari’s death “I was too late getting to the hospital. And the eh…reality of…the reality of it. It’s been absolutely…It really, now…” (10), but John is unable to find the words to describe this first blow to his sense of reality. John’s struggle with reality continues as he tells Ian of his encounters with Mari’s ghost. He says that “she was as real as…you know if you’ve ever seen a dead body? How strange it is, but…it’s…real! That feeling…” (12), and again, John is unable to find the words to explain. He tells Ian that he “figured, you know, I, I rationalized it, that maybe…I hadn’t…seen her or…like there was nothing there! And I thought maybe it…that…just the fucking grief I suppose” (14). He had constructed a new reality about seeing her ghost, because, as he says, “what choice did I have? I mean, I have to get on with my life” (14). Finally, John insists that Ian tell him if he believes that he saw a ghost.

The next instance of discourse on the subjectivity of reality happens in scene two. Just after Ian tells Neasa that their relationship is over, she asks “have you completely lost touch with reality? Have you completely fucking lost touch with fucking reality?” (19), to which Ian replies, “This is reality!!” (19). At this moment, Ian’s version of reality is incompatible with Neasa’s.
In scene three, John brings up the subject again:

You know, when you’re young. And you’re told about...what to expect I suppose. It is kind of happy ever after. But it’s...you know, it’s weird to accept what happiness really is, you know, or what it is...nothing is ever like anyone expects, is it, you know? Like, it’s not a fairy tale...I mean, it has to be kind of ordinary, you know? A bit boring even, otherwise it’s probably not real, you know? (31)

Later, John is describing the time leading up to his clandestine meeting with Vivien:

I was just like an actor, or something, in my own life, just playing this part in something that just didn’t seem real, you know, or as real as...I mean, crazy, you know? Like I felt I could just look behind everything because it was only scenery, everywhere I went. Because, I suppose in a mad way I believed that something else was my reality! And that this other shit—my life—was...(39)

John is struggling with a shifting sense of reality, a struggle that he continues with throughout the scene. About his encounter with the staff at the brothel, he says:

I suppose these two people represent everything that’s wrong with the world to me and it’s like I’m...I just refuse to accept this, you know? And I’m demanding my money back! I just want to have a transaction where some normal rules apply again, you know? And look where I was trying to achieve that! (45)

After his violent explosion at Mari, he says that he was “only just barely hanging on, just hanging in there. And I was frightened that she’d, or anyone would...see how weak I was. And how...disgusting I was” (46-47).

John is unable to reconcile the changes in his reality, and find a way to negotiate his new world.
Next, McPherson provides a discussion of therapy, defining it as a way that people like John can begin to sort out their lives when reality and expectations clash. Ian tells Laurence that his patients are not necessarily crazy, they are:

People who might feel a little bit...stuck, you know? And maybe they...just need a...just another point of view on what’s going on, if they’re carrying, you know, a big burden, you know? Of some guilt maybe. You know? Or where they might feel it’s hard to go on because they’ve got themselves into a bit of a corner, because they’re worried about other people, or maybe it’s just that they have some old feeling... Maybe even from years ago, just even sometimes things can happen to us when we’re children, and that, you know, maybe that sets the tone for how people get on later. Where maybe they get a bit stuck. And maybe I can just invite them to consider something that maybe they didn’t think was that important before, but, you know, maybe it was...and [...] It’s all very conscious. It’s about perceiving reality, I suppose. (55)

Therapy, then, is shown as a tool to help people recognize and reconcile their reality.

At the end of the play, John has been able to make this reconciliation in his life. He has a new point of view on reality.

Regarding Mari’s ghost, he says:

Seeing something is one thing but...it’s how it makes you feel, isn’t it? It’s how that makes you feel. That’s what’s important. Someone could see something and it doesn’t really matter. Someone else’ll see it and...it’s the end of the world, you know? That’s the reality, you know? What it does to you is the reality. (64-65)

For the first time, John has become comfortable with subjective reality.

What matters now, McPherson is saying, is not what one sees—the
objective reality—but the individual, relative, impact that objective reality has on the observer. To cement that point, McPherson gives the audience the final moment in the play. When Mari’s ghost appears to Ian, the audience is given the objective reality of her appearance. However, instead of providing any insight into Ian’s reaction and any conclusions he might draw from his experience with Mari, McPherson ends the play just before Ian turns and sees the ghost. The conclusions are up to the audience. The reality of Ian’s journey must be constructed within the imaginations of the viewer, leaving each with the chance to employ John’s maxim. What will Mari’s ghost do to Ian’s reality, and by extension, to that of the viewer?

McPherson’s discourse on reality in *Shining City* is deliberate. He says:

> It's all about the audience. I'm always looking for ways to go beyond the material world. I want to go somewhere totally new in the theatre, to really transport the audience, to take them inside themselves and back out. You have to concentrate on things in yourself that are essentially human. You have to go inside yourself. What is the actual feeling of being alive, beyond language? It's very complicated, but it's very simple, too. Those are the things I'm after. It's a messy journey. (Qtd. in Csencsitz 39)

What better way to take an audience on a journey of discovery than to complicate their conceptions of reality? McPherson explains:

> It's really like Freud said: The unconscious is the iceberg underneath the surface, so we vainly think—in both senses of the word "vain"—that the important stuff is up here [in the head], that we're calling the shots because we can rationalize...
what we want to do. But isn’t that the trick of life—how we fool ourselves, how our illusions are so strong, how they have to be? It’s a necessary fiction, the story of our life. We often get totally lost in the illusion—but that’s a terrific way to approach making plays. (Qtd. in Csencsitz 80)

*Shining City*, then, reflects the worldview of its writer.

It would, though, be insufficient to accept that the attitudes about reality in *Shining City* are McPherson’s alone. The presence of reality as a key term in the play, and the clusters of meaning that surround it, reflect a societal shift on the idea of reality as a result of the Celtic Tiger.

Ariel Watson\(^{40}\) writes:

The *Shining City* of McPherson’s title is, in fact, the new Dublin of the European Union, superficially partaking of the bland comforts of globalization but haunted by the spectres of place and religion. History has an afterlife in McPherson’s play, and this afterlife intrudes on the sharp certainty of the present’s sanity. [...] This is a drama of integration and adaptation, a complex study of the struggle to absorb the new and appease the old. The play is implicitly concerned with Ireland’s integration into a European and global cultural dynamic but is explicitly interested in the ways in which self-examination becomes a defined part of the quotidian processes of work and play. (206)

Malcom MacLachlan (et al.) provide further insight into this struggle:

Ireland in the last 10 years has witnessed the emergence of the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ characterized by unprecedented levels of immigration, increasing secularization, economic prosperity and a general liberalization of social attitudes. As such, Ireland may be seen to offer a particularly good case

\(^{40}\) It is interesting to note that Watson groups McPherson’s play with others in her study precisely because of the association with In-Yer-Face theatre that I argue against in Chapter 1. Her arguments in defense of the application do not counter my conclusions.
for the study of the effects of rapid social change. Not only does this have acculturation implications for those people entering the nation but also for those within the nation, who already call it ‘home.’ (345)

MacLachlan and colleagues were writing particularly to defend their notion of “temporal acculturation.” They explain:

People who have for years existed in one culture into which they have been socialized and from which they derive (to some extent at least) their sense of self and who are then faced with a newly emerging culture to which they must adapt, must surely undergo some form of acculturative experience. This is what we term temporal acculturation. (346)

In particular, the group was looking at the cultural perception of this acculturation. They found that, among their test group, most respondents advocated for a reconstruction of social reality that involved rejecting “old” Ireland, and accepting “new” Ireland. They note:

Interestingly, it was the assimilationist strategy of rejecting the old Ireland and identifying with the new Ireland that was most strongly associated with good mental health” (349).

Ireland’s “reality” had changed. The decision to be made was, as the MacLachlan study indicates, whether to hold on to the old reality or to accept the new one. *Shining City*, as Watson says, exactly reflects this element of Irish culture.

While both plays deal with issues that are rather timeless—guilt, love, loss, death—the key terms in *Port Authority* and *Shining City* can be linked with cultural phenomena that are temporally situated. Both plays reflect a culture in Ireland that had undergone a tremendous change, a
change that necessitated a shift in the worldview of the nation. From *Port Authority* and *Shining City*, we gather evidence of the way that the culture as a whole was dealing with the reconciliation of its past and its future, a shift from insularity to globalization, from “old” Ireland to “new” Ireland. *Port Authority* and *Shining City* can be seen as artifacts of this new, changed Irish culture, and from them, we can gain insight into this profound moment in Irish history.
CONCLUSION

In his lecture-cum-essay “History’s Dark Places,” ethnographic folklorist Henry Glassie explains his vision of history, saying that it “is not the past. History is a story about the past, told in the present, and designed to be useful in constructing the future” (1). He suggests:

The past is vast, and it is gone. Almost all of it is gone utterly, leaving no trace in the mind or archive. We know the past only through things that chance to exist in the present: old books, broken pots, disturbed memories. (1)

It is this view of history that has guided my work.

Seen through Glassie’s lens, Conor McPherson’s work is a story about the past (the recent past, at the time of my writing, but the past nonetheless). These plays, these stories, each reveal a moment in time, and a moment in space. It is by these plays, and others like it, that Irish history may one day be studied. Certainly this has been true of earlier Irish plays. Through the works of Lady Gregory, Yeats, and Synge, much can be learned about the social history of Ireland at the turn of the 20th
century. The work of Friel has been studied in terms of its resonance with “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland.41

A commonality that McPherson shares with these other seminal Irish writers is the unusual ability to write historically, temporally, and geographically located stories that are timeless and universal. McPherson’s work has been popular internationally both because it is Irish, and in spite of its Irishness. It is the deep philosophy and fundamental humanity in McPherson’s plays, as in those of his predecessors, which will establish his place in the annals of Irish theatre history.

Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory were writing at a time of great cultural change in Ireland. During the Irish Literary Renaissance, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, Irish culture was in a state of definition. Declan Kiberd says that this group of writers:

Achieved nothing less than a renovation of Irish consciousness and a new understanding of politics, economics, philosophy, sport, language and culture in its widest sense. It was the grand destiny of Yeats’ generation to make Ireland once again interesting to the Irish, after centuries of enforced provincialism following the collapse of the Gaelic Order in 1601. No generation before or since lived with such conscious national intensity or left such an inspiring (and, in some ways, intimidating) legacy. (3)

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41 See Declan Kiberd’s Inventing Ireland for detailed looks at Yeats, Synge, Gregory, and Friel.
At a time when Ireland was finding an identity, these playwrights were there to help. At the turn of the 21st century, Ireland is once again struggling with its conception of itself. Just as Ireland was fighting to become a country of its own a century ago, Ireland today is suddenly a globalized European nation. Conor McPherson is in a position to help “new” Irish culture define itself. And, while his forebearers’ legacy was to “make Ireland interesting to the Irish” (Kiberd 3), McPherson’s international success suggests that his legacy is to help make Ireland interesting to the world.

It is important, then, that we work to understand the story McPherson is telling. Glassie talks about the “things that chance to exist” (1) that allow us access to the past. McPherson talks about much the same thing:

    Eternity doesn't stretch forward, it stretches into the past. If we're the only rational life in the whole of the cosmos, then we're the only part of the universe that knows itself. Is this where it all comes together in some bizarre, fucking way? Human beings will probably become extinct at some point. There's something very beautiful about that—like the universe came to life and knew itself for a little while, which is really sad, but we made art. Television and radio waves keep going into space and exist forever. The things we create do exist forever. That's beautiful. That's what I walk around with. I do try to get all that in my work—but I don't want to write it in a speech. You've got to hide it. The characters are playing against this backdrop. (Qtd. in Csencsitz 81)

What I have tried to provide is one frame for discovering what McPherson has hidden—knowingly or not.
I have chosen to examine McPherson’s work in relation to the Celtic Tiger, as a means of placing it into an historical context. I have done this, in the spirit of Glassie, precisely to demonstrate the past in which these stories were told, and to give context for “retellings” in the present and future. I do not believe that this is the only frame in which McPherson’s plays can be examined. On the contrary, I see in his work the potential for myriad methodological and theoretical studies ranging from post-colonialism and post-consumerism to feminist, Marxist, phenomenological, post-modernist critiques. I wish this study to expand the contextual understanding of McPherson’s writing rather than to limit it.

McPherson’s work has been frequently misunderstood. The systematic lumping-together of his plays with those of Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh, and others, and Aleks Sierz’s assertion that McPherson’s work is “In-Yer-Face,” has created the potential for a grave misunderstanding of his writing. I hope that my study has not only separated McPherson’s plays from Sierz’s genre, and distanced him appropriately from McDonagh and Walsh, but also provided a fundamental context for McPherson’s work to be seen as artifacts of Celtic Tiger Ireland. This identification of his work as artifactory can, in turn, allow for it to be used to better understand both the plays and the Celtic Tiger itself.


