

The Feminist View in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* on Stage and Screen

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Abstract

This article attempts to show the shared points in Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* as a contemporary Irish play. In its country (Ireland), an intense rural atmosphere is created by the play itself. Introducing us to the rarefied community of five single women under sexual repression and are confined by domestic space. At home, the role of women was emphasized by the papal encyclicals *Castii Connubii* (1930), which were highly influential in country. In gender studies, interrogations and redefinitions of the female domestic space have been a central issue. Therefore, from this perspective the researcher approaches the play as evidence of feminine oppression, which represents the five women's honor. The strict law of domestic space will prove an obstacle for the sexuality, marriage and motherhood and its transgression will be severely punished. The sexual morality imposed by the Catholic Church will make the five women lifelong prisoners and will preside over the claustrophobic society they belong to. A changeable and irregular perception of language is offered by Brian Friel. Words are mainly understood as temporary as ambiguity can be created by using them. This is so, because of the different and contradictory interpretations of words. Therefore, Brian Friel shifts from realism to present theatre as a space of liminality of physical liberation and rituality. This shift is carried out through as Friel seeks for new channels of communication that go beyond words. These channels are a means of expression that sets free from the tyranny of words.

Keywords: Catholic, Women, marriage, morality, sexual repression, domestic space, rural atmosphere, transgression.

Introduction

The setting is a village called Ballybeg and the year is 1936, the events of *Dancing at Lughnasa* tell a story of the five single sisters. In County Donegal, the setting is during harvest time, and the range of these sisters (Mundy – sisters) was between 26 – 40. These sisters lived with a seven-year-old son, who is their youngest sister's. A missionary priest Jack is their brother, deported from Africa after spending twenty-five years. In the family's lives, as depicting two days, Friel evokes both the interior landscape of a group of humans trapped in their domestic situation, and the wider landscape – internally and externally. This play is considered as Friel's masterpiece on a wide range of those in concern. In this play, the spirit is honored and the past is courage.

Performance Studies

As human's behavior plays a key factor in investigating in Performance Studies, the circumstances have been observed by theorists, in which a specific behavior has been externalized. First of all, a performance is understood as an artistic practice, as Schechner (2006, 10) states that, "a process and a product of communicating interaction". This process of communication takes place between an actor and a spectator. Thus, the treatment of acting as an extensive term, that encompasses varied types of expression. The range of these types extend from the more conventional ones like music and dance to the nearer to reality like performs. Additionally, it is not always possible to distinguish between these types.

The Liminal Space

Both on stage and on screen, the performance of the ritual in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, since it corresponds to the special scopes of the drama that is materialized by dancing. The month of August witnessed the occurrence of the action by the time of holding a celebration for the god of the harvest, Lugh. To get purification against the evil spirits, the lighting of bonfires and a meeting of people with their cattle walking through the fire were consisted in the ritual. They drink and dance with no refrain. A visual representation is found in this celebration through the film, which is a liminal space. A sense of spontaneous and disruptive imposition of social order occurs to add a new stance to the community as an idea. An emancipation crises and conflicts takes place, in which people are emancipated from

everyday restrictions (Halprin, 1995). Dancing is the sign of ritual by which the performance is carried out to be transported into the liminal space of pagan celebrations. Here, language is referred to as the force that counters and hinders the rationality where emotions are controlled.

Shared Points in *Dancing at Lughnasa*

Although the play is detached by fifty-four by a linguistic and cultural impediment, it exposes numerous points in common: creating of a rural atmosphere in country – Ireland as echoing to the catastrophic times of 1936; introducing us to the community of five single sisters suffering from domination of sexual oppression. There is from one side, an inspiration made by some autobiographical episodes, and from the other side, it is the fact, that is stated in the dedication in *Dancing at Lughnasa* “five unmarried sisters”. In fact, they are the seven sisters of Friel’s mother who participated very significantly in the life of Friel as a playwright.

A memory once told by Thomas Kilroy – with Friel – as he was walking in London, Friel told him about his journey to London look for his aunts. These aunts had departed Donegal searching for their safe lives. By this, Kilroy encouraged Friel (1999) to write about it: “I made the obvious, if cold, remark that he would simply have to write about them” (83) there is in him, seems a lack of ideological motives to do so: “Maybe that’s the important thing for a man: a *named* destination, democracy, Ballybeg, heaven” (51). Nevertheless, the humorous tone of Gerry’s words is contrasted to the condemnation. It is a more dramatic one that is made by Kate, who is the eldest sister among the Mundy sisters, a forty-years old. She has resisted the changes occurred around her, respectively those crucial to the singing and dancing pagan.

“It would be on my conscience if I didn’t tell
you how strongly I disapprove of this
International Brigade caper. It’s a sorry day
for Ireland when we send young men off to
Spain to fight for godless Communism. (52)”

It is apparent that the reason Spain in which Gerry Evans is going to fight is far away from Ballybeg as well as from Mundy sisters’ house. It seems clear that Friel’s ideals were not those of the Ireland of De Valera. It is a country that oppresses Catholicism, on the border of the emergence of a new constitution that would define the essentiality of the family as the unit of society. It is obligatory to keep in mind that the constitution did not grant a recognition to divorce, contraception and abortion.

Additionally, the constitution of 1937 bases the establishments of a woman according to her life a limited to the house. The State has to guarantee all mothers not to be subjected to obligation according to economic necessity to engage in labor. Thus, as was canonized by a patriarchal society, marriage was all the women's aim. This is so, as marriage is a guarantee of their survival and social status. Within such societies, single women were suffering under men's sympathy ⁽¹⁾.

During the 1930s, Spain had undergone a decade of contrasts and social agitation by which resulted in the Civil War ⁽²⁾. It has to be remembered that that the beginning of the 1930s was a time of women's progression. For instance, in 1931 woman gained their right vote. It was for the first time, that the constitution of 1931 declared the equality between men and women. The next year, 1932, witnessed the declaration of equality between legitimate and illegitimate children as well as civil marriage. When the war was over, the adoption of the Victor's ideology concerning the feminine model of submission and obedience to the home. April of 1939 Pope Pius XII defined Spain as the chosen nation by God and as the tool to convert the world of Catholicism. However, what is significant here, for our analysis is that Ireland was enthusiastic supporters of the instructions of *Casti Cannubii* (1930) that established women's role, "Home is the only frame for female task. The fact that some women have a job to earn a salary is a dreadful abuse the researcher must put an end to by all possible means."

There is a brief analysis of *Dancing at Lughnasa* that will be carried out with feminine sexual oppression and its representation in domestic space as a common nucleus. Gerry Smyth (2001) states that, "Modern Ireland is obsessed with issues of space [...] Irish people seem to have become fixated with issues of individual, local and private space" (xiv-xv).

Undoubtedly, that the space nowadays is an analytical category of outstanding position, though as Foucault observes, "it has been neglected in comparison to others ⁽³⁾". Again, it seems to be impossible to give a summary to gender's contribution of studies to redefine and negotiate the meaning and distribution of masculinity and femininity in terms of space and the interrogation of domestic space as a woman's zone *par excellence* ⁽⁴⁾. As for *Dancing at Lughnasa*, - the kitchen - as representing the restrained role of the domestic setting, as it acts as a "strict framing of a play about overly-framed lives" ⁽⁵⁾, what has got a more focus. Thus, the house as a final refuge for feminine, which is proposed to be "read in an exercise reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard" (1994). In order not to forget that the "topo analysis" as proposed in "*The Poetics of Space*" (1958), which seeks a new landscape of our private life to examine the house assets ⁽⁶⁾. However, here is what the most motivating for us is the idea of an

“exasperated” frontier between outside and inside, which is accepted as the law of space and transgression. De Certeau (1988) states:

“Stories are actuated by a contradiction between the frontier and the bridge that is, between a (legitimate) space and its (alien) exteriority [...] The bridge is ambiguous everywhere: it alternately welds together and opposes insularities. As a transgression of the limit, a disobedience of the law of place, it represents a departure, an attack on a state, the ambition of a conquering power, or the flight of an exile; in any case the “betrayal” of an order (p.149)”.

An explicit reflection of the idea of transgression is apparent in *Dancing at Lughnasa* when it is stated that “a sense of order being consciously subverted”. Its existence as one of the concluding moments in the play. At the same time, the idea of transgression of forbidden barriers is present in a continuous way. In this play, the inner world of the women as represented by the house, the feminine space is continuously attacked by the outer world, the masculine world. As Gerry Smyth (2001) shows that:

“The hearth constitutes the heart of the dwelling, the still center around which both movement and emotion is organized, in a typical patriarchal society the male’s life is measured in terms of the increasing distance from the hearth he shared in childhood with his mother (p.154)”.

Similarly, between inner and outer world, the basic boundaries are undoubtedly defined. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is the separation between the house and the town of Ballybeg.

The colorful farm of the Mundy, which is open to the country, has wide horizons if we consider that the sisters shifted to Ballybeg and even to London. The importance here is to visualize the spaces indicated by the playwright in direction and how the representative of interpretation has been asserted. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, as represented in 1990 and 1999 at the Abbey Theatre, that offers more spaciousness, which has given that no separations of the interior of the house from the green fields that surround it. regardless of all these differences and the more open atmosphere of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, it is important to highlight that neither of this play’s representations seem to have a shared space for sex.

With no man around, the five women in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, are suffering being isolated, prisoned within domestic walls. These women with an obvious hierarchical system within the limits of the house. Even due to such a restricted society, masculine and feminine roles are assigned to be produced. In this way, Kate assumes the Calderon-like supervision of honor reinforced by a repressive and intolerant ideology. For Kate, the masculine characters and Gerry Evans and Father Jack in

Dancing at Lughnasa are weakened in a remote distance, that makes them act as the counterpoint of young woman's impossible desire.

For DL, the earlier mentioned characters do not have any other task than to provoke and confuse the existence of the Mundy sisters. Chris has conceived a son, Michael, who is at the same time the family's pride and dishonor. Having come to Spain at the age of thirty-six, Gerry Evans is the cock of the farm and is under the control poverty. He is a smart person who dances with one girl or another. His promises to marry the mother and buy the son a new bike. Father Jack is a peripheral character who is degenerated by sanity with a provocative defense of paganism and polygamy against the Mundy sisters. Agnes wonders:

"How many years has it been since we were at the harvest dance? [...] And I don't care how young they are, how drunk and dirty and sweaty they are. I want to dance, Kate. It's the Festival of Lughnasa. I'm only thirty-five. I want to dance. (13)"

Which surprisingly fights with Kate's answer:

"Look at yourselves, will you! Just look at yourselves! Dancing at our time of the day? That's for young people with no duties and no responsibilities and nothing in their heads but pleasure [...] Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us? –women of our years? – mature women, dancing? (13)"

Though the Mundy sisters show overtly their wish for a male, Chris wants to put on lipstick and see Gerry Evans, Rose lives for a secret encounter with Danny Bradey and Maggie dreams to add the pleasure of a man to the pleasure of smoking:

"Wonderful Wild Woodbine. Next best thing to a wonderful, wild man." (23); "We are all in the same boat, Jack, we're hoping that you'll hunt about and get men for all of us (40)"

As verified, that in *Dancing at Lughnasa* play two marginal characters with insane are added to the women's murmuring about being without men. Father Jack, the Mundy sisters' brother returns from Africa in a dishonor. The deficiencies of women's communities, which are the absence of sex, the frustration of motherhood of the always-failed attempts at marriage. This is because sex stalks around the house a veil of intense desire. Such desire makes them all want to be seen at the grille as dancing as in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Also, because temptation, undisguised sex always come from beyond the walls: in particular the Mundy sisters with the celebration of the Lughnasa festival is obvious ⁽⁷⁾. Motherhood and marriage are essential for the women's natural destiny, which is never seem to be accomplished.

The panorama in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is seen through the character of Chris, the single mother, who refuses Gerry's marriage proposals as she does not have trust in him. It is very stimulating to perceive the two "planes" of morality that exist in Friel's play and which could be defined as being promiscuous as the case with Father Jack.

Extracts from the play

The below conversation (p.74) exemplifies the two positions:

"MAGGIE: If I had to choose between one Wild Woodbine and a man of – say -fifty-two widower- plump, what would I do, Kate? I'd take fatso, wouldn't I? God, I really am getting desperate.

Maybe I should go to Ryanga with you, Jack.

JACK: I know you won't but I know you'd love it.

MAGGIE: Could you guarantee a man for each of us?

JACK: I couldn't promise four men but I should be able to get one husband for all of you.

MAGGIE: Would we settle for that?

CHRIS: One between the four of us?

JACK: That's our system and it works very well. One of you would be his principal wife and live with him in his larger hut.

MAGGIE: That'd be you, Kate.

KATE: Stop that, Maggie!

JACK: And the other three of you he'd keep in his enclosure. It would be like living on the same small farm.

MAGGIE: Sure enough, girls, isn't it? And what would be – what sort of duties would we have?

JACK: Cooking, sewing, helping with the crops, washing – the usual housekeeping tasks.

MAGGIE: Sure, that's what we do anyway.

JACK: And looking after his children.

MAGGIE: *That he'd have by Kate.*

KATE: *Maggie!*

JACK: *By all four of you! And what's so efficient about that system is that the husband and his wives and his children make up a small commune where everybody helps everybody else and cares for them. I'm completely in favor of it.*

KATE: *It may be efficient and you may be in favor of it, Jack, but I don't think it's what Pope Pius XI considers to be the holy sacrament of matrimony. And it might be better for you if you paid just a bit more attention to our Holy Father and a bit less to the Great Goddess...Iggie. (62-63)".*

As related to motherhood, the panorama is much more tolerant in *Dancing at Lughnasa* with the character of Michael, Chris and Gerry's illegitimate son. This son is loved and protected by all of the Mundy sisters. As it has already been stated, it is Father Jack who is the voice of house's crimes. Therefore, we must remember that the symbol of family honor. (silence – silence I have said) echoes in the words of Kate Mundy when she remarks on Father Jack's delirium:

"This must be kept in the family, Maggie! Not a word of this must go outside these walls –do you hear? – not a syllable" (49)

"or when she finds out about Rose and Danny's secret encounters:

"What has happened to this house? Mother of God, will we ever be able to lift our heads again...?" (59)

In his work, Friel confirms the importance of music: "Since words did not seem to be up to the job it was necessary to supply the characters with a new language. And that is what music can provide in the theatre: another way of talking, a language without words" ⁽⁸⁾.

Undoubtedly, the place of honor corresponds to the radio, that reaches the Mundy's household in the summer of 1936. It is the central point of the sisters' emotional and erotic quakes. As the drama unfolds in the three weeks of August, the outer world is well-introduced by the radio into their small cosmos, which receives Kate's resounding condemnation:

*"D'you know what that thing has done?
Killed all Christian conversation in this country." (66)*

Above all, the radicalism of the *Dancing at Lughnasa* is represented as songs are broadcasted by the radio, which echoes in Gerry Evans, who is a dancing, teacher and consummate dancer. Through this character *Dancing at Lughnasa* is full with indications of Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Shirley Temple

or Mae West, Hollywood figures that are very distant from the Mundy sisters' morality. For example, the song "Anything Goes" can be heard. Gerry makes use of this to dance with Agnes and Maggie while he is singing that song. The lyrics do not have anything to do with the Mundy's house:

*"In olden times a glimpse of stocking
Was looked on as something shocking- [...]
If driving fast cars, you like,
If low bars you like,
If old hymns you like,
If bare limbs you like,
If Mae West you like,
Or me undressed you like,
Why, nobody will oppose.
When ev'ry night, the set that's smart is intruding
in nudist parties in Studios,
Anything goes [...] (64-5)" (9)*

Thus, Kate's apocalyptic words do not exist, in which her spiritual and ideological restlessness can be summarized as strange: "Control is slipping away; the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held together much longer. It is all about to collapse." (35) The house, the women as one tragic fate for them all. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, women is offended in a similar way, which is no more than being transgressed by the law of domestic space. The Mundy sisters' fate may have more tragedy than that of Bernarda Alba's daughters desire to be emancipated, that is created in a fake way in Friel's play; *Dancing at Lughnasa*. This desire can be seen as a hopeful version with light and sound, open countryside and wide horizons.

Conclusion

The real action that is found in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is better shown by language and dialogue. In most of the film, a sense of peace is conveyed through the intimate conversations on familiar topics. Furthermore, words of bitterness of criticism and insults reveal good spirits that represents the strive against change and disruption. Therefore, the language of the play is fundamentally driven and focused on character depiction. This explains the generalized criticism put against the film as characterized of being too theatrical, and failed to convey an influential convincing cinematic performance. It is obviously shown that Brian Friel achieves success by mixing the constant dialogues around the kitchen

table and theatrical acting. This is the mixing of cinematic elements like close ups, re-modulation of sounds and silence, fast changes of perspective, choosing a dialogic approach between the two media.

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