T.C.
VAN YÜZÜNCÜ YIL ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ

YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ

SOCIO-CULTURAL ASSETS BELONGING TO IRISH FOLKLORE IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *DANCING AT LUGHNASA* AND *THE VOLUNTEERS*

KEVSER KAPLAN

İNGİLİZ DİLİ VE EDEBİYATI
ANABİLİM DALI

MAYIS 2025

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YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ

HAZIRLAYAN

KEVSER KAPLAN

DANIŞMAN

DOÇ. DR. MEMET METİN BARLIK

VAN – 2025

T. R
VAN YÜZÜNCÜ YIL UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE DEPARTMENT

SOCIO-CULTURAL ASSETS BELONGING TO IRISH FOLKLORE IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *DANCING AT LUGHNASA* AND *THE VOLUNTEERS*

M.A THESIS

PREPARED BY

KEVSER KAPLAN

ADVISOR

ASSIST. PROF. DR. MEMET METİN BARLIK

VAN - 2025

KABUL VE ONAY

Kevser KAPLAN tarafından hazırlanan "Socio-Cultural Assets Belonging to Irish Folklore in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *The Volunteers* (Brian Friel'ın *Dancing at Lughnasa* ve *The Volunteers* Adlı Eserlerinde İrlanda Folklörüne Ait Sosyo-Kültürel Ögeler)" adlı tez çalışması aşağıdaki jüri tarafından OY BİRLİĞİ ile Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalında **YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ** olarak kabul edilmiştir.

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Tez Savunma Tarihi:	**23/05/2025**

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(İmza)

Kevser KAPLAN

DEDICATION

“To my strong self who never hesitates to struggle in all kinds of ignorance…”

“To my conscience that is not on the side of the oppressor, but on the side of truth, justice and knowledge…”

“And to my childish dreams that never run out.”

Yüksek Lisans Tezi

VAN YÜZÜNCÜ YIL ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
Mayıs, 2025

BRİAN FRİEL'IN *DANCING AT LUGHNASA* VE *THE VOLUNTEERS* ADLI ESERLERİNDE İRLANDA FOLKLÖRÜNE AİT SOSYO-KÜLTÜREL ÖGELER

ÖZET

Abbey Tiyatrosu'ndan 21. yüzyıl akımlarına kadar İrlandalı tiyatrosu, geleneksel ve modern İrlanda toplumunun karmaşık sosyo-politik manzaralar içerisinde kimlik arayışını ve ortak bir kültür oturtma çabasını tema seçmiştir. Dönemin oyun yazarlarından Brian Friel, İrlanda'nın kültürel mirasını ve tarihi mücadelelerini *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) ve *Volunteers* (1975) adlı eserlerinde ele almış ve siyasi, ekonomik ve kültürel gelişmelerin yansımalarını oyunlarına entegre etmiştir. Bu kapsamda sömürgecilik, gelenek ve modernleşme arasındaki gerginlik, dil ve tarihin kolektif hafıza üzerindeki etkisi, kimlik kargaşası, romantikleştirilmiş ideolojiler tarafından harcanan maddi ve manevi maliyetler gibi oldukça derin ve çok katmanlı sorgulamalar bu eserlerde mercek altına alınmaktadır. Eleştiri esnasında siyasi görüş açısından tarafsız durmaya çalışan yazar, İrlanda'nın sıradan kabul edilebilecek kırsal yaşamındaki karakterleri titizlikle şekillendirmiş, sembolleri ve dil seçimini dikkatle kullanmış, bireysel ve toplumsal travmaları gündelik diyaloglar yoluyla okura / izleyiciye sunmuştur. Oyunlarında, Büyük Buhran, bağımsızlık sonrası İrlanda, Kuzey İrlanda Sorunu (The Troubles), Paskalya Ayaklanması ve Sivil İç Savaş gibi köşe taşı olayların halkın üzerindeki maddi manevi etkisine ayna tutmayı hedeflemiştir. Bu bağlamda iç ve dış baskılar karşısında İrlanda'nın özgün folkloru ve sosyo-kültürel uygulamalarının sürdürülebilirlik konumu, karakterin pasif direnişleri aracılığıyla doğal bir döngü içerisinde aktarılmaktadır. *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Mundy kızları aracılığıyla 1930'ların İrlanda kırsalını toplumsal gerçeklikleri ve ekonomik krizin harekete geçirdiği aile dinamikleri farklı çerçevelerden yansıtır. *Volunteers*, öte yandan, siyasi entstitülerin Kuzey İrlanda Sorunları sonrası İrlanda toplumunda oluşmuş kaos ve kargaşa ortamını, kendi çıkarları yönünde nasıl manipüle ettiğini su yüzüne çıkarır. Bu süreç, İrlanda tarihinin ortaya çıkarılmasının yanı sıra kolektif hafızanın silinmeye çalışılması ve sömürgecinin sömürgeleştirilenin anlatısını dikte ettiği bir sosyolojik baskıyı yansıtır. Bu tez, Postkolonyalizm, modernleşme ve milliyetçilik teorilerinden yararlanarak, tarihsel ve politik gelişmelerin bu eserlerdeki yansımalarını ve etkisini analiz etmek için yakın okuma yaparak disiplinler arası bir yaklaşım kullanır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Büyük Buhran, IRA Gönüllüleri, İrlanda tiyatrosu, Kanguru Mahkemeleri, Kimlik ve Aidiyet, Kuzey İrlanda Sorunları, Lughnasa festivali
Sayfa Sayısı: viii + 98
Tez Danışmanı: Doç. Dr. Memet Metin BARLIK

M. A. Thesis

Kevser KAPLAN

VAN YÜZÜNCÜ YIL UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
May, 2025

SOCIO-CULTURAL ASSETS BELONGING TO IRISH FOLKLORE IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *DANCING AT LUGHNASA* AND *THE VOLUNTEERS*

ABSTRACT

Irish theatre, from the Abbey Theatre to the 21st-century movements has chosen the search for identity and the effort to establish a common culture within the complex socio-political landscapes of traditional and modern Irish society as its main themes. The Irish playwright Brian Friel addressed Ireland's cultural heritage and historical struggles in his works *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and *Volunteers* (1975) and integrated the reflections of political, economic, and cultural developments into the plays. The works examine multi-layered questions such as colonialism, the tension between tradition and modernization, the effect of language and history on collective memory, identity confusion, and the material and spiritual costs incurred by romanticized ideologies. Friel attempting to remain neutral in terms of political views during his criticism meticulously crafted the characters in the rural life of Ireland being considered ordinary, and carefully employed symbols and language choices. He presented individual and social traumas to the reader/viewer through everyday dialogues. He aimed to reflect the material and spiritual impact of milestone events such as the Great Depression, post-independence Ireland, the Troubles, the Easter Rising and the Civil War on the people. The sustainability of Ireland's unique folklore and socio-cultural practices in the face of internal and external pressures is conveyed in this context in a natural cycle through the passive resistance of the characters. *Dancing at Lughnasa* reflects the social realities of rural Ireland in the 1930s through the Mundy girls and the family dynamics triggered by the economic crisis from different perspectives. *Volunteers*, on the other hand, reveal how political institutions manipulated the chaos and turmoil in Irish society after the Troubles in Northern Ireland for their interests. This process reflects the sociological pressure of the colonizer dictating the narrative of the colonized as well as the attempt to uncover Irish history. This thesis uses an interdisciplinary approach by drawing on theories of post colonialism, modernization, and nationalism and by conducting a close reading to analyze the reflections and impact of historical and political developments in these works.

Key Words: The Great Depression, IRA Volunteers, Irish theatre, Kangaroo Courts, Identity and Belonging, The Northern Ireland Troubles, Lughnasa festival
Quantity of Page: viii + 98
Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Memet Metin BARLIK

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PREFACE

The Irish people have been a nation that my curiosity and desire to know them has been increasing day by day since I was introduced to the heroism of Cú Chulainn. Their struggle for independence and the crises and crises they faced after independence, the fact that young Irish people were forced to leave their country in desperation and migrate to other countries reluctantly, provided a common ground for my individual and social experiences and strengthened my ability to empathize with Irish society. Beyond all these problems, how this vibrant society, which constantly manages to have fun with cultural elements such as music, dance, festivals, etc., copes with the problems has led me to sail to new seas. This is actually the main reason why I have a bond with Irish literature and Irish theater. Being able to create a harmonious synthesis within a great confusion of identities requires being able to analyze and criticize both one's own society and the factors that cause it very well. I hope that I can awaken this sweet curiosity that has formed in my essence in my valuable readers by examining his works *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Volunteers*.

Beyond all these words, I would like to thank my valuable advisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Memet Metin BARLIK, who supported and contributed to the creation of my work, showed the necessary interest and attention to my research from the very beginning, enlightened my path to success, and held my hand and lifted me up whenever I was about to fall during this long process. I would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Aydın GÖRMEZ, who helped me choose my thesis topic with his mastery and academic success in Irish theatre.

Finally, I would like to thank my valuable friend Yunus KILIÇ, who helped me start my master's degree and made his presence felt by me until the completion stage.

Kevser KAPLAN

INTRODUCTION

> *Now, even though you refuse to acknowledge the fact, Screwballs, I'm leaving you forever. I'm going to Philadelphia, to work in an hotel. And you know why I'm going, Screwballs, don't you. Because I'm 25, and you treat me as if I were 5—I can't order even a dozen loaves without getting your permission. Because you pay me less than you pay Madge.* (Friel, Translations, 1980)

Brian Friel widely regarded as one of Ireland's greatest playwrights intricately woven threads of Irish folklore into the very fabric of his works. Born in 1929 in County Tyrone, Friel infused his plays with subtle distinctions of Irish geography, culture, and history—elements with which he was deeply familiar. Early in his career, he underwent a period of self-discovery that later evolved into a focus on the idea of complete national independence. Both his personal life and literary output reflect nationalist convictions articulated through the discourses of Irish culture. Although Ireland had achieved independence, Friel confronted the notion that individuals could never possess a wholly pure identity, nor could they entirely sever ties with Anglicized motifs embedded in both cultural and political realms. This realization led him to distance himself from rigid visions of nationalism. His experiences in the United States not only softened his perspectives but also enabled a more pragmatic approach to socio-political questions by saying "Irish identity is neither fixed nor pure; it is a palimpsest rewritten by history and memory" (Friel, 2015). By the help of this assertion, he articulated a view that became foundational in his later works. Friel ultimately secured his place as a luminary within the canon of Irish drama, devoting his theatrical vision to the expression of the Irish spirit. Through a Chekhovian lens, he prioritized cultural identity, language, personal memory, and artistic record, particularly within the existential struggles of ordinary Irish people and the complexities of human relationships. This distinctive approach earned him the title "the Irish Chekhov" and marked the beginning of a new era in Irish theatre.

Rather than reinforcing nationalistic binaries, Friel redirected the focus of contemporary playwrights toward shifting perceptions of humanity, Irishness, nuanced interpersonal dynamics, uncertainty, and the universal human condition. His

work reflects a conscious effort to forge a shared cultural memory uniting tradition and modernity. He explored the musicality and aesthetic qualities of the Irish language—not in opposition to English, but as a complementary force seeking renewal. His academic endeavors traced the Irish people's longing for a place within the flow of national identity. The strength of Friel's emerging style lay in its capacity to create a space where the local population could embrace modernity while expressing authentic identity beyond ideological nationalism. In an interview, Friel defined this transition by stating: "Nationalism is a powerful force, but it can blind us to the more nuanced and less conspicuous forces of identity and humanity" (Murray, 1997). He believed that rigid ideological dichotomies could never fully capture the lived experience of Irish identity. Rather than outright rejecting English moral structures, Friel chose to examine their implications, integrating them within Irish cultural frameworks that already bore their imprint.

Claiming that Friel entirely abandoned or rejected nationalist concerns would constitute a grave misjudgment. His primary focus remained the lived and ongoing experiences of ordinary Irish people oppressed by mechanisms imposed through upper-class hegemony. Although his plays grapple with existential anxieties, they consistently steer these concerns toward Irish identity while preserving an intrinsic sensitivity to Irish cultural consciousness in tandem with universal human values. This cultural sensibility continually sought answers to the question "Who are we?" within the depths of Irish folklore. As exemplified in *Translations* (1980), Friel issued a forceful challenge to the deliberate colonial project of Anglicization. His frequent engagement with the Irish language and Celtic mythology invited audiences into a realm of internal romanticism. Through modernist reinterpretations of Irish oral traditions, he constructed a framework that both preserved cultural identity and adapted it to the demands of contemporary structures. For Friel, the Irish bore an obligation to transcend their current circumstances and access a more enlightened selfhood through such adaptations. Keane (1965) posited that "Irishness" signified a process of healing and renewal. This concept transcends the geographical boundaries of the Republic of Ireland, rooted instead in the formation of a unified cultural sphere encompassing Northern Ireland. Friel never mentally or spiritually severed his ties to Northern Ireland; the region emerges in nearly every one of his works as a symbolic

homeland, a place to which he repeatedly returns. At a deeper level, he could never detach himself from rural Ireland, leading to the creation of the fictional town of Ballybeg—a recurring setting in dozens of his plays. Ballybeg represents a microcosmic, universal Ireland where North and South remain inseparably connected by shared suffering. Friel described this imaginary space in deeply personal terms: “I am not ‘influenced’ by place. Place check me. It’s unavoidable. And the place that I respond to most is the wild countryside of Donegal” (Friel, 2015). This profound attachment gave rise to a cosmopolitan symbiosis and collective memory seamlessly reflected in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and *Volunteers* (1975).

1. HISTORY OF MODERN IRISH THEATRE

Irish theatre began to define its modern form most distinctly in the early 20th century, engaging closely with Ireland's political and cultural identity. Its foundations extended to the struggle for independence from British colonial rule. While literary works by Irish writers existed prior to this period, they could not be fully distinguished as separate from English literature. However, the emergence of an Irish theatre movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, spurred by Ireland's growing desire for independence, sought to preserve and promote both creative expression and the national struggle against oppression—artistically and politically. The Great Famine and subsequent waves of emigration heightened the urgency of this movement. Simultaneously, the Gaelic Revival and Irish Literary Revival reshaped the character of modern Irish theatre (UCD University Relations, 2015).

The Abbey Theatre, founded in 1904 by William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and Edward Martyn, ignited the Irish theatre movement, earning the title "National Theatre." The movement aimed not only to assert national independence but to end cultural colonization. It provided a platform for stage performances to address real-life political upheavals while reviving Ireland's unique culture, heritage, language, history, and spirit. This platform inspired audiences to envision a sovereign future by celebrating and critiquing national identity while promoting political and intellectual activism (Mathews, 2016).

The revival of modern theatre at the Abbey led to the rise of numerous writers addressing diverse themes. Figures such as John Millington Synge and Seán O'Casey explored colonial resistance, national identity, and socio-political issues. Works like *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) made significant impact. In the latter, O'Casey dramatized the complexities of the Irish struggle surrounding events such as the Easter Rising and the Civil War, portraying the human cost of independence and the lives of everyday Dubliners in crisis. His impassioned rhetoric introduced striking commentary on the tension between idealized nationalism and social realism, provoking outrage among critics who believed the depiction tarnished rural Irish life. Yet the duality of celebrating triumph

while subtly criticizing it marked modern Irish theatre as a dynamic and compelling field of cultural critique (Morash, 2002).

Political discourse, deeply fractured in Ireland, found expression through allegorical forms that repurposed Irish history, myth, folklore, and music to confront contemporary issues. Cathleen *Ní Houlihan* (1902), written in an allegorical style by W. B. Yeats and Gregory, portrayed Ireland as a mythical old woman who demands the sacrifice of young men for national freedom. Declan Kiberd (1995) believed Gregory's production aimed to "bring the deepest Irish thoughts and feelings onto the stage." This impact catalyzed increased participation in the nationalist movement particularly among women. Seán O'Casey, recognizing the divisive atmosphere that emerged as nationalist groups clashed with opposition forces, turned his attention to the sociological and psychological fragmentation of the public, especially the internal existential suffering of society. His response came in the form of *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) and *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), written to expose the contradictions embedded in the uncertain reality of his time (Mathews, 2016). These plays offered a raw depiction of Dublin during war and revolution, showcasing realist drama centered on the city's tenement communities.

The Abbey Theatre and the broader Irish Theatre Movement laid the foundation not only for modern Irish drama but also for a generational bridge between traditionalists and a new wave of playwrights. The fragmentation of the social structure became apparent in the more innovative theatrical practices of later generations. The movement's significance, in terms of cultural and historical nationalism, shaped the cultural identities of subsequent playwrights, influencing how they addressed the collective life of the Irish people and especially the Irish and Gaelic languages. Writers such as Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Frank McGuinness, and Marina Carr carried this tradition forward into the present. Their work shared key features: combining past experiences with contemporary social realities, and presenting the daily sorrows and anxieties of the Irish people through modern interpretations. Murphy's *Famine* (1968), for instance, unambiguously linked historical trauma and population imbalance in modern Ireland to forced emigration (Morash, 2002). Marina Carr, by contrast, responded to the Abbey's engagement with social norms by deconstructing these norms from a feminist perspective through

Irish folklore, most notably in *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) (Pine, 1991). Carr offered a postmodern literary perspective on social norms and female roles, expanding this approach to include LGBTQ+ themes and ethnic minority experiences (Lonergan, 2009).

Among the playwrights influenced by the Irish Theatre Movement, Brian Friel emerged as one of the most cited and rapidly ascending figures in the field. His literary acumen extended beyond mere continuation of tradition, as he developed new conceptual frameworks and refined the formal aspects of "language" and "literary technique," bringing the theme of memory in colonial contexts to the forefront of Irish theatre. His most publicly influential work, *Translations* (1980), investigated the intersections of history, language, and power. In this play, Friel reanimated the legacy of the Abbey Theatre by transporting it into new dimensions of post-independence identity crisis, crafting a dialogue between tradition and contemporary cultural-political discourse (Richtarik, 1994). His use of postmodern narrative in *Molly Sweeney* (1994) demonstrated a technique that intertwined the movement's foundational realism with the fragile nature of subjective truth. Through adaptive innovation, Friel established the Field Day Theatre Company, staging contemporary political and social realities under the shadow of the Abbey Theatre. This endeavor allowed him to skillfully merge tradition with modernity and ultimately with postmodernity.

The Irish Literary Revival provided one of the most powerful intellectual foundations for the nation's quest for independence. Together with the Irish Theatre Movement and the Abbey Theatre, this cultural journey enabled a kind of national renaissance. The revolution initiated domestically served as a template for other colonized societies and garnered international attention. Irish language, culture, and history were pulled from the dusty margins and reintroduced into the modern literary canon. The Irish Theatre Movement's influence remains extensive and enduring. Its legacy persists in the continued vitality of Irish theatre, committed to exploring the complexities of identity and power through the work of contemporary playwrights. This historical continuity serves both the discovery of new theatrical forms and the preservation of cultural practices the very dual purpose that initially propelled institutions like the Abbey into being (Kiberd, 1995).

2. A LITERARY PORTRAIT: BRIAN FRIEL

Referred to as the "Irish Chekhov" due to his plays' incisive exploration of social and political life in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, Brian Patrick Friel (9 January 1929 – 2 October 2015) is recognized as one of Ireland's greatest dramatists (Wikipedia contributors, 2024). In response to the political crises unfolding in Northern Ireland, Friel co-founded the Field Day Theatre Company in 1980 alongside actor and director Stephen Rea. He soon initiated collaborations with other playwrights, seeking to expand the company's vision and cultural reach. In addition to his plays, Friel authored short stories, film scripts, essays on artists and theatre, worked on a radio program, and adapted many of his works for the screen, aligning him with an evolving and innovative media landscape.

Born in 1929 in the village of Killyclogher near Omagh, in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, Friel was the eldest of six children in a Catholic family. His father, Patrick Friel, once his schoolteacher, later became headmaster of a school outside the town. His mother, Mary McLoone Friel, worked as the postmistress in Glenties, County Donegal (Delaney, 2000). Friel spent part of his childhood in Donegal, a region whose cultural and emotional imprint is clearly evident in his literary works. At the age of ten, the Friel family relocated to Derry, where his father assumed a role as advisor to the local municipal authority, the Londonderry Corporation. Friel pursued his education at St. Columb's College for five years, and then continued his studies at St. Patrick's College Maynooth for two and a half years, followed by a year at St. Joseph's Training College.

In 1954, Friel married Anne Morrison, with whom he had four daughters and one son. Between 1950 and 1960, he taught mathematics at various schools in the Derry area while also nurturing a growing interest in literature, submitting short stories to multiple periodicals. His first short story was published in *The Irish Times Literary Supplement*, followed by another in *The New Yorker* (2006). *The New Yorker* began publishing his stories regularly, Friel left teaching to become a full time writer. His early fictional texts were initially broadcast on radio and later adapted for theatrical performance. Though he expressed a preference for writing short fiction, the plays he produced ultimately secured his literary reputation. His

dramatic works drew the attention of prominent contemporaries such as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, and Tennessee Williams, facilitating his entry into the global theatre scene (Wikipedia contributors, 2024). The moment Friel abandoned his teaching career to pursue writing is widely regarded as the turning point in his life. His personal and aesthetic concerns, his drive to question both traditional and acquired knowledge, and his ability to analyze society through sociological and psychological lenses, all served as the foundation of his literary career. His compulsion to interrogate unsettling truths has been characterized as follows:

> *(…) An Irish Catholic teacher of nationalist background, in a schizophrenic community, the son of a teacher and the grandson of a peasant, who couldn't read and who couldn't write..... But what I hope is taking shape is in the words of Sean O'Faolain; "a faith, a feeling for life, a way of seeing life which is coherent, and persistent, and inclusive and forceful enough to give organic form to the totality of my work. (Delaney, 2000)*

Brian Friel constructed his reputation as one of Ireland's most formidable playwrights through works that grapple with the complexities of nationhood, identity, language, and memory. His plays interrogate the intricate relationship between history and narrative and probe the shared ideas and struggles passed between generations. His career, spanning over sixty years, began to take shape following a six-month residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre near Minneapolis in 1963. In addition to mastering the fundamental principles of theatre, Friel acknowledged that the most profound gift America offered to his personal and professional life was "a sense of liberation" (Delaney, 2000). Escaping what he described as the claustrophobic grip of inherited cultural weight; Friel embraced a reimagined Irish spirit one marked by new perspective, freedom, and self-confidence. His first play infused with this renewed aura, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1980), captures the emotional dissonance of Gar O'Donnell, a young man emigrating from County Donegal to America. The play presents a groundbreaking portrayal of personal conflict and alienation, weaving private sentiment into a broader web of universal emotion. Nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play in 1966, Friel subsequently relocated to County Donegal in pursuit of belonging.

During The Troubles, a period of violent sectarian conflict between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland, Friel honed both his political perception and dramatic voice. His plays rapidly gained traction in Irish society due to their topical relevance and incisive treatment of enduring issues. While residing in Derry, he wrote *The Freedom of the City* (1973), followed by the staging of *Volunteers* (1975), both drawing public attention for their sharp political satire (The Irish Repertory Theatre., 2024). *Volunteers* depicts political prisoners held without trial by the Irish government, who are employed in an archaeological excavation intended to unearth the nation's historical and political origins. The play critiques the reduction of Ireland's past into simplified narratives serving contemporary political aims (Kurdi, 2002). Its thematic findings parallel the commodification, erasure, and marginalization of collective memory.

The 1970s marked a decisive turn in Friel's artistic development. After concluding that Ireland's territorial sovereignty did not equate to autonomy of will, he distanced himself from the impassioned doctrines of the Nationalist Party and from romanticized heroic discourse. Redirecting his focus, Friel immersed himself in the everyday lives of rural communities, studying their interpersonal dynamics, struggles, and coping mechanisms. His well-earned moniker as the "Irish Chekhov" derived from his deep engagement with the ordinary and realistic problems faced by Irish men and women: financial collapse, gendered tensions, cultural friction, and linguistic discord (Roche, 2006). Refusing to reinforce clichés or limit public imagination through rigid narrative conventions, Friel expanded his reach through interdisciplinary work, seeking to share his cause across all public platforms. This mission continued through radio and film productions and culminated in his widely influential play *Translations* (1980), which premiered across Ireland. The play integrated academic layers of philology and ethnographic inquiry, offering a portrayal of the Irish language and accent freed from the marginalizing and derogatory dominance of British colonialism. In doing so, Friel propelled Irish theatrical literature into a multidimensional and globally resonant framework.

The rural regions of Ireland, deeply affected by the socio-economic challenges of Irish geography, and concurrently steeped in the enduring presence of pre-Christian Irish traditions, significantly shaped Brian Friel's spatial imagination.

His formative years, spent amidst the rural landscapes of Donegal, anchored his artistic orientation toward such settings. According to Friel, the truest depiction of the Irish spirit and character, with all its struggles and contradictions, could only be observed in the lived realities of rural life. His belief that Northern Ireland and the Republic could not be separated politically, culturally, or emotionally led him to craft an imaginative, unified geography that transcended actual borders. Within this conceptual framework, Friel created the fictional town of Ballybeg, a place suffused with the spirit of Donegal. Approximately a dozen of his plays are set in this symbolic town, which served as a narrative canvas for exploring identity, memory, and belonging. Written in 1990, *Dancing at Lughnasa* synthesizes Friel's artistic vision, intertwining his philosophical convictions with autobiographical elements to produce one of his most emotionally resonant works. Depicting fragments of his life and family history, the play resonates with emotional intensity and authenticity. Its impact was immediate and profound, earning the Olivier Award for Best Play of the Year (Wikipedia contributors, 2024).

Friel's contributions to Irish literature span oral, written, visual, and academic forms, establishing him as a multidisciplinary figure of considerable influence. In recognition of his artistic legacy, the Irish association Aosdána honored him in 2006 with the title of Saoi, the highest distinction awarded by the institution (Bradford, Gonzalez, Butler, Ward, & De Ornellas, 2020). Following his passing, Queen's University Belfast inaugurated the Brian Friel Theatre and Centre for Theatre Research, further solidifying his intellectual and creative footprint. Revered for the universal themes embedded in his work and the profound emotional resonance of his narratives, Brian Friel earned international acclaim and became a beacon of inspiration for future generations of writers. He passed away on October 2, 2015, leaving behind a body of work that continues to shape the contours of contemporary Irish theatre.

3. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF *DANCING AT LUGHNASA* AND *VOLUNTEERS*

3.1 The Great Depression and the Anglo-Irish Economic War of 1930s

The Republic of Ireland achieved its initial independence from Britain with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1922, which established the country as a semi-autonomous state. The resulting fragmentation of Irish society and the lack of full sovereignty fostered unrest and intensified public dissatisfaction. The Treaty's continued subordination of Ireland to British influence sparked the Irish Civil War between 1922 and 1923. This conflict, marked by clashes between pro-treaty forces and nationalist factions, dealt a severe blow to Ireland's already fragile political and economic foundations (Neary & Gráda, 1991). Attempts to establish a coherent social order failed amidst deepening divisions and lawlessness, particularly in rural areas, where communities descended into crisis and instability.

The global reach of the Great Depression, which originated in the United States, further destabilized Ireland, inflicting additional economic damage on rural life. The prolonged economic downturn and sociopolitical turbulence of the 1930s directly shape the setting and thematic core of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The play offers a realistic depiction of the harsh economic conditions born out of national instability and the Great Depression. The global collapse in demand for agricultural products led to a dramatic fall in prices, impacting both domestic farming and agricultural exports—sectors in which Ireland was striving to specialize (Daly, 2011). The Depression, coupled with the Anglo-Irish Economic War, emerges as a defining context for the play. During this period, agriculture formed the backbone of Ireland's economy. Despite the Irish government's initial measures, Britain's deep involvement in the global economic crisis prompted it to exert pressure on Ireland. The first major retaliation involved a 20% import duty imposed on Irish land annuities—revenues that constituted 90% of Irish exports. Ireland's refusal to remit these payments led to an economic conflict between the two nations (Neary & Gráda, 1991). This trade war devastated Ireland's agricultural sector; between 1932 and

1935, export prices for butter and beef, key commodities, were halved. Dependent on Britain for international trade, Ireland lacked the capacity to compete under new tariff conditions.

Britain's economic leverage forced Éamon de Valera's administration to adopt protectionist policies in pursuit of self-sufficiency. State-run enterprises, such as the Irish Sugar Company in Carlow, received increased governmental support. Nevertheless, trade imbalances proved difficult to rectify, straining the limited resources of a nascent state and further destabilizing an economy heavily reliant on agriculture. The crisis delayed Ireland's industrial development, pushing its economy further backward. For rural families dependent on small-scale farming or localized industries, emigration became the only viable escape from deepening poverty. Farmers were unable to balance their incomes due to economic forces beyond their control. Small-scale laborers could not compete with cheap industrial production following the twin blows of the Great Depression and the Anglo-Irish trade war. Urban centers in Ireland failed to offer adequate employment as industrial opportunities became increasingly scarce. The growing disparity between job seekers and available positions made unemployment the country's most pressing issue. Local production failed to scale sufficiently, and in urban hubs such as Dublin, unemployment rates exceeded 30% in the early 1930s. Unskilled manual laborers were the hardest hit. In Dancing at Lughnasa, the characters Rose and Agnes reflect this reality; their real-life counterparts were dock workers who earned their living through traditional labor (Ferriter, 2004).

The housing crisis, resulting from the inability of the housing sector to keep up with urban population growth, represents another problem brought about by migration. A study in 1936 revealed that over 112,000 people were living in single-room apartments. The increasing overcrowding and scarcity contributed to a rise in diseases such as tuberculosis. Ireland, with one of the highest mortality rates in Europe, was further traumatized by the introduction of new diseases, exposing deep flaws in hygiene and sanitation standards.

For farmers, rising taxes were one of the major causes of the economic crises in rural Ireland during the 1930s. The sharp increase in the cost of necessary farming supplies forced many farmers to abandon their activities. Most of the farmers could

not find alternative employment, and those who continued farming were unable to obtain the necessary financial support, resulting in a further escalation of unemployment and poverty. Through the Mundy sisters, *Dancing at Lughnasa* conveys the sociological and psychological trauma caused by the economic upheavals of the 1930s, offering a microcosmic reflection of the period's reality. The women experience and express the material and emotional toll of the aforementioned crises, illustrating how they sought meaning and coping mechanisms in their daily lives. Kate is the only wage earner of the five sisters. In addition to her sisters, Kate is responsible for her illegitimate nephew, Michael, and an elderly uncle showing signs of Alzheimer's. Another representation of unemployment is seen in the character of Gerry, Michael's father. Gerry is a confused man who constantly attempts to find work but fails to maintain any employment, while also searching for adventure in other countries amidst his unstable life. Friel, staging the play with a cast of eight, uses the tension caused by the societal upheaval in the Irish lower class to subtly explore the relationships and dynamics within families and similar institutions. Moreover, Kate's dismissal from her job and the rapid disintegration of the Mundy family highlight the painful reality of societal division and turmoil across the country. In addition to Kate's unemployment, Rose and Agnes, who contribute to the family through handicrafts, lose their jobs with the advent of industrialization, reminding the audience of the multifaceted blows to the working class. Through these scenes, Friel addresses not only the economic crisis but also the identity crisis faced by the Irish people, who are forced to adapt to an evolving industrialized and modern world.

Unemployment in both rural and urban areas of Ireland, coupled with the inability of urban services to meet demand, led to a significant wave of emigration from the country, particularly toward foreign destinations. In contrast to the rapid recovery of the British economy, Ireland's economic policies lagged behind, often proving ineffective. As a result, many Irish men and women moved to London and other cities in search of work in manual labor or domestic service sectors. However, racial barriers and the exploitation of the working class, exemplified by the expropriation of workers' labor and their forced employment in low-wage job, shattered the hopes of many Irish youth. In response to political dissatisfaction and

economic disillusionment, thousands turned to illegal organizations and secret societies, such as the IRA or the Blue Shirts, seeking solutions to their problems (Lee, 1989).

At its core, the tariffs imposed on Irish exports, combined with the effects of the Great Depression, severely diminished the export potential of Irish industries, triggering shockwaves across the country. Ireland's export sectors—encompassing industries such as brewing, textiles, construction, and food processing—were characterized by their small scale, yet were labor-intensive and capital-intensive. A decline in demand for exports from these sectors crippled urban economies, which were tightly integrated into international markets. Sales of Irish goods in these markets nearly ceased, and the cost of raw materials skyrocketed (Johnson, 1974). Nearly all breweries, textile factories, and workshops, lacking market flow, were shut down. The blockade on maritime trade imposed by Britain dealt a severe blow to port workers and auxiliary logistics in areas such as Dublin. The profound economic upheaval and stagnation led to the following recorded data:

- Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the average unemployment rate in Northern Ireland reached 19%, peaking at 27% in 1939 (Johnson, 1974).
- The situation in the Irish Free State was similarly grim, with unemployment hovering around 25% during the 1930s (Gráda & O'Rourke, 2022).
- Between 1931 and 1934, the Workman Clark shipyard in Belfast, one of the city's major shipbuilding facilities, failed to launch a single ship for export during these three years. In 1935, the shipyard was permanently closed (Gráda & O'Rourke, 2022).
- The city's largest shipyard, Harland & Wolff, followed suit by laying off thousands of workers. Overall, more than 20,000 shipyard workers lost their jobs (Gráda & O'Rourke, 2022).
- In certain urban areas of Belfast, youth unemployment rates surpassed 50% (Daly, 2011).
- In Dublin, the unemployment rate among the working class exceeded 30% during the 1930s (Daly, 2011).
- Due to the United States' immigration restrictions and the United Kingdom's 1924 Immigration Act, annual emigration from the Irish Free State fell to

between 8,000 and 10,000 people annually between 1930 and 1935. This decline intensified the concentration of unemployed youth in Irish cities (Johnson, 1974).

- Urban areas such as Dublin, Cork, and Belfast were overwhelmed with visitors from rural areas seeking employment. Between 1926 and 1936, Dublin's population grew by 10% (Ferriter, 2004). This wave of migration led to the collapse of urban service infrastructures, exacerbating the already dire situation.

These figures provide a statistical framework for understanding the extent of the economic challenges faced in both rural and urban Ireland during the 1930s. They illustrate how the decline in industrialization intertwined with rising unemployment and migration trends.

3.2 The Struggles of the Mundy Sisters During the 1930s Economic Depression

The Mundy sisters residing in the town of Ballybeg in County Donegal serve as witnesses to an era marked by individual and societal struggles as well as the internal conflicts brought to the stage by the playwright. This microcosmic region functions as a mirror reflecting the so-called history of the economic and political crises in the relevant countries. Moreover, it provides a micro-view of Irish society and cultur, deeply intertwined with the economic crisis of the Irish Free State.

This period represented a time when conservative Catholic values and nationalist ideals most intensely overlapped. Although the Éamon de Valera government appeared to be an independent entity, the decisions made were far from being entirely free from the influence of the Catholic Church. The 1937 Irish Constitution, by enacting Article 41, designated the woman's role in the home, as the protector of the family institution, as a public good, thereby creating a gender-biased atmosphere of oppression for women (Lojek, 2006). This crisis, however, was too deep to be resolved through small scale industrial activities such as handcrafting or poultry farming.

Kate Mundy, wage-earner among the Mundy sisters, stands as a direct victim of this economic crisis. For Kate, teaching is not merely a profession, but also a reflection of her authoritative and responsible role within the family. Despite being unmarried, she assumes the parental role within the family, shouldering the responsibilities of keeping the family together, shielding them from problems, particularly Rose, and ensuring their livelihood. Kate explicitly expresses this burden with the following words: “But what scares me most of all is Rose. If I died - if they fired me - if they broke up this little house: what would happen to our Rosie?” (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 46). Maggie and Agnes trying to share Kate’s financial burden represent the lower-skilled worker group. However, with the opening of textile factories and the resulting decrease in product costs, the small businesses of single women were forced to close down. The situation of the Mundy sisters mirrors that of many workers and shopkeepers who closed their businesses due to the crisis of the 1930s.

Another member of the family, Rose, is depicted by Friel as a character who is innocent, naive and in need of protection. Rose who values love and affection, possesses a lively energy and is considered a young and attractive woman. She is positioned within the new and dynamic Ireland, having gained independence, yet is left vulnerable and helpless. In addition to being a dreamer, Rose is also unemployed and has been deceived by a married man. Throughout the play, Rose never loses her sympathy and childlike innocence and she has to confront the harsh realities of the country’s difficult circumstances. The youngest sister Christina is also unmarried but unlike the others, she has an illegitimate son named Michael. Unmarried motherhood, while increasing social stigma and pressure within the conservative values of the time, also provides an opportunity for Friel to offer a chance for women to take steps toward adaptation in a modernizing world. Christina’s motherhood becomes central to the unfolding narrative, highlighting the challenges women face within social and economic structures.

One of Friel’s central critiques lies in the romantic idealism applied to the responses to the migration issue. This critique is embodied in the character of Gerry Evans, who, despite offering grand promises, fails to fulfill any of them and, due to economic instability, seeks to build his life in different countries. Rose’s lively but

haunting song, which references not only Mussolini and the Italian-Ethiopian War with the "fascist concert" but also reflects the internal effects of external problems on Ireland, underscores this. Through these subtle references, Friel not only points to the impending wave of migration but also expresses his critique of Ireland's political conservatism. Gerry's desire to participate in the Spanish Civil War highlights an interesting point. His loss of enthusiasm for his country's independence struggle, along with his disillusionment with the general politics of the time, emphasizes the fragility of collective memory and the weariness of the people. In this context, through *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the author bridges real historical events with autobiographical memories, raising the reader's awareness of the fluid and narrative nature of history (Dean, 2019).

By writing *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel examines the socio-economic transformation of rural Ireland in the 1930s through the Mundy family, shedding light on the destructive impact of the interplay between traditional structures and the processes of modernization on individual lives. The unmarried women, the central protagonists of the play, become subjects of a survival struggle shaped by the intersection of economic fragility, religious authority, and societal gender norms. The professional loss of Kate Mundy, at the forefront of this structural transformation, stands as a striking reflection of this shift. Father Jack's deviation from the role of a Western missionary to embrace the local belief systems of the Africans was deemed a serious violation of discipline by the Catholic Church, ultimately leading to Kate's removal from her teaching position. Despite being a devout Catholic and a qualified educator, Kate's position was deemed insufficient in the face of institutional authority's decisions. Female labor, under the ideological control of religious institutions, was rendered invisible and devalued. Similarly, Agnes's small-scale handcraft business also disappeared in conjunction with industrial transformation and the rise of factory work. The restructuring of the labor market pushed her out of production relations, leaving her feeling ineffective as she could no longer contribute to her family's livelihood. Agnes's decision to move to London with Rose should be understood not as a quest for economic independence, but rather as a manifestation of an existential deadlock.

Agnes's words regarding labor exploitation are profoundly meaningful: "I wash every piece of clothing that you wear. I make your bed. We both do — Rose and I. (…) what you've got here, Kate, is two unpaid servants" (p. 33). This tirade clearly reveals the devaluation of women trapped by domestic duties and systematically marginalized in both public and private spheres. Through this, Agnes questions the social structure that reduces women to the position of natural servants. This questioning also represents her confrontation with the system.

On the other hand, the reality that Agnes and Rose face in London demonstrates that breaking away from rural life does not lead to salvation, but instead to deeper poverty and marginalization. In low-wage jobs, struggling to survive within the ruthless structure of urbanization, these two women ultimately vanish within the gears of the system. Their silent and gradual destruction is not only an individual tragedy but also a historical reflection of the patriarchal-capitalist system's devaluation of female labor.

3.3 The Troubles and Other Political Issues in Volunteers

Brian Friel's *Volunteers* (1975) stands out among the author's works as one of the most striking and bold metaphoric representations. The play focuses on condemned prisoners who volunteer to uncover a historical period stretching from the early Viking era to the late Georgian period. These prisoners, participating in an archaeological dig, metaphorically represent the effort to bring to light Ireland's suppressed and contested history, reawakening memory on an intellectual level. The Viking skeleton, discovered during the excavation and named "Leif", alongside the mythological narratives created around it, calls for the recovery of collective memory.

These condemned individuals symbolize those trapped in the repetitive cycle of historical violence and ideological conflict. The play reflects a period in which Irish society grappled with fundamental historical and political issues, including nationalism, colonial history, the aftermath of uprisings, Ireland's partition, the Troubles, the Civil Rights Movement, and the actions of the IRA. Moreover, Friel's work draws inspiration from archaeological findings related to Iron Age people

ritually sacrificed in the swamps of Jutland Peninsula in Denmark, as described in *The Bog People* (Costero, 2016), and the impact of laws such as the Internment Act and the Special Powers Act on the ethno-nationalist conflicts in Northern Ireland. Within this framework, the characters in the play have been reshaped through a process of reinterpreting "Irishness", critiquing political structures and institutions, probing the meanings assigned to language, and questioning the values and attitudes embedded in Ireland's collective consciousness (Imhof, 1991).

Friel constructs the central character as a political prisoner sentenced for five crimes in *Volunteers*. These prisoners, arrested in the post - Troubles period, volunteer for the archaeological dig in search of Ireland's essence and the truth. Their obsessive desire to uncover ancient remnants is portrayed as a pathological metaphor for their yearning to relive and retell the lives they perceive as wasted in the past. During the excavation, the skeleton of a man, evidently killed by a blow to the head, is found and ironically named Leif. The name, in a sarcastic contrast with the word Life, establishes a powerful link between past and present times, as well as the contradictory identity of post-colonial Ireland. Keeney, depicted as a clever prisoner at the beginning of the dig, requests the excavation team to fabricate a story about Leif's death. Keeney, by narrating his own theory, suggests that Leif went to America, married a Native American woman, returned to his homeland, and was eventually killed by his family. This narrative reflects not only an individual fate but also the historical fragmentation of national identity.

Friel also underscores the helplessness of prisoners struggling with identity loss amidst the societal and political upheavals. In this context, Leif, a prisoner from a thousand years ago, mirrors the modern Irishman; like the past, he remains a symbol of the individual punished and stigmatized by society for his ideas and choices (He, 2014). The hole in Leif's skull can be interpreted as a historical representation of these prisoners, who, much like those who once wore a noose around their necks in the name of nationalism, have been silenced.

Another aspect of the play is the emphasis on the injustice within the "kangaroo courts" established by the prisoners in the jail. The volunteer prisoners in the dig, who fundamentally oppose the political structure both ideologically and in practice, are imprisoned under the pretext that they threaten public safety. Ironically,

they are sentenced to death for treason by a kangaroo court for supporting the government's work through their voluntary participation in the dig. This scenario illustrates that political crime is not merely a legal category but is reproduced within the dynamics of collective resistance. In some cases, Friel views the prisoners' unauthorized and lawless actions within these internal dynamics as potentially more dangerous than conscious media manipulation, and this is sharply criticized throughout the work. For instance, Smiler, one of the volunteer prisoners, is abducted from the dig by his friends but, fearing the social pressures he would face, decides to return to prison. For Smiler, the threat he faces within is far sharper than any external threat. Smiler's return is not an act of freedom but rather a forced return of a lost soul, and his internal dissolution and search for belonging add dramatic depth to the narrative:

> *As I got up to the gate I wanted to run – had to run away – knew I had to run away – I knew that – I knew that I- I - [...] and then when I was outside, I -I-I-I didn't know anything more – knew nothing, Butt – and then I had to return – to come – to – (...)* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 76)

Volunteers not only depict portraits on a micro scale of the difficult struggle against the criminalization of ideas within organizations but also among individuals within their own communities. This analysis, dominated by a sense of distrust, should be regarded as a concrete example of the damage done to public consciousness during the Troubles. The period, also known as the Northern Ireland Conflict, refers to the series of confrontations between the 1960s and 1990s, resulting in the deaths of 3,281 people by 1998 and the injury of tens of thousands. It witnessed direct confrontations between the IRA and INLA on one side, and the British Army, as well as between Catholics, Protestants, and Republicans on the other. This conflict rendered the idea of an independent Northern Ireland utterly unfeasible and, since then, has imposed a historical and ideological burden that has shaped the concept of Irishness (Woodwell, 2005). To reference this period, the writer has had Smiler arrested for a specific crime. Smiler is the only prisoner whose arrest we know was a direct consequence of a protest march to Dublin during the Derry Border incidents. Participating in such an action during the time of ongoing political crises was considered a capital offense. Despite being aware of this, other prisoners who volunteered for the excavation chose to support him for the sake of the

nation and brotherhood ideal, thus continuing their passive resistance under imprisonment. Friel, while attributing these qualities to the volunteers, powerfully illustrates the physical and mental sacrifices made by Irish individuals in their struggle for self-determination.

Overall, there are significant points of intersection between Brian Friel's personal life cycles and the plays *Volunteers* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The Northern Irish land where Friel was born and raised represents not only a physical geography but also a cultural memory concentrated with the colonial legacy, sectarian conflict, and suppressed histories. These lands, woven with pagan mythologies, also bear the weight of a collective identity developed under the dominance of Catholicism. Friel's childhood home, where these mythical and political contexts intertwined, shaped his mental background as a place where Catholicism and sectarian violence coexisted. When Friel's works are analyzed in the context of postcolonial identity, they delve deeply into the identity crisis of post-colonial Ireland, the concept of a divided nation, and the individual narratives shaped by historical traumas. Especially in *Volunteers*, the prisoners' effort to uncover the past through excavation serves as a metaphorical reference to suppressed historical truths and silenced identity narratives. This situation aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of "cultural hybridity" (Özbent, 2023). Indeed, Friel's characters become figures caught between the colonial and the indigenous, struggling to reconstruct their own subjectivity.

Friel's experience of living both in the Republic of Ireland and in the multinational state of the United States exposed him to different intellectual paradigms. His ability to observe traditional nationalism alongside culturally adapted forms of nationalism (acculturated nationalism) nourished the multilayered identity constructs in his plays (White, 1985). These experiences solidified his critical stance on national identity, belonging, and historical continuity. Particularly during his time in Dublin, he witnessed the violence and conflicts during the Derry Border incidents, which deepened his understanding of the effects of traumatic memory on individuals. He internalized the psychological and sociological hysteria that Dominick LaCapra (1999) refers to as structural trauma. Friel explores issues of identity and memory in his works, emphasizing that the individual cannot cope only with the events they

have experienced, but also with the historical and cultural systems they are embedded in: “It’s one of those uncomfortable plays, where it challenges your idea of identity and culture, but at the same time, we criticize them, you know?” (Friel, 2015). Illustrating *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel blends individual memory with collective trauma by transposing his own personal losses—such as the loss of friends during the Derry Border incidents—onto themes of family, belonging, and failed social ideals. The play sheds light on individual tragedies excluded from the nation-building process through themes such as the roles imposed on women by a society shaped by its colonial past, economic exclusion, and cultural inconsistencies.

3.4 Irish Folk Motifs in *Dancing at Lughnasa*

The five sisters’ struggle to maintain family bonds in the post-independence era and in the face of the Great Depression is just one of the narratives portrayed in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. As with many of his other plays, Brian Friel skillfully weaves the cultural and folkloric traces of Irish society into this work. While the characters reflect the darker aspects of the period, the distinctive structure of daily life, folklore traditions passed down from ancestors, and superstitions bring liveliness and theatrical depth to the play.

The word “dance” in the title of the play refers to the Lughnasa Festival, a part of Celtic tradition, which serves as both a bittersweet reminder of Ireland’s pagan past and a continuous link to it. Dance, in this context, also symbolizes the characters’ connection to the land and cultural heritage. Lughnasa is an ancient harvest festival celebrated in honor of the Celtic god Lugh, marking the end of a seasonal cycle with rituals, dances, and communal feasts. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the mythical festival becomes a highly symbolic motif. The characters’ expectations and preparations for the festival reflect their desire for belonging and their attempts to fill the inner emptiness, while also providing a cultural backdrop that underscores the struggles they face. The sisters, bound by Catholic faith, may be prohibited from participating in the pagan dance by Kate, but Agnes and Rose deeply feel the desire to join in. This persistent longing is clearly expressed in Agnes’s words:

> *I think we should all go. […] How many years ago were we at the harvest dance? -- at any dance? And I don’t care how young they are, how*

> *drunk and dirty and sweaty they are. I want to dance, Kate. It is the Festival of Lughnasa. I'm only thirty-five. I want to dance.* (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 22)

Irish dance, as an inseparable part of the festival, imbues the work with a ritualistic dimension. The relationship the characters establish with dance goes beyond individual expression; it reflects cultural values such as self-expression within the strong bonds of the community and integration with the land. Throughout the play, the sisters' different forms of dancing represent their resistance to economic and psychological hardships. Despite their differences, dance serves as a natural means for them to unite, offering a temporary space of freedom and liberation. This act is not merely a fleeting moment of joy; it also represents a connection to the past. Each figure carrying traces of ancient Celtic traditions also serves as an outlet for the suppressed emotions within the characters' subconscious. Rose's enthusiastic and at times hysterical recounting of the festival reveals the surfacing of her deeply suppressed desires. In this context, dance has a symbolic meaning on stage: it is an expression of repressed individual freedoms, cultural identity, and social resistance.

Rituals are defined as moments when the boundaries of the community temporarily dissolve, and the individual's identity is redefined by Victor Turner (1966). The dance scenes in the play mark moments where the characters, through these temporary spaces of freedom, reconstruct their individual and collective identities, breaking free from societal norms. Despite Kate's prohibition, the sisters' insistence is rooted in the desire to re-establish connections with society, to disregard hierarchical realities, and to erase the differences between classes, thereby achieving a sense of shared belonging. The comforting dance, which features the liberated figures of ancient Celtic traditions, has a mystical, enchanting effect on Rose:

> *Now they set a bonfire next to a spring well. Then they dance round it. Then they walk their cattle through the flames to drive the devil out of them. […]And this year there was an especially large group of boys and girls. And they'd all been drinking like fish. And young Sweeney's pants caught fire and he went up like a torch. That's what happened.* (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 25)

A similar manifestation of Rose's hysterical desires is presented in the first act, where Maggie performs an almost primal dance in response to her sisters' question, "Do you want to make yourself a pagan?" In reply, Maggie spreads flour

on her face and angrily lifts her skirt to perform an almost savage dance (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 9). Afterward, when the other sisters join her, their instinctive desire to revert to paganism is staged around a collective ritual (Rollins, 1993). In this way, dance provides the audience with a space to interpret the characters' inner worlds. Indeed, Kate, who initially sees her sisters' actions as pagan because they do not conform to the Christian female archetype, ultimately succumbs to the ritual's enchanting effect. She goes outside and begins to dance alone, thus finding an opportunity to express a primal side of herself beyond the character shaped by society.

As in nearly all cultures, music holds a central place in Irish culture, with Irish music tracing its roots back to ancient times. Research shows that the Celts used dance music and battle music, and Druids played musical instruments during religious ceremonies. Before Christianity, there were numerous Irish poets (bards) who used nine different musical instruments, and it is also reported that these poets took their names from Ogma, the pagan god considered Ireland's Apollo (Foley, 1933). The old radio in the Mundy sisters' house, powered by Marconi, serves as a kind of Ogma in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. In fact, when the Mundy sisters fight for survival, it serves as a force that binds them together, cheers them up and makes them vulnerable. As soon as they turn on the radio, they begin to sing and dance wildly. In ancient times, people who danced like priests with painted faces, swearing oaths to the gods, could even be seen as a reflection of these primordial worship practices. Among the sisters, Maggie is the one who most intensely experiences this situation. Analyzed in terms of movement, it becomes apparent that Maggie is a woman who, by remaining distant from sexuality, is almost starved for sensuality and desires. Unlike her daily life, where she suppresses her femininity, she occasionally expresses passionate emotions. The flirtatious feelings that increase with Gerry's arrival are seen as an outlet for these repressed desires. Just before starting to dance, her act of making a flour mask with her fingers represents the release of her desires, which are veiled by all social barriers, into nature, as naked and free as in ancient times (Tracy, 2007). Maggie's wild dance, which she performs as if she were the god Bacchus and her pagan gestures are conveyed to the audience through Friel's following tirade:

MAGGIE turns round. Her head is cocked to the beat, to the music. She is breathing deeply, rapidly. Now her features become animated by a look of defiance, of aggression; a crude mask of happiness… At the same time she opens her mouth and emits a wild, raucous 'Yaaaah!' – and she immediately begins to dance, arms, legs, hair, long bootlaces flying. And as she dances she lilts – sings – she shouts and calls, 'Cme on and join me! Come on! Come on!' About ten seconds she dances along – a white-faced, frantic dervish. (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 30)

3.5 The Representational Power of Marconi and Modern Pagan Rituals

Marconi is one of the rare elements temporarily transporting the Mundy sisters away from the burden of reality and the hardships of life and bringing them fleeting moments of happiness. The radio itself is not merely a technical device; it is also a tool that facilitates communication between people and provides the flow of information regarding current events. In this regard, Marconi becomes a symbolic element, bridging the lived experience with real life. The radio is perhaps the strongest connection between the Mundy sisters and reality (Aragay, 2002).

Throughout the narrative, it is a common occurrence for Marconi's battery to constantly run out, and for the music to be interrupted each time. This interruption carries symbolic significance. Marconi's function is considered as a symbol of the transfer of information between individuals and the connection with the outside world. The environment in which the unmarried sisters live is clearly distant from the beauty of life and most of the standards offered by an ordinary life. The sisters' efforts to operate Marconi symbolize their struggle for survival. In the isolated, provincial world of the Mundy sisters, the intermittent and sudden bursts of music briefly awaken them from their narrow consciousness. These musical moments represent a small but powerful act of rebellion against the ordinariness and the structures that limit their lives. The songs played through the radio carry the sisters a vision of an unlimited life; these songs are pieces produced according to contemporary dynamics, reflecting the spirit of the time. Despite their continued connection to the traditional and oppressive past, the wave of progressive modernity rising with Marconi brings them a new rhythm of life. However, this new rhythm contradicts the stagnant and orderly world of the Mundy family. For them, the radio is a tool that temporarily disconnects them from the world they are trapped in,

allowing them to make contact with the outside world. However, whenever the radio works and creates a joyful atmosphere, the entertainment is soon interrupted by the battery running out or malfunctioning. These sudden interruptions symbolically express how disconnected the Mundy sisters are from the beauties of life and the normality of living. Furthermore, it is a major example of the family's inability to adapt to the modern world.

According to Baker (2006), Marconi serves as a tool that not only represents the destructive effects of industrialization and technology on women but also functions as a small warning brought about by industrialization. He assesses "aside from giving them a link to the outside world, the radio acts as a harbinger of the social upheaval that will eventually tear the Mundy family apart". Then, it is possible to say the radio brings a foreshadowing for the fate of Agnes and Rose. Despite all their resistance, the two sisters, who escape to London with hopes of finding work and establishing a new order, are doomed to be crushed under the harsh realities of the modern world. In the process where they try to earn money by cleaning toilets in a factory near the subway line, industrialization causes their gradual disappearance.

Marconi not only represents a tool symbolizing the destructive effects of industrialization but also carries a deep, spiritual meaning linked to Celtic mythology. The Mundy sisters' inability to participate in the Lughnasa Festival is rooted in the authoritarian figure of the family, Kate, and her unwavering devotion to Catholicism, along with the restrictive rules it imposes. In response to these restrictions, the women associate Marconi with the festival's primary deity, 'Lugh,' and position it as a spiritual guide within their inner world. Additionally, the radio functions with a rhythmic structure reminiscent of the drum sound in pagan rituals, calling women to express their suppressed desires collectively (Sweeney, 2008). Friel portrays the radio as "a nearly threatening entity rising from underground," endowing it with a supernatural quality. This narrative style imbues Marconi with a role beyond being a technological innovation, elevating it to a cultural code based on ancestors and a sacred symbol. In this context, Marconi becomes both a marvel of modern technology and a mythical tool of cultural transformation. As soon as the radio starts working, the women instantly enter a trance-like state; desires suppressed by the patriarchal order and Catholic morality rise to the surface through the

ritualistic energy of the pagan past. The “voodoo effect” of the radio acts as a key to accessing the subconscious desires; with this influence, the women begin producing false but liberating parodies. The stagnation within the four walls of the house is shaken by the melodies rising from the radio, and life, constrained within the town, briefly transforms into an exuberant experience of freedom. This unrestrained dance, reminiscent of themes from pagan rituals, creates a space for the women temporarily free from patriarchal and religious limitations. This transient state of freedom, shaped by sacred energy, signifies both the expression of individual desires and a collective form of resistance.

In conclusion, Marconi, positioned as a modern pagan figure, transforms into a sort of “facilitator of ritual” in the process through which the women express their inner conflicts and repressed desires. Even Kate, the staunch representative of Catholicism, is drawn into this trance, and she too joins the ritual (Fusco, 1996).

3.6 Folkloric Symbols and the Spiritual Reflections of Celtic Heritage: Broken Mirror, Bilberry, and Mythical Marconi

One of the most striking traces of Irish folklore in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is reflected through the symbolism of superstitions, particularly the motif of the broken mirror. Chris finds a shattered mirror in the house and contemplates throwing it away, but Maggie intervenes with a superstition rooted in Irish pagan beliefs: “You’re right, you’re not, Chrissie. I’m the one that broke it and the only way to not have seven years of bad luck is to keep using it” (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 11). Broken mirrors are symbols commonly associated with bad luck in many cultures, often regarded as harbingers of disaster. The concern about the Mundy sisters breaking the mirror stems from pagan beliefs that material objects carry spiritual significance. In Celtic metaphysics, mirrors are not only physical objects but also symbolic gateways that facilitate transitions between the material and spiritual worlds. In this context, the broken mirror is both a superstitious omen and a culturally rooted symbol tied to rural Celtic thought.

The mirror also functions as a powerful literary device within the narrative. It serves as a forewarning, hinting at the emotional and psychological challenges the

characters will face. The broken mirror signifies the breaking of both individual and collective illusions. Mirrors often symbolize self-examination, inner confrontation, and the pursuit of idealized beauty or truth. In this context, the broken mirror motif in *Dancing at Lughnasa* visually represents the characters' disappointments, the harsh realities they must confront, and the collapse of their dreams. The physical deterioration of the mirror directly mirrors the Mundy sisters' spiritual and emotional fragility.

Another folkloric element in the play is the act of picking bilberries (known as "fraochán" in Ireland). This practice reflects the deep connection Celtic culture has with nature and its manifestation in contemporary Ireland. During the Lughnasa Festival, fruits like bilberries, gathered from nature, are offered to the god Lugh in celebration of fertility, abundance, and seasonal cycles. In this way, Lugh, much like the figure of Bacchus in classical mythology, symbolizes fertility and prosperity. Agnes and Rose's frequent excursions to pick bilberries are not only part of rural life but also represent a form of escape from the emotional and spiritual barrenness within the home. Their turn toward nature expresses a desire to reconnect with the sacred and establish an inner connection with life. The importance of this cultural practice is reinforced by an anecdote that Father Jack shares with Maggie, telling her the story:

> *Mother and myself; every Lughnasa; the annual ritual. Of course I remember. And then she made the most delicious jam. And that's what you brought to school with you each day all over the winter: a piece of soda bread and bilberry jam.* (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 57)

This memory deepens the play's theme of cyclical life and tradition by linking individual memory to collective cultural memory.

In addition to the elements narrated, *Dancing at Lughnasa* hosts numerous cultural and symbolic references. Father Jack's return from Africa, not as someone who reinforced Catholic beliefs but rather as someone who adopted pagan practices, serves as an indirect but critical commentary on the Catholic-Protestant tension in Ireland. Jack's voluntary assimilation into the Ryangan culture points to the universal human need to connect with the sacred. His deep adaptation to Ryangan culture highlights the existence of a shared spiritual language rooted in paganism, bridging cultures across empires (Sweeney, 2008).

The simple lifestyle of the sisters, knitting gloves and scarves, preparing traditional meals in the kitchen, and gathering fruit from the forest and eggs from the henhouse, realistically conveys the rural life and subsistence struggles of the period. However, the loss of opportunities for livelihood through handcrafted work due to industrialization and the necessity of migration to larger cities reflect the destructive impact of modernization on traditional ways of life. This forced relocation symbolizes the broader socio-cultural transformations Ireland underwent in the early 20th century.

3.7 Representation of Irish Folkloric Motifs in *Volunteers*

Volunteers in a vision comparable to that of *Dancing at Lughnasa* stages an ongoing interrogation of Irish identity. This quest, encapsulated by the question "Who we are" is framed through reconciliation with Ireland's millennia-old historical legacy. The traditional exuberance of music and dance in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is replaced in *Volunteers* by ironic songs and verses composed by the volunteer prisoners.

The opening scene introduces the condemned prisoners, Pyne and Keeney, with theatrical flair. Their cheerful and exaggerated gestures provide the audience not only with a stylized performance but also a multilayered commentary. Their duet, performed as if en route to a concert and the verses dedicated to Leif, whom they address as though he were a person employs satire to reflect Ireland's historical identity conflict:

> *There was a Norseman called Leif*
> *Whose visit to Ireland was brief*
> *He was caught in war*
> *Between Jesus and Thor*
> *And he came to a permanent grief.* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 18)

Pyne is portrayed as the most playful and sarcastic character in the play. At the moment when Butt, Knox, Keeney, and Pyne commence their excavation work together for the first time, Pyne immediately begins to sing. He mockingly whistles the folk tune *The Bonny Laboring Boy*:

> *All I went out one morning air*
> *All in the blooming spring*

I overheard a damsel fair
Most grievously did sing:
'Cruel were my parents,
They did me sore annoy,
They wouldn't let me tarry with
My bonny laboring boy. (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 34)

It is evident that the multilayered and ironic songs incorporated by Friel into the text are far from coincidental. Music constitutes a significant component of Irish folklore and has historically served as a means for the people to express their emotions and preserve collective memory. The Irish are known for their cheerful, humorous, and resilient nature in the face of adversity; Friel deliberately integrated this national trait into the structure of the play.

Music also functions as an artistic expression that nourishes the soul and sustains one's connection to life. Despite the dark and oppressive circumstances they face, the prisoners in the play do not surrender their inner sense of hope. These songs become a form of resistance—a way to remember and assert who they are. Moreover, the meanings embedded within Friel's selected songs closely align with the thematic structure of the play. The figure of the "bonny laboring boy" mentioned in the second song performed by Pyne represents an archetype with which the volunteer prisoners identify. This character, who labors both in the excavation site and in civilian life, is condemned to social exclusion and isolation. In a broader context, the political subtext of *Volunteers* conveys, both to the audience and the reader, that Irish society itself can resemble a kind of prison, one that dramatizes the marginalization of individuals, particularly those who are different. The identity of the prisoners as "political offenders" signifies not only an individual tragedy, but also a reflection of the nation's internal mechanisms of repression.

In modern Ireland, the recent global popularity of the song *Wellerman*, which shares a rhythmic structure similar to Pyne's Limerick, is noteworthy. The enthusiasm conveyed in Pyne's songs parallels both the rhyme patterns and the overt parody of dominant power dynamics found in *Wellerman*. As a song that highlights the economic structure of whaling, *Wellerman* offers a sharp critique of exploitative systems that bind sailors through indefinite contracts and extract labor under harsh conditions. Similarly, Pyne's songs satirize the ways in which society exploits

individuals for its own interests (NathanEvansVEVO, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qP-7GNoDJ5c).

3.8 Reflections of Christianity, Paganism, and the Search for Identity in Volunteers

Christianity and Paganism emerge as central folkloric motifs in Friel's work, particularly in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Volunteers*, where the influence of belief systems on Irish social structure is critically examined. Irish territory, having been colonized by Celts, Romans, Normans, and Anglo-Saxons throughout history, retains a complex and layered religious heritage. Despite the widespread adoption of Christianity, the Irish have never entirely eradicated their Pagan traditions. Over time, the convergence of these two belief systems has produced a hybrid spiritual framework, in which Christian doctrine coexists with residual Pagan customs. This hybridization continues to shape Irish cultural practices.

Periods of heightened religious conflict, such as the Troubles in Northern Ireland, intensified pre-existing national tensions. The resulting instability triggered a renewed scrutiny of Christian dogma across different segments of Irish society. Friel raised as a Catholic and nationalist schoolteacher personally experienced the psychological fragmentation caused by this religious divide (Boltwood, 2002). *Volunteers*, however, refrains from making direct moral judgments on political or religious doctrines. Instead, Friel situates the play within the postcolonial context of Northern Ireland and proposes that, rather than preserving cultural continuity, the Irish have increasingly sought the indigenous or the "native" within a broader existential inquiry: "Who we are" (Boltwood, 2002). The play's spiritual core addresses both individual and collective quests for identity and confrontation with truth.

A key symbolic gesture within the play occurs during the excavation scene. The archaeological dig is abruptly halted, and the site is covered to make way for hotel construction. At this turning point, the play's satirical and inquisitive figure, Keeney, mockingly conducts a burial ceremony for Leif's skeletal remains (p. 82).

Although he claims to be non-religious and attempts to delegate the ritual speech to another prisoner, Keeney ultimately performs the ceremony himself. As a character not regularly attending church and instinctively questions institutional authority, Keeney enacts the funeral in a manner that deviates from Christian rites and reflects a form of paganized ritual. This scene, purposefully constructed by Friel, signifies the symbolic burial of the prisoners' hopes for an uncertain future alongside Leif (Imhof, 1991). As suggested in one of Pyne's earlier songs, Keeney may have come to perceive Leif as a sacrificial figure. In this interpretation, the people have sided with Thor over Christ, making Leif a scapegoat of religious devotion. The prisoners, especially Keeney, who serves as the central voice of irony and resistance, symbolize individuals shaped by modern Irish society's national, religious, and political value systems. The harm these individuals suffer from the very structures that define them points to a deeper crisis of collective identity.

The ritual, as a recurring artistic structure in Friel's work, plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Friel articulates the theatrical significance of ritual in the following terms: "Drama without ritual is poetry without rhythm? Hence not poetry, not drama. Not to say ritual is an 'attribute' of drama - it's the essence of drama. Drama is a RITE, and always religious in the purest sense" (Tracy, 2007). *Volunteers* stands as a performative exploration of faith, belonging and identity embodying Friel's distinctive approach to the intersection of ritual and theatre.

3.9 The Historical, Sociopolitical, and Postcolonial Codes of the Brotherhood Theme in Volunteers

Volunteers is a sharply constructed play in which Brian Friel revisits the deeply rooted theme of brotherhood in Ireland's collective memory. He transforms this theme into a multilayered narrative that operates on both historical and individual levels. Brotherhood is not merely portrayed as an emotional bond between individuals, but also as a social construct and a political stance. In this sense, the portrayal of brotherhood in the play is closely linked to the ideological legacy of radical organizations that accompanied Ireland's struggle for independence.

Brotherhood stands out as one of the most visible expressions of Irish folklore and is powerfully present throughout the scenes of *Volunteers*. The narrative revives this folkloric theme in the style of traditional Irish tales and conveys it with strong dramatic emphasis. In Irish history, the concept of brotherhood can be approached from two distinct perspectives. The first is the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), founded in 1858. This organization believed in Ireland's natural right to independence and held that such a goal could only be achieved through armed revolution. The IRB also defined its actions as wholly and unequivocally democratic (Jackson, 2008). Known later as the "Fenians," the IRB was officially dissolved in 1924, yet its influence resurfaced among certain groups in the aftermath of the Irish Civil War. It would be idealistic to claim that Friel uses the prisoners in Volunteers to directly represent this historical background. However, for the figure of a transnational volunteer seeking to reconnect with their roots, to cleanse themselves through emotional and ideological unity, and to confront the past, the notion of brotherhood becomes a meaningful vehicle.

Postcolonial literary theory is embedded in *Volunteers* through Friel's dialogue and dramatic structure. This body of theory examines how societies reconstruct their cultural, historical, and identity-based foundations in the wake of colonial domination. Ireland, shaped by centuries of British imperial control, saw its religious, cultural, and political identities fragmented under this regime. The characters in Friel's play are not simply individuals experiencing personal crises; they are figures shaped by the colonial legacy, bearing the marks of historical ruptures. The prisoners are punished by the state and simultaneously judged with death by their own comrades. This duality reflects Edward Said's (1979) concept of "the Other." These characters are suppressed by institutional power while also being excluded by the very communities they belong to. The colonial order persists not only through external authority but also through internalized conflicts. The prisoners are not only victims of colonial repression but are also alienated from their own political groups, branded as traitors or deviants. In this context, Said's notion of "the Other" functions not just as a tool to construct an external enemy, but also as a mechanism of internal control.

Although they resist the dominant ideology represented by the state, the prisoners fail to achieve full acceptance within their own ranks. This dual rejection plunges them into a profound identity crisis and evokes a deep sense of unbelonging. Such a condition is one of the defining existential conflicts of postcolonial subjects. In short, *Volunteers* dramatizes the experience of otherness not only as a colonial construct but as a consequence of the internal divisions left behind by colonialism. In doing so, the play brings Said's theory to life on stage.

Little is revealed about the personal histories of the volunteer prisoners who are persuaded by Keeney to participate in the excavation project. However, it becomes evident that these individuals share certain defining characteristics. They have all belonged to a secretive group and have volunteered for an archaeological mission under state supervision. These individuals not only accepted imprisonment in their respective countries but were also marginalized by Irish society for joining a minority faction. Simultaneously, they were condemned to death by their own comrades in makeshift tribunals for allegedly collaborating with the authorities. This dual form of exclusion lends itself to an interpretation through the lens of hybrid identity" and the "third space" (Özbent, 2023). The pasts of the characters remain opaque. Their ideological affiliations and social backgrounds are ambiguous. Each character occupies a liminal zone: they neither belong to the dominant power structures nor are they fully accepted by the revolutionary groups they once supported. This liminality exemplifies the fragmented identity of the postcolonial subject.

The first prisoner introduced in the play is Butt, described as a poor peasant crofter (p. 41). His story is marked by a moment in which his formal education is disrupted by the Christian Brothers who as he recounts taught him useless fragments of knowledge through physical punishment. Among the other prisoners is Knox, who falls into poverty after the death of his father and survives by secretly transporting messages between opposing groups (p. 57). Smiler, a figure who intensifies the play's dramatic trajectory, and Leif, constructed as an ancient sacrificial archetype, round out the ensemble. Although the prisoners possess diverse socioeconomic and personal backgrounds, Pyne and Keeney share noticeable similarities. This parallel becomes especially apparent at the climax, when the condemned prisoners face their

imminent execution. One among them decides to sacrifice himself to save a comrade, while another manages to escape during the excavation. Ironically, the one who escapes is Smiler:

> *(…) stonemason from the west of Donegal; a quarry with seven men, and Smiler's the shop-steward. And when they rounded up one of his mates, what d'you think the stupid bugger did but call his men out and lead a protest march on Dublin! … Six great blunt quarrymen from the back of beyond, being led by Smiler, … and they got up as far as the Derry border and there they took Smiler oot and booked him into the gaol in Dublin and thumped him naibing up and down the street for twelve hours on the bounce (...)* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 46)

Considering Smiler's background, he emerges as a poor man caught between innocence and political awareness—a condition for which he has paid dearly, both physically and mentally. Among the group of volunteers, he is widely regarded as the only one who is truly innocent and, as such, should have been released from prison. Available evidence suggests that the other prisoners share this assessment. Smiler groans in pain throughout the night, follows every order from his comrades without question, and is nonetheless betrayed by them. The psychological torment and physical abuse he has endured have brought him to the brink of insanity. His vulnerability, helplessness, and childlike naivety clearly mark him as the most innocent among the group (Kosok, 2010).

This entire pattern reveals that *Volunteers* stages not only individual conflicts but also the deep social tensions resulting from Ireland's colonial legacy. Friel's text does more than recall the past; it examines how that past continues to shape contemporary identities and compels individuals to confront enduring traumas. In this respect, the play may be read as a postcolonial-modernist narrative, as it intertwines personal alienation with colonial rupture within a unified dramatic structure. The theme of brotherhood in *Volunteers* constructs a multilayered narrative space in which both the political and cultural histories of Ireland resonate. By merging historical context with personal trauma, Friel invites the audience to confront not only the characters themselves, but also the complexities of Irish identity. In this framework, brotherhood is not merely a thematic device; it becomes a test, a burden, and a search for redemption.

The prisoners are not individuals who volunteered for the excavation work; rather, they are those who put everything on the line to save Smiler's life, at least, they did so in an attempt to rescue one innocent among them. Butt stays with Keeney despite George's warnings, while he approaches George with hostility. Keeney, as the one who convinced them to undertake this dangerous task, bears direct responsibility for some of the ensuing events. Butt responds to George's words about Keeney by smashing the jug, an object of value to him. Friel's song of brotherhood is sung by a group of political prisoners whose right to life has been taken away in Keeney's words, it is a huge womb where hopes for the future sprout and individuals are granted the opportunity to discover their own identities.

The historical jug from the Viking era, discovered by Smiler becomes an important symbol on the last scene of the play. Site supervisor George uses this jug to both protect the relics unearthed during the excavation and to keep an eye on the volunteers. Although Smiler is the one who finds the jug, it is George who receives most of the recognition for this discovery. Keeney, the cynical figure among the volunteers, turns this situation into a symbol of power and belonging against George:

> *Smiler's pieces all put together and making a handsome jug! And you are a secretive wee man as well, George. [...] Oh, the boys need to see this. [...] It's a lot more than an omen – it's a symbol, George. It is Smiler, George. Smiler — the free, full, integrated form (...)* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 55)

The antique jug, in addition to symbolizing freedom, independence, and life (for Leif), also represents the hope and search for belonging of political prisoners, embodied in the character of Smiler. In this sense, the jug is not a pure and independent symbol of sovereignty like a native pigeon; rather, it is a reflection of fragmentation, resistance, and the search for identity. Over time, George attempts to pull Butt to his side against the now less flashy Keeney. However, after George confesses to Butt that he is unsure whether he can remain loyal to the other volunteers and admits that Keeney is dangerous and difficult to deal with, he asks Butt to stay away (p. 78). Nevertheless, the jug serves as a bridge; it not only marks the connection between Keeney and Smiler, but also signifies the continuity of the brotherhood bonds that have sprouted in the excavation site, linking the past with the future (Imhof, 1991). As the curtain nears its fall, Butt deliberately throws the jug to

the ground and shatters it again. This action becomes a faithful monument to the trauma and fragmented selves of the characters. The prisoners are individuals who have been broken both by the society they belong to and, upon returning to their cells, condemned to death by their comrades. The breaking of this historical relic, the jug, represents the dual destruction of the volunteers. In this way, the jug responds to their painful confessions not with its whole form, but with its fragments, narrating the tragedy that cannot be put into words (He, 2014).

Butt's unexpected radical act can be interpreted in two different ways. According to some critics, this action is rooted in Ireland's victim identity. Smiler's return is the first representation of the victim allegory. Butt instinctively supports this allegory by performing a passive act of resistance, breaking the jug again and accepting death like an infamous martyr (Dantanus, 1988). However, breaking the jug can also be interpreted as an act of defiance, a boundary violation, even in the moment of death; despite the disastrous consequences, this action leaves a lasting impact in the viewer's mind.

4. ALLEGORICAL AND METAPHORICAL MEANINGS IN THE TITLES OF THE PLAYS

Irish writers, notably Brian Friel, often incorporate pagan symbols and Celtic cultural heritage into their works, using these elements as tools for aesthetic expression and identity formation. These authors have endeavored to redefine both individual and collective identities by relating ancient mythological narratives to contemporary issues. This approach has been shaped by a desire to gain a deeper understanding of Ireland's historical identity and to resist the cultural erosion imposed by British colonialism and imperialism. Celtic mythology and pagan symbols have been used as carriers of national identity, highlighting cultural differences and making historically suppressed narratives visible. In this context, Irish writers have sought to revitalize collective memory and historical consciousness by developing alternative narratives rooted in indigenous values and beliefs.

W. B. Yeats, one of the foundational figures of Irish literature, placed Celtic mythology and pagan elements at the core of both his poetic and dramatic works. His admiration for the spiritual depth and rich belief systems of the Irish people is strongly reflected in his writing. Yeats centered Aengus, the Celtic god of love and youth, in his poem "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (Yeats, 2024) thereby concretizing his approach. Similarly, in his 1912 novel *The Golden Pot*, James Stephens intertwined Irish mythology and folklore referencing figures like the Druid and emphasizing Ireland's historical connection to its pagan past. In works such as Seamus Heaney's *Station Island* (1984), Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (1966), and Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985), ancient mythological references and agriculture-based rituals are interwoven with contemporary issues, turning the rural Irish landscape into a space that connects individual experiences with cultural and historical collectivity.

Brian Friel, with a focus on exploring the inherent sanctity of nature, brings respect for the rhythmic cycles of life to the stage in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The title of the play directly references a Celtic festival, clearly demonstrating the influence of Celtic mythology on Irish identity. This mythological framework is understood as a holistic cosmology that connects humans to nature, seasonal cycles, and universal

order. It ensures cultural continuity while allowing historical narratives to reconnect with the present, safeguarding against the danger of forgetting the past. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel critically reflects on the negative impacts of modernity especially the rise of capitalist values, migration, unemployment, detachment from spirituality, and the alienation brought by industrialization while simultaneously questioning the transformation itself on the same stage. To fully understand the pagan symbols and rituals in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, a detailed analysis of Celtic belief systems, sacred rituals, and cultural legacies is necessary.

Around 500 BCE, the Indo-European Celts, known for their warrior nature and polytheistic beliefs, invaded Ireland. Their mythology consists of a pantheon of gods and goddesses, nature worship, life and death cycles, and animism. Fertility and the renewal of nature are dominant themes within this mythological system. Lugh, the god of harvest, light, art, and craft, is also associated with the life-giving power of the sun and the ripening of crops. The concept of harvest is not only an evolutionary process but also holds significance for survival and reproduction in the modern world. The Lughnasa festival is one of the four major seasonal turning points in the Celtic calendar: Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnasa. Therefore, the Lughnasa, or harvest festival, represents an important transitional moment in the seasonal cycle of Celtic culture; it is a ritual time for expressing gratitude to the gods (Hicks, 2003). In this festival, life, death, and rebirth are inseparable parts of the whole, and the community prays to Lugh for abundance in preparation for the coming winter. If the ritual is performed correctly, Lugh grants fertility and productivity. On this special day, feasts are prepared to honor Lugh, music is played, dances are performed, fires are lit to enhance the dominance of light, and offerings are made to the god. These practices are crucial for maintaining cosmic harmony and ensuring a bountiful harvest. In particular, communal dancing around flames optimizes divine energy and is considered “an integral part of the festival as a way of transcending the mundane and entering into sacred communion with the gods” (MacCulloch, 1911).

Christianity began to spread in Ireland in the 5th century with the arrival of Palladius, who was of Roman origin, followed by Saint Patrick in the 430s. Although the Celtic people converted to Christianity, they maintained a strong attachment to

their own mythological narratives and folk traditions. Despite being known for their pagan belief systems, the Celts constructed a distinctive hybrid culture by integrating these beliefs with Christian practices rather than abandoning them altogether. This cultural continuity was preserved most clearly and purely in rural areas compared to other regions. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is the seasonal festivals. Despite the passage of centuries, the Lughnasa festival has continued to be celebrated; even while adopting Catholic teachings, the people retained rituals centered on nature, fertility, and communal bonds at the heart of their lives. The duality of Irish identity "is buried in the amalgamation of these pagan and Christian pasts, poised as each, in turn, educated and subverted the other" (Fusco, 1996). The ongoing existence of these festivals vividly illustrates the resilient and enduring nature of Celtic cultural memory.

4.1 *Dancing at Lughnasa*: Pagan Cultures and Their Origins

Dancing at Lughnasa reveals a pagan cosmology despite the long-standing pressures of the Catholic Church has survived in the rural Irish imagination as a lingering remnant. By placing the Celtic harvest festival of Lughnasa in the background of the play, Brian Friel connects the narrative to Ireland's mythological past and opens meaningful spaces for themes such as identity, spirituality, and resistance. Although written within a Christian context, the play is profoundly rooted in pagan origins (Aldhouse-Green, 1993). In Friel's narrative, the Lughnasa festival embodies the conflict between tradition and modernity. The Mundy sisters' desire to participate in the festival, accompanied by their dance rituals, reflects both the communal celebratory atmosphere of Lughnasa and its spiritual elevation. Through the character of Michael, it is implied that the women seek a connection to their ancestors, a relationship tied to freedom and rebirth, transcending all societal prohibitions through their primal dance movements. Friel is acutely aware that such festivals are not merely cultural events for the Irish people but spiritual ceremonies that affirm identity and community (Doan, 2019).

The entire folklore tradition, ranging from the Banshee to the Sí of Celtic mythology, is interwoven with a longing for the past. This narrative form unites

concepts such as cosmology, nature, cycles, and sacredness; the cosmological significance of the primal becomes visible through the dance of the Mundy sisters. The character of Maggie, in particular, never missteps in this ritual; her intuitive connection with nature becomes almost trance-like, materializing in her effort to achieve societal relief through divine energy. Maggie resists the worldly cycle through the sacred one. In the abundance and fertility-oriented atmosphere of the ancient festival, the desire to align with the rhythm of survival and nourishment becomes evident. Despite this rich mythological tapestry, Brian Friel adopts an approach that favors realism over romanticism. No matter how compelling the Mundy sisters' authentic resistance dances are, the festival itself is portrayed not as a lived experience, but as a remembered one. The play's title also signals this: the characters never actually attend the festival; the only thing Rose sees is the aftermath, the residue left behind by the fire. For Friel, like true freedom, the festival becomes an unattainable symbol—an emblem of longing for an idealized past and the alienation stemming from it. The sisters' persistent yearning reflects the Irish cultural consciousness, in which the line between myth and history blurs, and an idealized past casts a shadow over the present. The moments of joy the characters experience are fleeting; the pressures of everyday life erode both their spiritual and physical wholeness. The economic and cultural limitations of Ballybeg heighten the characters' passivity and prevent them from reconciling tradition with modernity. In this context, the play's title functions as a lens through which the complex relationship among joy, memory, and existential insecurity can be contemplated.

As Brian Friel himself emphasized, the legacy carried by Celtic ancestry is a deeply personal matter. Like many other Irish writers, he treats Celtic mythology as a literary field rich in symbols, archetypes, and diverse variations, worthy of in-depth exploration. Themes such as love, sacrifice, fate, and supernatural forces address the universal dimensions of human experience and therefore offer a valuable source for literary inquiry. Intertextuality, as a postmodern narrative technique, is a natural process for Friel. While engaging with pagan culture, the author establishes meaningful and layered connections between ancient texts and modern themes, thus uniting the reader in a literary depth that transcends both ancient heritage and contemporary societal boundaries.

4.2 A Response to Romanticized History and Heroism: *Volunteers*

Volunteers serves as a multifaceted symbol representing Ireland's revolutionary history and the oppressive regime that defined the era. Although the prisoners working at the Viking excavation site in Wood Quay are technically referred to as volunteers, the title is widely interpreted as a reference to the Irish volunteers who were willing to fight for independence. This dual meaning enables a reinterpretation of the play through the themes of resistance and national identity. In order to grasp the impact of historical and political developments on the play, it is essential to understand the history of IRA volunteers.

The term "volunteers" was first used in 1913 to describe the Irish volunteers, a nationalist paramilitary organization established by the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Their activities emerged as a response to the foundation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (Bennett, 2024). From the outset, their primary objective was to secure Ireland's independence and safeguard it permanently. During the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), the group evolved from a militia into a guerrilla force, gaining operational autonomy and strategic capability. Over time, myths and legends transformed the term into a core motif of early 20th-century Irish identity for a generation seeking a direct connection with nationalist struggle and sovereignty. Following the division caused by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, admission into the IRA was conditional upon being a committed citizen rather than a professional soldier. The language used to describe them in Susan's writings, as employed in Brian Friel's play, functions dually as both a political and symbolic force.

Friel brings together the term "volunteers" in various contexts, enabling a profound emotional link between past and present Ireland. The core issues that emerged before and continued until 1975 include oppression, loss of life, brutality inflicted upon the population, and the destructive cycle of ideological systems. The forced labor of prisoners at the excavation site becomes a metaphor for the unpaid labor offered by volunteers during and after the independence struggle. While the title highlights the prisoners' powerlessness, it simultaneously critiques the systems that exploit marginalized individuals. The depiction of inmates being used as laborers reflects the ideologies that institutionalized exploitation in Irish society,

challenges the mythologization of historical heroism, and confronts the formation of collective misremembering. As Keeney ironically states “Good afternoon, children, and welcome to our dig... like a prison yard with the high walls and the watch-tower up there” (p. 35), his sarcasm targets not the archaeological site itself but the surveillance systems once imposed upon the volunteers.

Additionally, the halting and backfilling of the excavation, along with the execution of the volunteers by a kangaroo court, function as a critique of how the contributions of the volunteer class have been erased and commodified both historically and within the play. *Volunteers* mirrors the socio-political climate of 1970s Ireland. It reveals that the promises made in the wake of independence were not fulfilled, and that the dream of a united and independent Ireland was exploited economically, socially, and politically by post-colonial systems. By 1970, the aim was no longer to preserve the history of those who devoted their lives to the cause inside or outside the IRA but to rewrite it artificially with distorted facts. Moreover, there were direct attempts to erase history and collective memory, leading to the construction of distorted, commercialized, and exploitative narratives. These disillusioned ideals demonstrate that the cultural heritage associated with the “volunteers” fails to align with the lived consequences experienced by those who pursued them (Kosok, 2010). The betrayals of volunteers, particularly those who played key roles in the 1916 Easter Rising, as well as the failures and hypocrisies of those who followed, become central to Friel’s critique of emotionally idealized narratives and myths of heroism. This critical momentum is reflected through Pyne and Keeney’s cynical attitude toward Smiler’s ideals.

The title “Volunteers”, ultimately, functions as a layered excavation of Ireland’s past, offering the prisoners a space to confront this legacy. Friel’s volunteers interrogate the idealism of nationalist movements and cast light on the pressures that diminish human dignity, the shaping of historical memory, and the dreams of romantic idealists (Roche, 2006). The term “volunteers” accurately reflects the cycles of oppression that characterizes Irish history under colonial rule and beyond. The prisoners’ lived experiences are embedded within a broader context of political and cultural conflict in Ireland, providing the audience or reader with a dialectical lens through which to assess the complexities of the era’s social dynamics.

5. THE PIVOTAL FUNCTIONS OF CHARACTERS IN DRAMATIC NARRATIVES

Brian Friel introduced Volunteers and *Dancing at Lughnasa* to audiences in the late 20th century. Many characters in these plays serve pivotal roles in awakening the Irish people from the prolonged dark dreams they have endured. The various situations and emotional complexities portrayed in the plays converge to address Ireland's collective crises. A Chekhovian style is employed both to explore the lifestyle and beliefs of the people, and to provide an internal analysis of their experiences. The plays center on the thoughts, emotions, and way of life of a series of micro-communities, each reflecting the lived realities of ordinary Irish individuals. This focus bridges the past and the future, illustrating how Irish history and politics continue to shape the present and inform the challenges that must be addressed going forward. In essence, both works engage with themes of oppression, identity, and cultural resilience. One is set in a political prison, while the other takes place within a domestic environment. Irish volunteers symbolize socio-political struggle, offering a critical examination of Ireland's colonial past from multiple perspectives. This analysis aims to illuminate aspects of Irish identity, within the context of British domination, that are fraught with conflict, complicity, and survival, as expressed through the characters and their principles. In contrast, the Mundy sisters direct their focus toward their personal struggles as they confront the social and religious restrictions of 1930s Ireland.

In this context, Brian Friel imbued the characters with symbolic significance, assigning them distinct characteristics that allowed each to assume different roles through their respective tasks. He embedded allegorical, symbolic, cultural, and intellectual elements within their dialogues and interactions. As a result, the audience was not only able to watch and enjoy the play, but also invited to engage in deep critical reflection on its nuanced aspects.

5.1 The Memory's Narrator And Transmitter: Michael

Brian Friel's character Michael, played by Colm Meaney in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, plays a pivotal role in addressing the complex issues of Irish identity and cultural transformation during the 1930s. As Chris's illegitimate son, Michael serves as both the narrator and the reflection of her imagined child. In adulthood, Michael revisits his childhood, offering a dual perspective—both from a child's naïve viewpoint and an adult's more reflective stance. Through his memories, the audience is not only immersed in the atmosphere of 1930s Ireland, but also introduced to the intricate relationship between personal and collective memory in the process of nostalgia.

Michael's childhood is portrayed as a symbol of innocence and purity, but as an adult, he can now assess events with a deeper, more critical understanding. His journey reveals the complexities of how memory and time interact. His narrative unearths the shared history of the Mundy sisters and their father, while also showcasing the emotional depth and fragility of their relationships. The adult Michael reflects on his childhood perspective—once unburdened by the complexities of adulthood—and now, with the benefit of experience, reinterprets familial and national dynamics in post-independence Ireland, free from the constraints of political ideologies. Friel introduces a modernist style through a postmodernist technique, beginning *Dancing at Lughnasa* with Michael's monologue. This monologue is essential for constructing the past, as it emphasizes the subjectivity of memory. Fragmented recollections reveal the memories Michael is particularly inclined to preserve. As Michael reflects, "When I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936, different kinds of memories offer themselves to me" (Friel, 2015). The play vividly explores the post-colonial fragmentation of Irish society, reflecting Edward Said's (1979) notion of the colonized subject's fractured identity. Michael's biased narration, initially naive, takes on a more emotional and painful resonance when revisited from his adult perspective. The dual nature of his memory transmission underscores the subjective construction and reception of historical memory. Friel challenges Irish society to reconcile with its past, despite the double-edged memories of pre- and post-independence, both personal and social. The author subtly highlights

the elusiveness of the past (McMullan, 1999) as a critical component in shaping Irish identity.

The return of Father Jack, described by Michael as “shrunken and jaundiced with malaria” (p. 8), serves as a metaphor for both his physical and psychological deterioration, as well as the decaying Irish values after prolonged colonial struggle. Father Jack’s sickness embodies the exploitation of the Irish, who were subjected to harsh colonial practices, such as labor in leper colonies under religious and imperialistic forces. This condition is reflected in Jack’s spiritual frailty upon his return, an allegory for the lingering effects of colonialism on Irish identity. Michael’s recollection of Father Jack as “the hero from a schoolboy’s book” (p. 16) illustrates how the colonial system glorifies the missionary figure in the eyes of the people. Through Foucault’s (1980) discourse, the colonial apparatus effectively conveys its oppressive and colonizing nature as a redemptive, civilizing force. Michael’s narration highlights how complex realities can be oversimplified. This contrast underscores the intricate dynamics of individual and collective identities during a period of profound societal transformation (Hadfield & Henderson, 1990). However, for the adult Michael, this narrative no longer progresses in such an idealized direction. His heroic uncle, once a symbol of virtue, now appears to him as a figure embodying the diseased body of colonialism. This symbolic body represents the transmission of colonial decay through literary imagery.

Friel portrays Michael’s perspective repeatedly, using the dramatic history of his family and the tensions within Irish identity and culture that threaten to erupt from within. Each time, this perspective is presented from a different angle. In all these microcosmic scenes, the seemingly simple act of making a kite becomes a symbolic form that Friel employs to address the various struggles faced by his characters. Beyond kite-making, activities such as dancing and painting symbolize the resilience of creativity and strength in overcoming adversity. Maggie’s playful remark, “Oh, that was the wrong thing to do! He’s going to have your hair” (p. 11) in response to Agnes’ comment, “HE’s making something. Looks like a kite” (p. 11), reflects the power of imagination in confronting life’s challenges. In a subsequent scene, the dialogue between Maggie and Michael, which refers to the two completed kites, symbolizes the passage of time and the ongoing surreal reality of life in the

Mundy household, which persists even amid deep emotional upheaval. Maggie's rendition of "Oh play to me, Gypsy..." (p. 52) further underscores Michael's creative resistance.

Through this playful engagement with serious topics, Friel subtly critiques Ireland's educational system. Although the play does not explicitly reference the educational context of the time, except for Kate's expulsion from a local school due to declining enrollment, it offers a significant reflection on the topic. In 1930s Ireland, the education system was shaped by political, social, and religious forces. Primary education was free and compulsory, yet access remained inconsistent, particularly in rural areas like Donegal, due to socio-economic barriers (O'Sullivan, 2009). The Catholic Church had a significant influence on the curriculum, with approximately 60% of educational content focused on religious instruction. The post-independence education system reflected the social stratification of Irish society, especially in rural regions, and aimed to reinforce Catholic values (McCoy & Thee, 2020). Following Ireland's independence, efforts were made to promote Irish culture and language, although these initiatives were often hindered by limited infrastructure. As a result, educational opportunities were not widely accessible, especially among the wealthier classes. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the educational system is not explicitly critiqued, but Kate's expulsion from the school highlights the economic and social constraints of the time. Michael's remark, "School doesn't start for another ten days," and Maggie's response, "God, I always hated school" (p. 46), reflect the negative personal experiences with education. Despite her frustrations with the church, Chris reluctantly accepts the limited educational opportunities available to her son, aware of their socio-economic context. McGough (2015) argues that education in this period was both a tool for personal advancement and a reinforcement of the social expectations imposed by the Church.

Michael represents the future of Ireland, and Chris, eager to defy social norms as a woman, instinctively embraces any opportunity that might strengthen her son's future. In contrast, Father Jack is the only character who actively resists the dominant system. His tolerance and hope for the future, alongside his rejection of rigid Church teachings, position him as a figure of resistance. This nuanced portrayal of Father Jack, along with the characters' struggles within the educational system, signals

Friel's advocacy for a secular, inclusive educational framework in Ireland, one that promotes equality, high literacy rates, and free access to education across all social classes.

Maggie's conversation with Michael shifts from education to economics, illustrating the significance of material resources and the difficulties of sustaining a family. Her remark, "You owe me money" (p. 53), humorously addresses the economic strain faced by the family. The prevalence of Wild Woodbine as a form of alternative currency highlights the scarcity of resources and Ireland's failure to recover economically after independence. The limited resources available to care for a young child suggest that the family must rely on self-made education through games and riddles. Maggie's attempts to discipline Michael through these means expose the tensions between an innocent child, unburdened by the harsh realities of life, and an adult world riddled with ego, neuroses, and trauma. This archetypical relationship speaks to the emotional uncertainty and disappointment inherent in the adult experience. Maggie's frustration with the unfulfilled promise of a bicycle, which Gerry had promised to buy for Michael, symbolizes a deeper longing for mobility and freedom. Yet Maggie is fully aware that the bicycle will never materialize. Her connection to the family's meager means of survival is poignantly expressed when she half-seriously calls her hens with a plaintive "Tchook-tchook-tchookeeeee..." (p. 13), underscoring the family's struggle to survive in a rapidly changing world.

Michael's character embodies the potential for Ireland's future. As a child learning to walk, he symbolizes the country's struggle to mature and develop. His periodic disappearances throughout the play are a metaphor for the search for freedom, yet these absences also evoke a sense of insecurity. Maggie's concern about Michael's safety reflects the broader anxieties of Irish society during this period. Chris's inability to ensure Michael's safety and well-being, due to both economic scarcity and societal norms, reveals the challenges faced by families, particularly in post-independence Ireland, where security and prosperity remained elusive for rural populations.

Kate's directive to Chris regarding Gerry's departure; "You'll meet him outside. You'll tell him his son is okay and happy. And then get another man to send

him packing" (p. 31) underscores the emotional and social burdens placed on single mothers within a patriarchal framework. Kate's outrage at Gerry's refusal to assume paternal responsibility underscores the broader societal expectations placed on women in a Catholic context, as well as the inner conflict she experiences between ideological beliefs and personal feelings (Roche, 2006). Kate's character exemplifies the cracks in the family structure that emerged in post-independence Ireland and the ongoing tension this created.

Father Jack is the only character in the play refering to Michael as a "love child." This description articulated by Father Jack whose experience with colonialism leads him to reject traditional Church doctrine stands in sharp contrast to the rigid moral framework enforced by institutional Catholicism. The moment illustrates a profound discursive contradiction (Lojek, 2006). Michael's struggle to navigate various roles within his family reflects the broader societal tensions and fears that shaped Irish family life during this period of social and economic upheaval.

Michael's monologue, which bookends the play, brings the collective memory full circle, effectively completing the narrative cycle. Adult Michael's reflection on the socio-economic changes affecting Ireland serves as a critical and emotional commentary on the historical context. Friel's exploration of the convergence of tradition and modernity aims to restore lost traditions and foster a unified, holistic identity for Irish society (Kiberd, 1995). Michael's role as a bridge between the past and the future emphasizes the enduring relevance of Irish folklore and ritual as a source of resistance and solace in times of change. The play concludes with music and dance, embodiments of Irish cultural identity, that underscore the enduring tension between tradition and modernity, illustrating how the past remains deeply interwoven into the fabric of Irish life (Potter, 2000).

5.2 Leif and Language

The characters in *Volunteers* attempt to bridge the divide between Ireland's historical past and its modern reality, much like *Dancing at Lughnasa*. This endeavor is embodied by the skeletal remains of a Viking male, Leif, unearthed by prisoners during an archaeological excavation. Leif becomes the narrative's central symbol,

representing the complex intersections of historical, political, cultural, and national identity. More than a mere historical artifact, Leif cuts to the very core of Irish identity and experience (Imhof, 1991). For the prisoners, political captives facing death, Leif represents "life" itself. His symbolic role in resurrecting collective memory parallels the Irish people's ongoing struggle for self-definition in Brian Friel's work. In this way, Leif propels the story of Ireland forward, from its pagan roots to its contemporary political tensions. His discovery by political prisoners underscores the excavation of cultural memory amid the aftermath of political and social unrest.

Following Leif's discovery and symbolic murder, the prisoners construct various fictionalized accounts of his death. In one version, Leif is portrayed as a nobleman killed by his own people for marrying a native pagan woman during a mythical voyage to America. These prisoners imprisoned in the aftermath of The Troubles and border conflicts in Derry had been arrested by political factions for actions committed in pursuit of national sovereignty. Ironically, they are further condemned by fellow inmates for participating in the excavation, a government-sanctioned project. In effect, these men are disowned by both the state and their compatriots for their nationalist ideals. Their narrative convergence with Leif exemplifies Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence (Niel, 2023). The prisoners' act of unearthing Ireland's past becomes the clearest metaphor for this repetitive historical cycle. Between the Viking era, the moment of excavation, and the prisoners' uncertain fate upon returning to their cells, a cyclical triangle of time emerges with Leif, like Michael in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, positioned at its center. Once again, Friel foregrounds the vitality of time and its recursive influence on history, politics, and social memory in Ireland. In this context, he critiques the linear, reductionist approach to Irish historiography.

The various versions of Leif's life and death, constructed by the volunteers, offer layered commentaries on the multiplicity of Irish identity. These narratives reflect "the desire to remember and reinterpret the multidimensional being of Irish oral literature" (Imhof, 1991). Through these dialogues, Friel challenges the volatile, subjective nature of historical truth and critiques the moral relativism embedded in contemporary socio-political chaos. Keeney, for instance, draws on Nietzschean

concepts of “master morality” and “slave morality,” arguing that the prisoners are victims of a morality historically manipulated to serve dominant interests. Yet it is precisely this fluidity of interpretation that allows cultural memory to remain dynamic and changeable. Friel positions language as the most powerful tool in sustaining this dynamism. Leif whose death is told and retold in conflicting ways is framed as both a “victim of society” and a “casualty of language” (p. 26). Friel, known for foregrounding the victims of language in his work, reinforces this theme throughout *Volunteers*.

In *Translations* (1980), Friel similarly interrogates the role of language in shaping identity and communication through characters such as Owen, Yolland, and Sarah. Owen, acting as a translator between English and Irish, embodies the tension between linguistic mediation and cultural preservation. Sarah, whose struggle to articulate even her own name renders her nearly voiceless, represents those marginalized by the loss or erasure of language. Yolland, an outsider drawn into the conflict, is himself trapped between cultures. Owen’s declaration; “I am a translator. I am a bilingual man” (p. 8), captures the essence of this conflict between identity and assimilation. Limericks appearing frequently in *Volunteers* further connect the power of language to Leif’s thematic role. They serve as humorous interjections that simultaneously challenge the solemnity of history. One prisoner remarks, “what a big beautiful job he must have done - being a Viking and burying treasure, and yet here we are, digging through the soil for bones” (p. 26). Keeney observes “the limerick is a direct challenge to the solemnity of history; It mocks the seriousness of our blunders and failures” (p. 22). Through humor, he resists the ideological forces that distort and constrain historical narrative. Friel uses the limerick consciously to deepen his exploration of collective memory and identity in the face of historical trauma. Leif’s ambiguous existence coupled with the metaphorical earthquake that destabilizes fixed notions of historical truth underscores Ireland’s continued struggle to reconcile with its contested past and the unresolved tensions of its present. Leif, as conceptualized by Friel, recalls other victims of systemic forces: Bull McCabe, who asserts, “This is my land. I will defend it until my last breath!” (Friel, Translations, 1980, p. 76) and Marlene, who declares, “I must succeed, or I am nothing” (Friel,

Translations, 1980, p. 89), in defiance of both patriarchal control and political machinery.

Volunteers functions as a conduit through which Irish society is urged to reflect on the existential questions: "Who I am" and "Who we are". This collective inquiry is epitomized by Keeney's recurring question: "What in the name of God happened to him?" (p. 25). In seeking to understand Leif, Keeney is in fact seeking himself his identity within the context of Ireland's tumultuous history. The prison excavation becomes a metaphorical descent not only into the earth but also into the prisoners' own psyches and the buried truths of Irish history. As the characters confront their fears and hopes, this introspective journey becomes inseparable from the process of self-awareness and revelation (Tracy, 2007).

Nevertheless, this path to self-discovery is continuously obstructed by the suffocating political climate. The prisoners' attempts at internal reflection are overpowered by immediate threats. Leif's suffering and eventual demise prefigures the violence awaiting the volunteers themselves. His story stands as a stark reminder of the betrayal they face by their state, their society, and their history. By drawing parallels between Leif's tragic fate and the prisoners' reality, Friel emphasizes the cyclical nature of trauma and the importance of confronting it within the cultural and political present (Imhof, 1991).

5.3 Power and Authority: The Roles of George, Mr. Wilson, and Kate

George in *Volunteers* holds responsibility for the surveillance of the prisoners ensuring the safety and management of the archaeological excavation amidst Ireland's political turmoil. His authority within this context is tied to his adherence to the rules of the excavation, reflecting a strict compliance to duty. George's role as the de facto leader of the archaeological team sees him enforce the system's regulations without questioning their morality or validity. As he asserts, "there are rules… and we must observe them" (p. 45) his unflinching commitment to these rules highlights his function as an instrument of the system, a figure who enforces order without regard for the ethical implications of his actions. Despite being aware

of the suffering inflicted upon the prisoners, George maintains his position without challenging the authority that governs him.

Kate in *Dancing at Lughnasa* also serves as a figure of authority albeit within a different socio-cultural context. As the head of her family, Kate shoulders the responsibility of maintaining the household, managing its finances, and ensuring the survival of her family amidst the changing social and economic landscape of rural Ireland. Her duty to "keep this family together" (p. 67) places her in direct conflict with both external societal pressures and internal family dynamics. Kate's authority, though rooted in the traditional role expected of women during this period, is strained as she navigates the challenges of poverty, familial expectations, and personal aspirations. Like George, Kate demands conformity within her family, compelling them to adhere to traditional norms. However, her rigidity and insistence on maintaining order within the family structure increasingly clash with her siblings' desires for independence, illustrating the tension between tradition and progress in Irish society.

George's role during *Volunteers* can be understood as an embodiment of an agent who enforces colonial power structures without engaging with the broader political or cultural implications of his actions. His commitment to obedience underscores his alignment with the colonial system's dictates, where personal beliefs or historical narratives are subordinate to the authority of the ruling power. His superior, Mr. Wilson, represents the embodiment of British colonial influence, symbolizing an authoritative figure who seeks to shape and erase Irish cultural history. Pilkington (2006) asserts that "Wilson's character embodies the British tendency to seek to circumscribe interpretations of the cultural and historical identity of the nation of Ireland in colonial discourse and to position it as subordinate within colonial narratives." Wilson's casual dismissal of the excavation's historical significance further highlights the colonial disregard for Irish heritage, favoring the construction of a mall over preserving the site. His enthusiasm for his daughter's violin recital, presented as an achievement of cultural elitism, contrasts sharply with the prisoners' music and dance, which reflect the indigenous cultural identity that the colonial system aims to suppress and commodify.

In comparison to George whose obedience to authority is unquestioning Kate's authority is shaped by her internalization of societal expectations and her struggle to uphold traditional values in the face of inevitable change. Her attempt to prevent her siblings from attending the festival at Lughnasa reflects her desire to impose order but this effort is ultimately futile. The sisters' decision to defy Kate and escape to London symbolizes a profound act of personal rebellion a desire to break free from the constraints of familial and societal expectations. Attending the festival, therefore, becomes an act of liberation, a manifestation of individual identity against the backdrop of familial loyalty. The pivotal moment in the play occurs when the family, initially resistant to change, begins to dance to Marconi's music on Maggie's doorstep, with Kate eventually joining them. This act of dancing represents a momentary fracture in Kate's authority, signaling the broader transformation of family dynamics and the shifting roles within the Irish family unit.

Kate's authority, deeply rooted in her adherence to social norms, is eventually challenged by her siblings' desire for autonomy. Their wish to attend the festival in defiance of her wishes becomes emblematic of a broader cultural resistance, a desire to reclaim individual identities that have been stifled by familial and social expectations. Through this act of rebellion, the play explores the conflict between personal desires and societal obligations, portraying the struggle for individual freedom within a system of familial and social conformity (David, 2004).

The prisoners in *Volunteers* are placed under the surveillance of George, whose responsibility is to oversee the archaeological excavation amidst Ireland's political turmoil. While George is tasked with maintaining order during the excavation, Kate, the matriarch in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, is similarly responsible for keeping her family intact within the shifting landscape of rural Ireland. Both characters confront the challenges posed by their respective roles within their microcosms. George's position is one of authority in the excavation, serving as a de facto figurehead for the process of uncovering ancient history. His adherence to the system is unquestioning. He states "there are rules… and we must observe them" (p. 45), reflecting his obedience to the colonial structures, even as he witnesses the suffering of the prisoners. His focus remains firmly on enforcing compliance, rather than questioning the morality or necessity of the system itself. In contrast, Kate, as

the head of her family, bears the weight of responsibility for their economic survival, education, and well-being, grappling with the burdens of tradition and the expectations of society.

George's authoritarian role is rooted in unquestioning obedience, while Kate's authority arises from her efforts to impose social conformity on her family. She strives to shield her family from the social upheavals of rural Ireland, yet her actions also curtail her own personal development, creating a conflict between her desires and societal obligations (McCormick, 2011). This internal struggle becomes most evident when Kate forbids her sisters from attending the festival at Lughnasa, though they ultimately defy her and escape to London, seeking lives free from the constraints she seeks to impose. For her sisters, the festival symbolizes personal liberation and the reclaiming of individual identity, set against the backdrop of familial duty. His authority, however, is undermined by the rebellion of Butt, one of the volunteer prisoners. The foreman, initially aligned with the colonial system, finds his position destabilized by Butt's act of defiance. Butt deliberately damages a significant Viking jug during the excavation, an act imbued with both historical and political weight. The destruction of the jug emerges as a potent symbol, rejecting the colonial system's attempt to simplify Ireland's traumatic past and replace it with a sanitized version of history. The act challenges the superficial progress promoted by George and figures like Mr. Wilson, revealing the fragility of the system's efforts to suppress the complexities of Irish history (Garratt, 2011). This destruction underscores the broader political project of erasure and the revision of history, emblematic of the colonial influence that seeks to control Ireland's cultural narrative.

The decision to abruptly close the excavation and replace it with a mall further illustrates the superficial nature of the historical restoration championed by those in power. The destruction of the jug signifies the broader societal tendency to overlook or erase traumatic historical events in favor of progress, disregarding the enduring impact of such traumas. The shift from excavation to commercial development serves as a critique of those in power who prioritize economic gain over authentic historical reconciliation or preservation (Roche, 1994). Cathy Caruth (1996) interprets the destruction of the jug as emblematic of the cyclical nature of historical and socio-political trauma. Initially unearthed from the sands of time, the

jug represents an attempt to restore what has been buried. However, its subsequent shattering reveals the temporary and incomplete nature of these restorations, highlighting the ongoing fragmentation of Irish history and identity. The broken jug thus serves as a metaphor for the perpetuity of trauma, unhealed and repeating across generations, as each new cycle bears the weight of past conflicts. Caruth posits that the act of breaking the jug transcends mere vandalism; it functions as a symbolic gesture that critiques society's collective impulse to sanitize or erase painful histories in favor of more palatable narratives.

Friel's portrayal of the jug's destruction aligns with his broader concerns about language, history, and the power dynamics inherent in colonialism. George, though semi-autonomous, remains tethered to colonial structures, embodying the manipulation of language to construct false narratives that obscure truth. The official narrative surrounding the excavation seeks to suppress the painful histories of famine, suffering, and colonial oppression, offering a sanitized version of the past that fails to confront the complexities of Ireland's colonial experience. The destruction of the jug thus demands a critical reexamination of how language shapes historical memory and cultural identity.

As Foucault (1972) argues, discourses are systems of knowledge that organize and regulate social practices, often serving the interests of those in power. The act of excavation, though seemingly physical, becomes a metaphor for the prisoners' ideological and intellectual quest to reclaim their identity and historical narrative. Their struggle is not simply to uncover artifacts but to unearth buried truths about their existence and the collective memory of their nation. The prisoners' imprisonment both physical and ideological is shaped by dominant narratives that restrict their freedom to define their own identity. The excavation process thus becomes a means of challenging these imposed narratives, and Butt's act of rebellion marks a critical moment of defiance against the colonial system's attempt to control the past and its interpretation.

The destruction of the jug, then, is a pivotal act of resistance. It symbolizes the rejection of the colonial narrative that seeks to erase or distort Ireland's history. Butt's defiance of George's authority underscores the futility of attempting to reconcile with the past through superficial means. The broken jug, fragmented and

incomplete, reflects the ongoing fragmentation of Irish identity a process that cannot be easily healed or restored. The shattered remains of the jug signal the chaos and instability that continue to define Irish history and politics, suggesting that the wounds of the past will persist, no matter how much effort is made to bury them. Through this metaphor, Friel highlights the impossibility of fully reconciling with the past without first confronting its painful truths. The volunteers' journey is one of gradual disillusionment, as they realize that their efforts to reconstruct history will always be incomplete, shaped by the forces of power and oppression. The fragments of the jug, scattered in the aftermath of Butt's defiant action, serve as a poignant reminder of the fractured and incomplete nature of Irish history and identity an identity that remains in the process of being written, subject to the forces of history, politics, and the struggle for meaning.

5.4 The Pagan Father Jack Breaking the Ancient Jug

Brian Friel established a symbolic parallel between Butt's destruction of the jug and Father Jack's embrace of paganism in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. These acts reject dominant cultural and religious systems while forging a direct link to the ancestral past. This reconnection occurs within the broader context of Ireland's sociopolitical instability, mediated through Norse artifacts and Ugandan spiritual practices. Characters express a profound longing for historical continuity, yet both plays are marked by a persistent absence of action. The theme of inertia extends to Friel's broader authorial concerns. Father Jack emerges as a rare exception responding to a primal impulse, he reconnects with an elemental self at the expense of social exile. His rejection of institutional religion challenges the foundational norms of his family and community. By embracing the belief systems of his ancestors, he enacts a latent aspiration rooted in Friel's own Catholic background. This personal rebellion dismantles the rigid ideological architecture responsible for sustaining violence, isolation, sectarian tension, and systemic inequality especially among Ireland's working class.

Jack narrates his experiences with Ugandan tribes through the lens of Ireland's oral storytelling tradition, reintroducing vitality and communal celebration into domestic life. His stories disrupt the austerity imposed by Catholic doctrine.

Maggie whose emotional proximity to Jack reinforces this contrast becomes a witness to the joyful alternative his worldview presents. Jack's connection to ancestral ritual directly contests the moral authority of both church and state. The rituals of the Festival of the New Yam and the Festival of the Sweet Cassava reveal a spiritual framework that parallels and subverts the Irish Catholic structure. His comment during a chicken sacrifice "(...) It's a very exciting exhibition – that's not the word, is it? -- demonstration? – no – show? No, no; what's the word I'm looking for? Spectacle? That's not it" (p. 48) exposes a lived belief not intended for performance or institutional validation. The Ryangan community becomes a counter-model to the Irish religious order. Jack recounts how the church was taken from him, after which hundreds gathered freely in the village square. This transition signifies a move beyond the control of institutionalized space and time, aligning with Foucault's (1980) analysis of spatial power relations. Jack envisions a similar collapse of Catholic authority in Ireland, symbolized by the shattered jug. The Ryangan are presented not as distant others but as kin, their integration of sacred and secular life becoming a source of envy (p. 58). Ceremonies evolve into communal festivities, eroding religious dogma without erasing spirituality. Jack's vision is not one of erasure, but of restoration, a belief system that unites through music, dance, and collective ritual, echoing the ancestral spirit of the Lughnasa festival.

Father Jack's embrace of paganism, like the fragmented remnants of Viking artifacts, reveals the fragility and complexity of identity amid cultural disruption. His return to ancestral belief systems articulates a desire for authenticity that resists the ideological constraints of Catholicism, colonialism, and their attendant political mechanisms. Characters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* frequently confront these oppressive structures, but Jack stands apart by actively renouncing the institutional apparatus he once upheld. His rejection constitutes a deliberate act of ideological severance. In the presence of his primary antagonist, Kate, the force of his transformation becomes evident. Her invocation of communal memory and celebration is met with disorientation and detachment:

> *KATE. It's Kate. And dozens of people were asking for you.*
> *JACK. They remember me?*
> *KATE. Of course they remember you! And then you're feeling stronger they're going to have a great public welcome for you – flags, bands, speeches, everything!*

> *JACK. Why would they do this?*
> *KATE. Because they're delighted you're back.*
> *JACK. Yes?*
> *KATE. Because they're delighted you're home.*
> *JACK. I'm afraid I don't remember them. I couldn't name ten people in Ballybeg now*. (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 27)

Jack's inability to recall his former community symbolizes more than personal forgetfulness; it marks an epistemological break with the ideological structures that once defined his identity. His attempt to channel the energy of his newly embraced belief system into family life introduces a tension between the immediate lived experience of the Mundy sisters and their suppressed aspirations. This tension redefines the concept of bio politics as theorized by Foucault (1980): the site of negotiation where cultural identities, bodily autonomy, and systems of governance intersect.

Bio political tensions in Friel's work manifest not as abstract theory but as lived contradictions embedded in cultural ritual and personal rebellion. *Dancing at Lughnasa* channels these tensions into acts of symbolic restoration and embodied resistance; *Volunteers* renders them as subdued defiance beneath institutional surfaces. Both plays trace identity as a site of struggle formed not through passive inheritance but through direct confrontation with colonial authority and the spectral pull of suppressed traditions. Friel positions these conflicts as part of a larger interrogation of Irish cultural heritage, urging a critical examination of ideological rigidity and the latent power of symbolic action amid historical fracture.

5.5 Reflection of Ireland's History, Political Struggles, and Existential Dilemmas: Keeney

Keeney functions as the central figure through which Friel articulates the volatile political and moral climate of Ireland during the Troubles. His presence in *Volunteers* embodies a complex fusion of resistance, ideological conviction, and personal sacrifice. As the de facto leader among the imprisoned men, Keeney exerts greater authority than the official foreman, George, galvanizing those around him through a combination of sharp wit, strategic defiance, and moral clarity. Friel

constructs this character not only to critique institutional oppression but also to explore the precarious nature of identity shaped under political duress.

Keeney's pronounced Irish accent and cutting sarcasm form part of his rhetorical arsenal, used to destabilize dominant historical narratives and challenge the legitimacy of the systems in place. His exchanges with George oscillate between humor and confrontation, offering moments of levity that thinly veil profound ideological friction. These verbal duels reveal Keeney's dual commitment: to uphold his principles and to protect his comrades, even at personal cost. This commitment aligns closely with the original ethos of Irish volunteerism as envisioned by the IRA, where moral authority is rooted in sacrifice and solidarity. Hayes (1997) situates Keeney within this tradition, likening his actions to those of the 1916 Easter Rising volunteers, where personal and collective liberation were inseparable. Friel's observation of the Derry border incident informs Keeney's role as a figure deeply embedded in real political struggle. For Friel, the project of national liberation extends beyond territorial sovereignty—it demands cultural and political unity between Ireland and the North. Language emerges as a critical site of this struggle. Keeney's reflection "Knoxie may well be on to something. Maybe he was a casualty of language. Damnit, George, which of us here isn't?" (p. 28) points to the role of language as both a colonial weapon and a determinant of identity. The loss of Gaelic under British rule catalyzed the erosion of Irish cultural memory, a theme echoed by Kiberd (1995), who warns of near-cultural erasure in the wake of linguistic displacement.

Keeney's use of language resists cultural erasure by transforming the colonizer's tongue into a vehicle of subversion and self-assertion. Rather than adopting English passively, he reshapes it infusing with the cadence, metaphor, and humor rooted in Irish oral tradition. His speech becomes a political tool, charged with poetic resonance and performative critique. One such instance "...you could well be excused for thinking that it does look more like a bomb crater, or a huge womb, or…like a prison yard" (p. 35) invokes Ireland's archaeological and political landscapes in a single image. This imagined "womb," presented as the site of a tunnel to freedom, becomes a metaphor for national trauma and historical burden.

Keeney's exhaustion emerges not from the physical labor of excavation, but from the futility of escaping a system that has repeatedly failed its people.

Satire becomes a critical mode of resistance. Keeney's cynicism exposes the commodification of Irish history, framing excavation as "encapsulated history, a tangible précis of the story of the Irish man" (p. 36). What lies beneath the ground is not merely cultural heritage, but a suppressed narrative disconnected from the present. Friel draws attention to state-endorsed acts of historical amnesia, such as the destruction of Wood Quay, which privilege urban development over archaeological preservation. The critique aligns with Roche's assessment of Friel as a playwright who, like Chekhov, interrogates the efficacy of inherited narratives in resolving present-day social and political crises (Roche, 2006). Keeney serves as an invaluable character in this context. He acts as a dispenser of justice, utilizing not only his intellect but also his moral compass. He persuades his comrades to include Smiler among the prisoners they aim to rescue through excavation. Even against George, Keeney remains steadfast in his rebellious stance, asserting that Smiler's arrest differs from theirs. He emphasizes that they willingly committed crimes against the state and were detained based on attitudes that, although unjust, could threaten public safety. In contrast, "Smiler marched to Dublin in protest of the arrest of a collier friend and was led by six burly quarrymen, behind a tattered banner and a half-drunk harmonica, to the Derry border" (p. 56). His sole transgression was an act of solidarity and nationalist endeavor. Consequently, Smiler was imprisoned in Dublin as a political prisoner and subjected to twelve hours of beating as a warning, highlighting the justice system's failure to address injustice. This irony not only seeks to demonstrate Smiler's innocence but also critiques the system's inability to reconcile idealism with the existence of free individuals holding diverse ideas and beliefs. Through this narrative, Friel brings attention to state violence against labor movements and dissent, as well as Ireland's historical suppression of workers' rights, particularly in the early 20th century. This satire and humor serve as both a method and a potent weapon of resistance, reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's approach, while the sarcastic tone that has persisted since the era of Irish independence indicates that little has changed since then (Forster, 1989). Thus, Keeney proposes humor as a

coping strategy for nations that have endured prolonged oppression and have yet to recover.

Keeney's possessiveness and protectiveness stand out as defining traits in his character. He endures both physical and psychological exploitation in his pursuit of the fundamental question, "who we are" and remains willing to face the repercussions of his resistance. In contrast, figures like Mr. Wilson and the institutional guardian, George, who stand to benefit from the sacrifices of the ordinary Irish people, along with the upper class intent on concealing the excavation and distorting history, prioritize their self-interests over the collective labor and history that ought to belong to the public. The cynical prisoner critiques the elite's manipulation of collective memory through pointed rhetorical questions, effectively undermining institutional authority. Although the struggles of the lower classes are disregarded, Keeney instinctively understands that his resistance will play a role in the formation of the state (He, 2014):

> *Now that's a curious phrase – 'where it belongs'.- Where does it belong? Is it Smiler's - finder keepers? Or is it the Professor's? Or does it belong to the nation? Or does it belong to - Brother Leif? Damnit, that's a thought! And if it's Leif's, isn't it about time he got it back?* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 60)

The phrase "where it belongs" epitomizes the moral quandaries embedded within the Northern Ireland conflict. Keeney's rhetorical question, "Where does it belong?" introduces a complex allegory regarding ownership and historical entitlement. The options he presents—whether the artifact belongs to Smiler, the Professor, the nation, or Brother Leif symbolize competing claims over Irish history and identity. Through this, Friel critiques the competing narratives of historical ownership, questioning the legitimacy of those who seek to define or control Ireland's past. Keeney's inquiry urges a reconsideration of the boundaries between heroism and villainy, destabilizing the audience's perception of right and wrong within the complex political landscape of Ireland (Pelletier, 1994).

Keeney emerges as a representative of a generation caught between the lingering shadows of past struggles and an uncertain future. Viewed from a larger historical context, the Troubles and the Derry border conflict serve as defining moments that shape his identity. These events, which have profoundly affected both

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, contribute to the cyclical nature of violence. As an ordinary man shaped by the political turbulence around him, Keeney's personal sacrifices are part of the collective struggle to define the future of his people. The persistence of colonial legacies, especially the lasting impacts of British rule nearly a century after Ireland's formal independence, illustrates the enduring influence of oppression. This continuity underscores the complexity of decolonization, suggesting that the dismantling of colonial structures is neither simple nor immediate. The excavation site symbolizes this ongoing confrontation with Ireland's colonial past, while the prisoners' plight highlights the continuous battle for identity and sovereignty (Roche, Brian Friel: Theatre and Politics, 1994). Keeney's realization is profound: when the established order digs up history and labels it, it simultaneously buries the very individuals engaged in this act. This metaphor encapsulates the self-defeating nature of institutionalized historical narratives and the continuous cycle of political struggle that keeps individuals tethered to a history that cannot be fully reburied or resolved.

5.5.1 Representative Layers of Keeney

Keeney plays a crucial role in defending the Irish cause, a struggle embraced by writers and intellectuals both in Ireland and abroad. Following 1900, Irish playwrights, notably W. B. Yeats, critiqued the commercialization of Irish culture, exposing its exploitation and the physical subjugation of nationalist sentiments. Yeats argued that national treasures were commodified and marketed in a superficial manner, stripped of genuine ideological substance. These treasures were often misrepresented through flawed narratives, which distorted the true Irish identity. Keeney shares this critical view, regarding the excavation as a commodified distortion of Ireland, where historical suffering is repackaged as a marketable story (He, 2014). Within Keeney, the action-driven character embodies the spirit of significant historical figures. His endorsement of resistance reflects a pragmatic approach to enduring oppression, evoking the memory of Michael Davitt, leader of the Irish Land League. Like Davitt, who navigated the tension between defending tenant rights and engaging in reconciliation, Keeney grapples with the conflict between personal interests and collective resistance.

The shift of the IRA away from militarism post-1969, leading to fragmentation into various factions, caused widespread disillusionment among its volunteers. The IRA leadership's escalation of violence and chaos, initially opposed by the group, generated profound moral dilemmas. In this context, the term "volunteers" becomes increasingly ambiguous, blurring the line between heroism and victimhood, encompassing all who took up arms for a cause. Keeney resurrects the figure of Bobby Sands, the IRA hunger striker whose death in 1981 ignited nationalist fervor, to examine the personal and political ramifications of resistance, as well as its ethical implications. Initially hesitant to participate in the excavation, Keeney wrestles with the futility of unearthing history, recognizing that it cannot resolve the present. His biting sarcasm and persistent critique of the system underscore the divided and morally complex nature of Irish nationalism (Kosok, 2010). Nevertheless, he retains an unwavering hope, reflecting Friel's portrayal of Keeney as a morally complex figure. This hope, intertwined with sarcasm, draws inspiration from Michael Collins, who, upon signing the Anglo-Irish Treaty, remarked, "I have signed my death warrant" (Bennett, 2024), fully aware that his action would precipitate civil war.

Keeney recognizes that each area he investigates represents the unearthing of his own grave. James Connolly, leader of the Easter Rising alongside Patrick Pearse, was wounded and later executed while still injured. Connolly's death, a consequence of his unwavering commitment to Irish workers' rights, embodies the betrayal and immorality of Ireland's historical exploitation by British rule (Johnston, 2007). For Keeney, the excavation and reburial of Viking relics, along with the construction of hotels, symbolize the continued exploitation of labor and faith, perpetuating the vicious cycle of historical violence. Within this framework, Keeney emerges as a true revolutionary, committed to advocating for Ireland's genuine interests. His inquiries transcend romanticism and the unethical aspects of violence, critically assessing the moral implications of freedom. Even as he faces imprisonment, Keeney continues to wrestle with the unresolved tensions between Ireland's past and present.

5.5.2 Lens on Ireland's Historical Struggles, Systemic Failures, and Shakespearean Echoes by Keeney

Keeney's repeated question, "was Hamlet really mad?" (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 28) echoes far beyond mere rhetorical inquiry, it embodies the existential dilemma that defines both his personal struggle and Ireland's collective turmoil. However, it is unlikely that a sharp and critical revolutionary like Keeney would pose this question casually. In Hamlet, the iconic line "To be or not to be, that is the question!" (Shakespear, Hamlet, 2001) reflects Hamlet's existential crisis as a mad prince seeking to restore rightful rule through revenge. Brian Friel, who frequently references Hamlet's madness, highlights how this disorientation ultimately leads to the tragic downfall of both Hamlet and his family, as well as the destruction of the principality. Keeney, living in a country torn by a national identity crisis and limited by political narratives, questions whether the greatest issue facing his society is "to be or not to be." This tension between choice and fate encapsulates the central contradiction of Keeney's resistance. His voluntary participation in the struggle against systemic oppression is both a response to imposed restrictions and an assertion of his identity. Keeney thus emerges as an archetype representing the complexities of Irish resistance, systemic subjugation, and the psychological toll of prolonged conflict. His internal conflict over identity, heritage, and the ethical dilemma of action versus inaction mirrors Hamlet's existential turmoil. Humor and sarcasm, in this context, serve as masks for the deeper, painful introspection and questioning that Keeney undergoes, as he grapples with reconciling his personal desires with the collective history and injustices endured by his fellow prisoners (Roche, 2006).

Keeney's rhetorical questioning of Hamlet's madness is an allegorical critique of the language of colonialism, particularly following the Act of Union in 1801. His reflections on Hamlet's state of mind intersect with his critique of language, drawing a parallel between individual disorientation and the collective disorder imposed by colonization. Friel suggests that the casualty of language is the burden of self-reflection. In this sense, both Hamlet and Keeney's actions are often euphemized or distorted, obscuring the inherent violence and struggle of their

movements, thereby highlighting the casualties of language as a mechanism to deny the brutal realities of their respective contexts (Foucault, 1980). For Keeney, the true imprisonment lies beyond physical walls, while for Hamlet, Denmark itself becomes his prison. Both must navigate complex games of deception in order to uncover the truth. Likewise, Keeney reflects on the performative nature of the systems he operates within: "When Keeney and his friends began this dig, they had a full complement of ordinary laborers" (p. 36). This excavation project uncovers the artificial and performative layers of the societal structures they are enmeshed in.

Ultimately, through Keeney, Friel challenges prevailing narratives that perpetuate oppression and questions the notion of heroism. He urges the audience to confront the contradictions inherent in both history and human action. While it is unclear whether Friel consciously intends to liken Keeney to Hamlet, Keeney's glorification of suffering for political ends in the line "Did Leif say something like that when he was being hoisted?" (p. 48) resonates deeply with the reader, internalizing the idea of martyrdom in a manner akin to Hamlet's own tragic fate. Hamlet's subsequent question; "To suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (p. 127) serves as a fitting summary of Keeney's existential struggle.

5.6 Pyne, the Master of Limericks

Pyne, a pivotal character in *Volunteers*, complements Keeney by embodying the role of a comedic and subversive figure whose irony and humor drive much of the play's critique. His primary weapon lies in the limericks and songs he shares with Keeney, which serve as pointed commentaries on their contemporary situation during the excavation, as well as on the broader political, historical, and cultural dilemmas facing Ireland. One such limerick states:

> *There once was a bird called O'Shea*
> *Who was known as a fabulous lay.*
> *Then along came Parnell*
> *Who screwed her to hell*
> *And we feel the results to this day.* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 18)

This verse alludes to Charles Stewart Parnell, using satire to critique nationalism and bureaucracy. Parnell, a key figure in Irish political history, is remembered for his

leadership of the Home Rule movement in the late 19th century. However, his political career was marred by scandal following his extramarital affair with Katharine O'Shea, which led to his fall from grace within the nationalist movement. Pyne's limerick underscores the hypocrisy and disillusionment that Friel highlights throughout the play, pointing to the lingering consequences of Parnell's actions, which are still felt in Irish society today (Lyons, 1977).

Friel's exploration of mythologized leadership and the corrosive effect of inconsistent nationalism is evident in *Volunteers*, where he critiques not only historical events but also the flawed human nature behind them (Murray, 1997). The name "O'Shea" serves as a dual metaphor referring both to the woman at the center of Parnell's scandal and to Ireland itself often personified as a woman in nationalist discourse. Parnell's actions, described as "screwing her to hell," symbolically illustrate how his personal failings undermined the Irish nationalist cause, leaving a legacy of ethical corruption and division within Irish political and cultural identity. Pyne's bawdy style further diminishes Parnell, while Friel, in turn, critiques the mythologized leaders of the Derry Border incident, acknowledging their impact despite the high human cost. The closing line, "we feel the results to this day," poignantly references the persistent unresolved tensions that continue to shape modern Irish society, marked by division, betrayal, and the distortion of history.

The discovery of the remains by Leif and the legendary figure of Scandinavian explorer Leif Erikson are interwoven in a narrative that examines the clash between ancient pagan beliefs and Christianity within contemporary culture. This conflict mirrors the struggle playwright Friel experienced in reconciling his own sense of identity confusion. The juxtaposition of "Jesus and Thor" in warfare serves as a poignant reminder of Ireland's historical struggles during the transition from Celtic spirituality to Christian rule, highlighting the profound material and spiritual losses the nation endured during this transformation. Leif's brief time in America ends tragically with his death, similarly to how Erikson's short stay in Ireland culminates in the invasion and cultural subjugation of the Irish people. Critics argue that both of these territories are ensnared in a cycle of colonization, stressing the urgent need to break this pattern (Hayes, 1997). These historical events are carefully

connected to present-day conflicts, with nuanced comparisons that underscore their enduring relevance.

The Labor Boy lines sung by both Pyne and Keeney serve as an exploration of the working class and inter-class oppression specifically in terms of socioeconomic status though they are mentioned infrequently in *Volunteers*. The couplets "As I went out one morning fair (…) They would not let me tarry with / My bonny laboring boy" (p. 34) and "Why did you stoop so low; To marry a poor laboring boy?" (p. 34) reflect the struggle of the working class, depicted through the image of a working child in Irish society. The lament "Girls' Fair" conveys that the working class is both unwanted and confined by social restrictions in an age where wealth and status are prioritized. Furthermore, the cause of the working peasant uprising, often romanticized and marginalized in nationalist discourses, is misrepresented in reality, as noted by Boltwood (2002). In truth, the working child is dehumanized and rendered invisible. Conversely, idealized political discourses, such as those surrounding figures like Parnell, attempt to obscure these stark realities. In Irish society, where economic inequalities have intensified, families are pressured to prioritize financial progress over personal well-being or happiness. The marginalized working peasant class lives in a paradox, where they are supposedly respected by the upper classes, yet their lived experiences are only remembered and expressed through the future ballad culture.

Pyne, in addition to his limericks and songs, employs poetic mockery to critique the ineffectiveness of the letter-writing campaign against the destruction of the archaeological site. He and Keeney complement each other by humorously presenting themselves as important figures who have signed the letter:

> *Keeney: We put our names under the paper.*
> *Pyne: The Leif's.*
> *Keeney: And Ulf's.*
> *Pyne: And Wilson's.*
> *Keeney: And George's.*
> *Keeney: Young Dolly's.*
> *Pyne: And George's.*
> *Keeney: And Valera's.*
> *Pyne: And Master McGrath's.*
> *Keeney: And King Kong's.*
> *Pyne: And Hitler's…* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 68)

This dialogue mocks the futility of nationalist protests by inflating the importance of the signatories. By incorporating exaggerated names like “King Kong” and “Hitler,” Pyne destabilizes traditional nationalist narratives, using humor to undermine the perceived gravity of historical myths. He and Keeney together satirize political inaction and the performative nature of intellectual protest. Pyne subtly signals to the audience that folk discourse can serve as a means of challenging colonial narratives and nationalist orthodoxy. Through his limericks and humor, Pyne lightens the gravity of the excavation event while simultaneously highlighting its inherent disappointment.

The limericks and songs sung in ballad style evoke the power of Irish cultural discourse, which is both radical and destructive. Pyne and Keeney criticize how this introspective tradition, once so functional, has been forgotten and replaced with blindly adhered-to ideological narratives: “Keeney: And after one hell of a lot of soul-searching—did we reach our souls? / Pyne: With fine combs and flash-lamps (…) (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 67). Their regret over not reaching their souls exposes the performative nature of intellectual protests, filled with wit, humor, and satire (Pine, 1991).

Pyne’s humorous yet incisive commentary on social roles and restrictions provides a subversive and striking critique in *Volunteers*. Her role is akin to that of Chris Mundy in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Both characters resist social expectations by challenging established norms. For Pyne, this resistance pertains to political formations and historical discourses, while for Chris, it involves the economic and emotional hardships of rural Ireland in the 1930s and the sexist restrictions imposed on her as a woman. However, their methods of resistance differ. As Ferris (1997) notes, “Pyne maintains a constant flow of verbal wit that undermines the seriousness of her circumstances.” She critiques institutional oppression and the absurdities of nationalism with wit and irony, refusing to be defeated by external pressures. Pyne conveys dominant narratives through the power of intellect. In contrast, Christina Mundy’s resistance is quieter and more emotionally enduring. As a single mother raising her son without a husband, she defies religious and gender stereotypes. She embraces her role by prioritizing Michael’s well-being and casting aside the need for social approval. Unlike Pyne’s loud sarcasm, Chris adopts a more nostalgic tone. Her

resistance is more closely tied to the personal sacrifices she makes as a woman in a changing society. Despite their differing methods, both Pyne and Chris embody the struggle to survive in post-colonial Ireland under changing socio-political conditions.

5.7 Representations of Vulnerability by Rose and Agnes

The tragic fates of Rose and Agnes in *Dancing at Lughnasa* highlight a society that marginalizes and neglects those deemed weak or different. After losing her manual labor job due to factory closures, Agnes escapes to London with the simple and naive Rose, retreating into silence. Their departure symbolizes not only the economic hardships faced by women in rural Ireland during the 1930s, but also the emotional isolation that defines their struggle. Agnes, as a single woman in an era of rampant unemployment and economic crisis, sacrifices her own well-being to protect Rose. Through this sacrifice, Friel portrays the economic and emotional hardships women in rural Ireland faced during the 1930s. However, the sisters' unsuccessful search for a better life in London highlights the failure of the system to support and value women marginalized by poverty. They serve as symbols of harsh realities and innocence within a rigidly patriarchal society.

The struggles of the Mundy sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* parallel the experiences of the characters in *Volunteers*, particularly in their fight against societal restrictions and limited opportunities within their own microcosmic family. These characters embody the ways in which Irish culture has excluded those who do not conform to its dominant ideals across different historical contexts. Agnes and Rose can be compared to Keeney and Pyne in several ways. Like them, these characters exist on the fringes of society and ultimately face erasure. Despite this, art becomes a tool of resistance, allowing them to confront the exclusion they experience. Rose and Agnes, though marginalized, resist in their own ways. They find solace in music, using Marconi songs to escape the harshness of their lives. Rose, in particular, embodies longing, innocence, and the desire for connection amid socioeconomic limitations. In this, Friel echoes themes of escape explored in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* with Rose's yearning for adventure symbolized by her dream of going to Abyssinia. As she sings, "Will you come to Abyssinia, will you come? / Bring your

cup and saucer and a bun...” (p. 10), she imagines a romantic escape from her restrictive home life. Abyssinia becomes a metaphor for hope and the possibility of freedom. This repressed yearning also surfaces in Rose’s sexual desires, which are expressed humorously through veiled expressions:

> *MAGGIE. You should be on the stage, Rose.*
> *ROSE continues to shuffle and now holds up her apron skirt.)*
> *ROSE. And not a bad bit of leg, Maggie – eh?*
> *MAGGIE. Rose Mundy! Where’s your modesty! (MAGGIE now hitches her own skirt even higher than Rose’s and does a similar shuffle.) Is that not more like it?*
> *ROSE. Good, Maggie – good -- good! Look, Agnes, look!*
> *AGNES. A right pair of pagans, the two of you.*
> *ROSE. Turn on Marconi, Chrissie.* (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 10)

Though Rose’s humor is not as overtly wicked as Pyne’s, she uses humor to express her desires within a family that suppresses individuality for the sake of reputation. This behavior creates an outlet for Rose to explore the tensions between her innocence and the harsh realities of her world. Desiring to escape the gloom of domesticity, Rose’s idealism ultimately makes her vulnerable to exploitation. She falls in love with a married man, Danny Bradley, who emotionally exploits her by promising to leave his wife. Rose, naive and hopeful, believes him, as evidenced by his endearing nickname for her, “Rosebud.” This innocence, though heartfelt, proves dangerous in a patriarchal society driven by material interests.

Kate, fearful of the social scandal Rose’s behavior might cause, becomes increasingly protective, leading to conflicts with her sisters. Rose’s insistence on attending the Lughnasa festival or meeting Danny is a plea for freedom from her confining home life. She accuses her sisters of jealousy, “And you’re jealous, too! That’s what’s wrong with the whole of you – you’re jealous of me!” (p. 31) challenging their repressed desires and revealing her own unfulfilled longing. In a bid to escape, Rose runs away from home under the pretense of picking blackberries. She reaches the remnants of the festival fires, a symbolic act of rebellion. Although she arrives too late to participate in the festival, Rose is the only character who dares to cross the mountains, making this act an assertion of defiance. However, the dead ashes she finds upon her arrival symbolize the price she must pay for her actions. Abandoned by her lover after this brief escapade, Rose is forced to face the harsh consequences of her choices. Unable to reconcile her desires with her family’s

expectations, she embodies both hope and tragedy in the family's narrative. The only character who accompanies her on this journey is Agnes, who shares her awareness of the situation:

> *AGNES: How many years has it been since we were at the harvest dance? -- at any 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.* (Friel, Dancing at Lughnasa, 1990, p. 24)

Agnes's saying expresses her unfulfilled desires, as she quietly leaves with Rose in the hope of experiencing something beyond their constrained lives. Through the characters of Rose and Agnes, Friel critiques the limitations placed on women by both socioeconomic conditions and cultural expectations. Their silent departure from Ballybeg with Rose represents a quiet protest against an unyielding system. As Watt (2009) observes "the silent departure of Agnes and Rose is an indictment of a society that values conformity rather than compassion." The sisters, who die poor and unnoticed in London, were cast aside by society for not conforming. Yet their departure serves as a poignant critique of a system that fails to support those like them. In portraying the struggles of Agnes and Rose, Friel highlights not only the personal fight for identity but also the broader societal forces that marginalize individuals based on class, gender, and circumstance. Their silent rebellion speaks volumes, offering a subtle yet powerful commentary on the limitations and injustices of their world.

5.8 Does Smiler an Imbecile or an Innocent Prisoner?

The innocence and vulnerability of Rose and Agnes in *Dancing at Lughnasa* find a parallel in the character of Smiler from *Volunteers*. Smiler, a prisoner who endured torture while defending his comrades during the Derry border incident, symbolizes the trauma and displacement inflicted by political conflict. Much like Rose, Smiler possesses a childlike innocence, which is evident not only in his demeanor but also in his physical appearance, such as the ski cap adorned with a tassel that he wears (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 19). His brain damage, the result of abuse and violence, has rendered him an "imbecile," which reinforces the

disfigurement of both the body and the spirit in the context of political violence. This absurd image of a man accused of serious offenses being reduced to an imbecile speaks volumes about the loss of dignity and human cost incurred by individuals who fall prey to nationalistic fervor and political oppression.

Smiler's tragic figure serves as a poignant commentary on the political and emotional struggles of the marginalized. Keeney, a fellow prisoner, forms a circle of friends with the hope of freeing at least one of them, and Smiler with his perceived innocence becomes the ideal candidate for rescue. Keeney, who admires Smiler's past actions is determined to protect him likely unable to accept the humiliation of a patriotic Irishman being reduced to a mere "imbecile." When Smiler initially escapes, it seems as though their plan may succeed. However, Smiler returns to the excavation site, causing Keeney to break down in frustration: "He's a stupid, pig-headed imbecile! He was an imbecile the moment he walked out of his quarry! And that's why he came back here – because he's an imbecile like the rest of us!" (p. 16). Keeney's outburst represents his frustration with the futility of resistance. Smiler's return not only highlights the personal tragedy of a man broken by political violence, but it also symbolizes the fragility of resistance movements and the profound human cost that political struggles entail.

The failure of their final attempt at resistance underscores Keeney's anxiety about the fragility of political struggle and the inevitable human cost it exacts. Their collective inability to sustain a system where resistance often leads to self-destruction reveals a cycle of erasure amid both rebellion and oppression. Friel articulates the profound anguish of his most resilient character, Keeney, who embodies the critique of the burdens of political activism. His character resonates with Albert Camus' philosophical explorations of the justification for suffering caused by rebellion, particularly as seen in *Rebel* (1951). Keeney, a courageous leader, willingly places himself in harm's way, accepting the risk of being marked by fellow prisoners for his support of the government's excavation plan to free Smiler: "He is the one they'll go for first" and "That's one of the reasons other political prisoners hate him" (p. 17). The volatile atmosphere surrounding Keeney, shaped by the marginalized dynamics within the prison, establishes a precarious foundation for him. Yet, Smiler's disruption of the escape plan exposes Keeney's betrayal of the fragile balance

between blame and solidarity in politically charged movements. The scapegoating that ensues, according to Durkheim's theory of social cohesion, is likely to occur within groups under extreme stress, where unity is continually tested by external pressures. Butt's observation that Keeney's actions stem from his fear (p. 75) unveils the vulnerabilities within this resistance. Keeney's fear both personal and collective profoundly shapes his decisions and responses, highlighting the tension between his commitment to the cause and his overwhelming anxiety about the personal and ideological consequences of failure.

Smiler's return starkly underscores the profound mental and physical trauma that Irish society has endured. His confession to Butt vividly illustrates this struggle:

> *Smiler: Butt, I …*
> *Butt: What is it, Smiler?*
> *Smiler: When I went up to the gate, I wanted to run away – I knew I has to run away – I knew that – I knew that – I – I –*
> *Butt: Easy man, easy.*
> *Smiler: And then when I was outside, I – I – I – I didn't know anymore – I didn't know anything, Butt – and I had to come back – to come – to - … - to come back to you 'cos you'd tell me what to do – what to do – what – what –* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 77)

Initially, Smiler's return highlights his inability to act autonomously. Despite Ireland being an independent nation, the persistent lack of freedom both in thought and action has rendered its people incapable of true autonomy, thus reducing those left behind, like Smiler, to being labeled imbeciles. This attribution carries deep layers of meaning and profound anger. Smiler, like many Irish people, has been dehumanized by his experiences, instilled with learned helplessness by the system that confines him. For Smiler, the outside world feels no different from the inside; in fact, the prison, with its familiar faces, offers a sense of safety far greater than the uncertain freedom beyond its walls. His fragmented statement, "I didn't know anything… and I had to come back" (p. 77), becomes a profound existential symptom of his disconnection from the world outside, embodying the doubt and absurdity he feels about his place in it.

Smiler's initial participation in the escape plan, followed by his retreat, underscores his confusion and disorientation. This reflects the mental and emotional fragmentation commonly observed in trauma victims, as highlighted in Seligman's research (Bayat, 2002). Smiler can no longer clearly articulate his needs or desires,

and instead, he relies on Butt's guidance to navigate his fractured identity. For Smiler, the distinction between freedom and autonomy has vanished, and he is left in a constant state of dependence, seeking validation and direction from those around him. Camus's concept of existential absurdity resonates here where even the pursuit of an unattainable goal can fill one's heart with meaning (Beyazyüz, 2020). Friel's use of repetitive, stuttering language serves to reinforce the trauma and disorder Smiler experiences. The phrase "..I – I – I – I didn't know anymore" (p. 77) exemplifies Friel's powerful choice of language to convey Smiler's fragmented identity and inner chaos. This linguistic distortion disrupts the narrative's coherence, trapping Smiler in a cycle of repetition and incomprehensibility, leaving him vulnerable and defenseless. His dependence on others for guidance underscores his emotional fragility, evoking a childlike need for protection and reassurance.

The primary reason Smiler was selected for the escape plan is his perceived purity and childlike nature, which mirrors Rose's innocence in their corrupted society. Despite the prisoners having sacrificed their resources for their beliefs and compatriots, they harbor internal guilt. Yet, Smiler represents the truest form of brotherhood. He fought for his friends, and over time, he has been mentally worn down by the process of dehumanization. Were Smiler to achieve freedom, he would reveal the fragmentation and cruelty of the oppressors to the world. Liberating such a defenseless, innocent figure would become their greatest act of resistance, exposing the corruption within the justice system. Furthermore, his release would spark collective awareness, reminding society of the personal tragedies mirrored in Smiler's deteriorating mental and emotional state. The volunteers' choice of Smiler aims to magnify the trauma of their collective struggle, shed light on the impact of state violence on the human psyche, and emphasize the injustices faced by political prisoners as a bold act of defiance (Butler, 2009).

Smiler's disorder may, ironically, offer him the advantage of being overlooked by society. Foucault (1980) argues that institutions tend to disregard those seen as weak or incapable of resistance, as they do not pose a threat. Additionally, the romanticized ideals of political prisoners may have contributed to the upheaval of innocent lives such as Smiler's. The negative consequences of blindly upheld radical ideologies are reflected in the prisoners' self-criticism. At this

juncture, the notion of brotherhood should reach its peak, and Keeney and his companions should aim to mitigate Smiler's suffering to some degree. As Pyne and Butt reflect on Keeney's fears and group dynamics, it becomes clear that their actions stem from a mixture of pragmatism and loyalty.

Smiler's return, coupled with his statement, "I didn't know anymore – I didn't know anything, Butt – and I had to come back…" (p. 77), emphasizes the impossibility of freedom for those condemned by institutional powers. The first punishment for those outside the system is social dysfunction. According to Kosok (2010), "Smiler represents a silent condemnation of the societal structures that dehumanize individuals. Friel uses him as a moral compass, juxtaposing his vulnerability with the cynicism of the other characters." Smiler's potential success in the escape would mark the first tangible victory for the volunteers, but the reality of freedom becomes meaningless for those unable to manage it, rendering the endeavor ultimately frustrating. Keeney, a genuine resister aware of the symbolic weight of their actions, also experiences fear over the consequences of their collective struggle. For Keeney, acts of rebellion are as much about psychological redemption as they are about political transformation. However, it seems that there is no true salvation for those outside the system, neither in the prison of oppression nor in the world beyond it.

6. THE SYMBOLIC AND LITERAL DIMENSIONS OF THE KANGAROO COURT IN VOLUNTEERS

Friel critiques all institutions that have adversely shaped Irish society and hindered the emergence of a truly independent Irish state, regardless of whether these forces stem from Unionists, Loyalists, Republicans, or Nationalists in *Volunteers*. His critique extends beyond formal political bodies that facilitated the incarceration of individuals alongside IRA members, encompassing informal judicial mechanisms that carried out extrajudicial executions. While the IRA undeniably contributed to the struggle for Irish independence, its detrimental impact on Irish society is equally significant. Among its most damaging legacies is the establishment of informal courts that operated without impartiality or legal oversight.

Both loyalist and republican paramilitary factions engaged in extrajudicial proceedings throughout the Troubles to enforce their respective codes of conduct. Among these groups, the IRA became one of the principal arbiters of this parallel justice system. In an effort to circumvent the legal frameworks imposed by British colonial governance during the independence movement, the IRA and Sinn Féin established unofficial family courts known as Dáil Courts. Initially intended to serve the welfare of the Irish people, protect national autonomy, and resist British authority, these courts gradually drifted from their original mission as they gained influence (Walker, 1992). Over time, their operations became marked by ethical violations and illegitimate practices. In the chaos of the Troubles, the Dáil Courts sanctioned executions aligned with paramilitary goals without any form of due process. The IRA's informal policing targeted individuals suspected of offenses such as theft, drug trafficking, or informing often based on rumor alone. Defendants were typically denied legal representation, and punishments frequently included kneecapping. This form of violence became so normalized that the term "Disappeared" emerged to describe those abducted, executed, and secretly buried by the IRA for allegedly betraying the republican cause. One of the most infamous instances was the 1972 execution of Jean McConville, a widowed mother of ten, by a kangaroo court (Moloney, 2002). Her remains were discovered in 2003, revealing she was not a British informant, a revelation that deeply discredited the IRA. Such

actions not only eroded societal trust but also fostered ideological decay among an already traumatized population.

Friel portrays such a kangaroo court in *Volunteers*, where Keeney and other inmates are judged by their fellow prisoners for engaging with the existing system. This scene illustrates a mock judicial process devoid of fairness, impartiality, or adherence to legal norms. In the play, inmates who volunteered for excavation are condemned for their perceived collaboration and are sentenced to death. This portrayal highlights the emergence of corrupt systems within broader structures of injustice and emphasizes the fractures created by internal divisions among the prisoners. By drawing parallels between formal and informal corruption, Friel delivers a powerful critique of power structures and the contradictions inherent in political resistance. Ireland, fragmented both territorially and ideologically, is not only shaped by conflicting allegiances but is also internally divided. Informal mechanisms for enacting justice often employed by the IRA and similar groups have long coexisted with formal legal institutions throughout both colonial and post-colonial periods. The vision of a democratic and pluralistic Ireland is undermined by the existence of these extralegal courts, the tension between justice and revenge, and the ethical ambiguities that permeate these practices. Through the symbol of the kangaroo court, Friel critiques the harm inflicted by the IRA and simultaneously exposes the fractured psyches and interpersonal dynamics among the prisoners.

Keeney emerges as the most outspoken and politically radical of the inmates. Even under extreme conditions, he voices dissent and takes action, notably by planning Smiler's escape. Ironically, his only moment of fear arises during his own trial by the kangaroo court, a process that underscores the inmates' vulnerability. At this juncture, authority is transferred to a parody of legal order, revealing how structures of dominance continue to operate even within rebellion. Keeney's execution, orchestrated to secure the release of another prisoner perceived as innocent, reveals the grotesque transformation of justice into a tool of political manipulation. This underscores the notion that the true enemy of Irish politics is not solely external but also embedded within internal power dynamics.

The kangaroo court depicted in *Volunteers* thus unveils the brutality and absurdity of informal justice, where personal vendettas eclipse collective goals. It resonates with Thomas Hobbes's political metaphor, "homo homini lupus" (Karagözoğlu, 2006). Friel examines how political prisoners, in their attempt to reclaim agency, replicate the authoritarianism they oppose. By portraying the imitation of oppressive structures, he critiques the misappropriation of resistance, the internal divisions within Irish nationalist movements, and the reproduction of hierarchical systems under the guise of revolution (Simons, 2011). In doing so, Friel positions illegal courts, common across revolutionary movements, from the French to the Russian Revolutions as symbols of both state failure and the collapse of revolutionary integrity.

7. THE DEDICATION OF *VOLUNTEERS* TO SEAMUS HEANEY

Brian Friel's *Volunteers* is explicitly dedicated to Seamus Heaney, highlighting a profound personal and intellectual bond between them. Their mutual literary concerns and creative visions consistently intersected throughout their respective bodies of work. Heaney, a renowned poet of Northern Irish descent, garnered significant acclaim, particularly for his poetic exploration of post-colonial Northern Ireland. His work captures the tensions within both rural and urban landscapes, illustrating the region's internal turmoil and its complex cultural and linguistic heritage shaped by British imperialism elements that Friel similarly interrogates in his plays.

The essence of Heaney's poetry lies in its lyrical richness combined with deep ethical insight, celebrating ordinary moments while simultaneously evoking the weight of historical experience. Raised in a Catholic household, Heaney shared a cultural sensibility with Friel. He would later describe his intellectual awakening as a journey from a hidden, repressed world into one shaped by learning and education (Ram, 2024). His writing reflects a balanced reflection on Ireland's historical trajectory and advocates for reconciliation between rural and urban identities, urging readers to reconnect with the sensory dimensions of life. A shared grief over the devastation of the Troubles further deepened the connection between Friel and Heaney. Heaney, deeply affected by these events in his youth, gave poetic expression to his lamentation. In articulating his critique of the conflict, he drew inspiration from Friel's skill in "masterfully using language," which involved probing its roots, examining its structural underpinnings, and treating it both as a cultural vessel and a rhetorical tool in constant transformation (Morrison, 1982). Their mutual engagement with Ireland's intricate socio-political landscape culminated in their collaboration through the Field Day Company, an endeavor grounded in their sensitivity and intellectual authority on the subject.

Personal and collective identity in Irish history emerged as a central preoccupation for both writers. *Volunteers* functions as a public address play, aiming to "peel down into the rubble to uncover fragments of Ireland's past and examine how these fit into Ireland's present" (Tallone, 2016). Friel, writing in direct response

to the aftermath of the Troubles, entered a phase of intensified creative production alongside Heaney. In this context, *Volunteers* reveals the manipulation of historical narratives through the metaphor of an archaeological excavation of Viking remains, while simultaneously questioning the constructed nature of Ireland's future. This thematic structure echoes the imagery found in Heaney's *Bog Poems*: "To pluck its fist of roots, to grasp it firm / And come at the weight of its history…" (Heaney, Heaney's Bog Poems, 2016).

Their shared commitment to cultural critique emphasized the power of language to both illuminate and resist the erosion of identity. By portraying characters trapped in cycles of violence, both writers critically examined the personal costs of political conflict. For Friel and Heaney, language becomes a medium of both aspiration and deception. Through humor such as Pyne's limericks and Keeney's sharp wit, lyricism, and satire, they alert audiences to the dangers of ideological manipulation. At the heart of their shared aesthetic lies a belief in the capacity of art to challenge dominant narratives and to offer new perspectives on social and political life. As Heaney famously asserted, "The poet is on the side of undeceiving the world" (Fox, 2013).

The thematic convergence between Friel and Heaney is further reinforced by Heaney's poem *Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces* (1974) from his North collection. The poem deepens the symbolic resonance of the excavation site in *Volunteers*. Heaney, who once described Friel as a playwright who could create worlds out of language, admired his poetic sensibility and his empathetic articulation of Ireland's struggles (Corcoran, 1998). Their creative synergy invites readers to revisit the historical contests for Irish identity, while also confronting the enduring impacts of modern-day conflict and displacement. Through their collaborative efforts and enduring friendship, Friel and Heaney celebrated a shared Irish heritage. Their artistic endeavors cultivated a collective cultural memory, passed from one generation to the next, bridging poetry and drama, history and myth, loss and resilience.

8. BRIAN FRIEL'S FICTIONAL TOWN: BALLYBEG VS. REALISTIC: WOOD QUAY

Ballybeg is the fictional town featured in over a dozen of Brian Friel's plays. Its name originates from the Irish term Baile Beag, meaning "small town" (Kosok, 2010). Friel envisioned Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as fundamentally connected and Ballybeg emerges as the only fictional space in which the two could be unified. Set in Donegal, this imagined village becomes a symbolic site where tensions between history, memory and identity are carefully examined. Through Ballybeg, Friel constructs a richly layered environment that serves as a powerful metaphor for broader cultural and national themes.

This rural setting reflects not only the socio-economic struggles of Irish life but also the wider cultural transformations underway. Each subject addressed within Ballybeg, whether fantastical or realistic, functions as a microcosm of Ireland, illustrating both its virtues and its failings. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Ballybeg embodies the alienation and economic stagnation that propel Gar toward emigration. In *Translations*, the town becomes a site for examining the linguistic colonization of Irish identity by English. *Dancing at Lughnasa*'s Ballybeg represents depopulation and rural poverty in early twentieth-century Ireland, shaped by the aftermath of the Great Depression and the partition of the island. This particular depiction captures the friction between tradition and modernity, reflecting the socio-economic marginalization of 1930s Ireland. The introduction of external influences such as the wireless radio and Gerry Evans amplifies the cultural uncertainty experienced by the characters. The Mundy sisters' estrangement from the Lughnasa festival symbolizes a broader erosion of Irish culture and spirituality. The festival, rooted in Ireland's pre-Christian heritage, is presented as a cultural touchstone gradually effaced by Catholic orthodoxy. Ballybeg, in this context, becomes a space in which an enduring cultural identity can be preserved and reclaimed through collective memory. Invented by Friel, Ballybeg transcends geographic limitations and offers a cosmopolitan artistic canvas, unrestricted by factual history (Andrews, 1995). As Higgins (2010) explains, Ballybeg is "small enough to contain the universal and specific contradictions of Irish society, its warmth, its isolation, its vitality, and its

decay." It is a shared space where personal narratives and political discourses converge, seeking to bridge Ireland's fractured past and unstable present. Through Michael's narration, for instance, the play links individual memory with the cultural and historical forces that shape it. Ballybeg's most significant role lies in its capacity to preserve collective memory and stimulate imaginative engagement with identity and belonging.

From an external perspective, Ballybeg appears balanced and multifaceted. It is simultaneously romantic, pastoral, and melancholic. The townspeople exude warmth and a quiet resilience, reflecting the spirit of modern-day Ireland. However, beneath this surface lies a legacy of deep-seated crises and ideological projects that shaped the community's experience prior to independence. These historical disruptions are embedded in the existential isolation and social decay experienced within Ballybeg. The future of the community remains uncertain, laden with the echoes of past hardship. Friel's creation of Ballybeg may stem from a desire to explore the complexity of Irish identity without succumbing to either romanticism or polemical discourse. His personal ties to Donegal shaped his artistic identity so profoundly that he could never fully detach from these lands. This deep connection was instrumental in the formation of Ballybeg—a fictional realm through which Friel navigates his sense of in-betweenness, his longing for home, and his evolving selfhood. In this light, Baile Beag becomes both a paradise that reflects the purity of Friel's childhood identity and a symbolic trap that imposes limitations on belonging and self-expression (Kerwin, 1997).

In contrast to the imagined Ballybeg, Wood Quay is a real historical site, depicted with precision and realism, leaving no space for fictionalization. Although the name Wood Quay is never explicitly mentioned in *Volunteers*, the play alludes to this area. The narrative aligns with the historical context of the halted excavation in Dublin, where Viking artifacts from the ninth century were unearthed, only to be overshadowed by the construction of the Dublin City Council offices. This deliberate interruption serves as an allegory for the commodification of Ireland's contested cultural heritage. By referencing Wood Quay, Friel critiques the erasure of significant historical narratives under the guise of progress and urban development.

Currently home to government offices, the Wood Quay site exemplifies the systematic suppression of Ireland's ancestral past. Friel uses the prisoners' forced labor in *Volunteers* to represent the continued exploitation of the working class, both historically and in the contemporary period. The tension between heritage preservation and modernization parallels the burial of Ireland's "ancestor cult," a foundational element of its cultural identity (Niel, 2023). Friel denounces how ruling elites appropriate and exploit history for their own purposes, regardless of cultural cost. Within this setting, themes of exploitation, resistance, and the manipulation of collective memory are vividly explored. The site's layered past from Viking settlement to Georgian expansion embodies not only historical depth but also the accumulation of socio-political oppression.

Through rhetorical strategies, Friel questions ownership of cultural artifacts and challenges the narratives upheld by those in power. Keeney's ironic inquiry "Where does the jug belong? Is it Smiler's—finders keepers? Or does it belong to the nation?" (p. 60) exemplifies this critique (Kosok, 2010). While prisoners are subjected to coercive labor, their shared wit, resilience, and defiance transform the excavation site into a locus of subversion, challenging authority and reclaiming dignity. The intersection of Ballybeg and Wood Quay forms a powerful dialectical relationship, offering contrasting yet complementary spaces through which Friel interrogates Ireland's socio-political and cultural landscape. These spaces serve distinct but unified purposes: to dramatize the tensions between past and present, tradition and modernity, oppression and agency. Whether through the invented intimacy of Ballybeg or the stark reality of Wood Quay, Friel constructs frameworks that allow for a deeper understanding of the challenges Ireland has endured across time.

9. BRIAN FRIEL'S VISION AND LEGACY

Brian Friel embraces a nationalist perspective and takes pride in his Celtic heritage through his plays and written works. However, his life experiences and the insights he has garnered over the years have led him to avoid rigid ideological stances. Rather than condemning political fluctuations, Friel focuses on exploring the enduring impact of historical issues on the Irish people. Through his sociological, cultural, political, and economic analyses, he dedicates himself to depicting the everyday lives of marginalized rural communities who endure significant hardships. His critiques delve deeply into the complexities of various situations, offering a diverse range of interpretations.

Friel contends that modern and future Ireland cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its past. He argues that the identity and essence of the Irish people remain incomplete without considering Northern Ireland's role in this narrative. Frank McGuinness (1996) praises Friel's nuanced works, stating, "Friel held a mirror to the nation's turmoil, showing the dissonance between our past and present without offering facile resolutions." The unresolved political and territorial boundaries between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have been a persistent source of tension in Friel's work, a theme he continually revisits in his plays. His works advocate the need to transcend divisions between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists in both regions. These tensions are subtly conveyed through the natural behaviors of ordinary individuals, avoiding overtly aggressive portrayals. Friel views language and culture as essential forces that unify and preserve collective memory, stressing the dangers posed by their potential erasure. In Translations, he employs the British Ordnance Survey of Ireland as a metaphor for cultural loss and misinterpretation. He suggests that achieving linguistic and cultural reconciliation would lead to mutual respect and prosperity. Importantly, his works encourage dialogue and compromise regarding sectarian and binary conflicts. In the context of nationalism and unionism, Friel's methodology seeks to synthesize various cultures and perspectives, avoiding rigidly defined ideologies and exclusions. As a result, his narratives frequently critique romanticized heroism and

monolithic political stories, presenting a complex interplay where diverse elements of language and culture converge.

Having grown up in Derry, a city torn by conflict, Friel experienced firsthand the violence that claimed the lives of several of his friends. These formative experiences illustrated how identity confusion, shaped by religious and cultural divisions, provided fertile ground for political entities to exploit human suffering. In the wake of British imperialism's colonization, Friel (2015) articulated the core issue: "The divisions in Northern Ireland are rooted not just in politics but in history, language, and culture. Art must address these fractures, not to resolve them, but to understand them." For Friel, the tension between tradition and modernity represents a crucial theme in contemporary Irish theatre. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, the protagonist grapples with the unmet expectations of rural Ireland and the resulting isolation and loss of identity experienced upon emigrating to America. The conflict between rootedness and cosmopolitanism faced by Irish emigrants after the Great Depression serves as a key theme in his work. In this context, language emerges as both a divisive and unifying force. It is a vital means of communication and a critical tool for preserving cultural identity. For Friel, the degradation and breakdown of language signify a continuation of symbolic colonization. The blending of Gaelic and English, reflected in their respective dialects and accents, can be seen as an attempt by the Irish to reclaim their lost cultural strength. Language not only addresses existential concerns but also serves as a bridge between the modern and the future. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, while Friel portrays the narrow and limited rural life of the 1930s, he also integrates themes such as pagan festivals, radio, immigration, and rituals, creating a rich tapestry of cultural influences.

Ultimately, Friel's primary desire is to eliminate the environment of chaos and confusion and to foster the creation of a clear and united Ireland. As he (2015) states, "identity in Ireland is too often a question of boundaries, what separates us rather than what unites us. I believe in an Ireland where those boundaries dissolve, or at least blur". When historical wounds are confronted with empathy and honesty, common ground can be established for negotiation between the self and others (2006). Known for his neutral and nuanced political stance, Friel has consistently refused to be confined by ideological labels. His narratives remain multi-faceted,

reflecting both the pain of colonization and the flaws within Irish nationalism, as seen in *Volunteers*. Moreover, he advocates that both communities in Northern Ireland share the responsibility of building a peaceful future.

10. CONCLUSION

Brian Friel's *Volunteers* (1975) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) intricately weave the historical and socio-economic fabric of Ireland, exploring themes of Irish identity, social marginalization, and memory. These plays reflect on the struggles individuals and society face during periods of turmoil. Although written fifteen years apart, *Volunteers* examines the political consequences of Irish independence, while *Dancing at Lughnasa* addresses familial and cultural fragmentation in rural Ireland. Despite differing focal points, both plays share common themes: the effects of historical and political legacies on contemporary life, critiques of societal structures manipulated by these influences, human resilience, and individual struggles. The socio-economic and cultural traumas wrought by ideological and exploitative politics before and after Irish independence have cultivated an atmosphere of profound disillusionment in post-independence society. Additionally, the profound impact of both national and global economic crises, particularly in rural Ireland, has introduced new challenges for an already frustrated and disillusioned populace. These challenges persisted throughout the chaotic 20th century, creating a foundation for Friel's criticism of Irish society. Known as Ireland's Chekhov, Friel captured the daily pressures and tyranny faced by ordinary people through micro-portraits.

Set against the backdrop of 1930s Ireland, *Dancing at Lughnasa* vividly portrays the Mundy sisters' struggle with economic hardship amid political and social change. Economic crises, political upheavals, and the lasting impact of the Great Depression significantly influence the characters' lives, illustrating how personal hardships are deeply connected to broader historical forces. Through Michael's nostalgic perspective, the play shifts its attention to familial relationships and the cultural shifts occurring within their rural community. The sisters' retrospective story offers rural Ireland a chance to reflect on its losses and rebuild a collective memory. Michael's narrative is not intended to preserve objective truths, but to reconstruct emotional truths longed for by his ancestors (Kiberd, 1995). Through this lens, the play critiques the tensions between pagan traditions and Catholic orthodoxy in the 1930s, the clash between modernity and rural simplicity, and gendered oppression as central issues. The Mundy sisters' struggles symbolize

the broader socio-economic decline of rural Ireland, positioning them as victims of both present conditions and the past's enduring legacies. Friel critiques the social norms and ideological forces that shape individual destinies, as evidenced in Kate's job loss due to Father Jack's actions and Agnes' unemployment as a result of technological advancements. The play highlights the harsh realities of urbanization, low wages, and exploitative structures that erode the lives of those trying to survive within this evolving system.

Father Jack's missionary work in Africa, where he is influenced by the region's pagan culture and assimilates into it, symbolizes Friel's critical stance on the religious-political conflicts of the period. What Friel seeks to demonstrate is the lingering effect of post-colonialism, as described by Ania Loomba (2000), wherein Ireland's economic dependency on Britain remained entrenched through the exploitation of markets. This imperialistic control contributed to Northern Ireland's separation and Ireland's continued dependence on British economic systems, perpetuating the country's vulnerability during the Great Depression.

The Lughnasa Festival, in Friel's play, serves as a metaphorical enlightenment ritual that not only rebels against the existing order but also seeks to purify Irishness by reconnecting with the roots of Irish culture, despite the political, religious, and economic crises. The ritual and dance offer the characters a temporary reprieve from their internal and external struggles. For the Mundy sisters, dancing becomes an act of defiance against familial and societal restrictions, a brief reclaiming of agency. In the context of the Lughnasa festival, their dance evokes the joy of pagan tradition, symbolizing their resistance to societal norms. This act of resistance is rooted in the ancestral cult of Lugh, the Celtic god of the harvest, and it connects them to pre-Christian motifs that date back to Ireland's ancient past. Friel's invitation for the sisters to dance in the back hills might symbolize the potential for change within this traditional order (Clutterbuck, 1999). However, this potential remains unrealized, as Agnes and Rose, who escape Ballybeg, end up trapped within the oppressive systems of industrialization. Their tragic end underscores the plight of women excluded from Ireland's patriarchal and economically rigid society. Their poverty reflects a system that offers no support to women who do not conform to traditional roles. This harsh reality, which Michael only fully realizes in adulthood, is

conveyed through the portrayal of his aunts, Agnes and Rose, who represent the dual oppression of gender and economic marginalization in rural Ireland during the 1930s (Breen, 1993).

Friel's works are not entirely pessimistic about Ireland or its people. In his plays, characters both passive and active challenge the system in their own ways. Michael's mother, Chris, defies societal and religious norms by taking on all responsibility despite limited resources, representing a significant act of resistance within the constraints of gender roles. Similarly, Father Jack's voluntary withdrawal from his missionary duties and his acceptance of paganism, along with his peaceful death despite his illness, reflect Friel's belief in the possibility of personal transformation. Michael's later reflection on these memories, which he cherishes, suggests that there is hope for the future. Throughout the play, the radio as an emblem of modernity serves as a powerful metaphor against the destructive effects of progress. The radio is not merely a passive presence, but an active trigger for the Mundy sisters' spontaneous dance, symbolizing an outlet for resistance and emotional release.

Volunteers, on the other hand, expands the exploration of Irish identity and social challenges by focusing on political prisoners who volunteer for an archaeological dig. The play delves into the characters' compulsive reliving of their own troubled lives, using the discovery of the ancient Leif skeleton as a metaphor for their search for identity amid political turmoil. Through the juxtaposition of historical events, including The Troubles, Friel underscores the ongoing struggle for Irishness and the psychological toll political conflicts have on individuals. The play also reveals how the religious and political conflicts that began in Northern Ireland and spread to the Republic led to civilian exclusion, the suppression of free thought, and a penal system that mirrored the Viking period, regardless of which side one chose.

The archaeological dig provides a space that is both confined and timeless for the prisoners. As they uncover buried artifacts, they also attempt to navigate Ireland's turbulent political past, struggling to survive in a society fragmented by ideological conflict. The play offers micro-portraits of individuals wrestling with the blurry boundaries between political ideals, personal beliefs, and the harsh realities of

their existence. Friel deftly weaves together past and present, drawing parallels between the historical struggles of Leif whose Viking skeleton bears a hole in his skull and a rope around his neck and the contemporary challenges faced by the volunteers illustrating the lasting impact of political turmoil on the very concept of Irishness.

Desmond, accepting history as a graveyard of ideals, reflects on the futility of attempting to maintain an untainted national identity amidst political betrayal. Similarly, humor and poetry are employed as forms of resistance in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Pyne and Keeney skillfully embed satire and criticism in their Limericks and songs, offering a sharp critique of Irish nationalism and its shortcomings. The volunteers, having dedicated their lives to revolutionary ideals, are filled with anger and disappointment at the betrayal of these romanticized ideologies. Their actions in the play are less about the glorified struggle for Irish independence and more about the personal and collective costs of betrayal (Mahony, 2001). Pyne, the intellectual resistance fighter, serves as the mouthpiece for Friel's critique of political hypocrisy. Through his sarcastic retorts and jokes, he enables the prisoners to retain their humanity in the face of systemic dehumanization. Keeney, the most intelligent and dangerous of the group, questions the system, the events, the society, and all realities by reacting against them:

> *Now, that's a curious phrase – 'where it belongs.' Where does it belong? Is it Smiler's - finders keepers? Or is it the Professor's? Or does it belong to the nation? Or does it belong to – Brother Leif. Damnit, that's a thought! And if it's Leif's, isn't it about time he got it back?[…] And when you think of it, what safer place could it be than in the vaults of a 150-storey hotel?* (Friel, Volunteers, 1975, p. 60)

Who truly holds ownership over the items for which others are condemned or even sentenced to death for differing views? Many scholars draw a parallel between Keeney's disposition and that of Hamlet, with his famous existential contemplation, "to be or not to be. That is the question" (Kosok, 2010). Keeney's probing nature, filled with doubt and introspection, mirrors the shared concerns surrounding identity and history, making his character relevant to contemporary discussions in both *Volunteers* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The political exclusion endured by prisoners like Desmond, Smiler, Knox, and Butt is echoed in the struggles of the women in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. These once-revolutionary figures, imprisoned and

marginalized by the very state they sought to dismantle, are exploited even within the confines of their prison. The moral and ideological compromises forced upon individuals in post-independence Ireland led to a new form of involuntary labor with their struggles largely ignored by the society they helped shape.

In contrast to other characters, this marginalized group is denied any reward or recognition for their sacrifices, even after independence is achieved. Similarly, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the inclusion of Marconi's "Just Dance" within the play's structure emphasizes the sense of 'otherness' felt by the characters, underscoring their isolation and frustration. This presence of the radio serves not only as a source of joy but also as a poignant reminder of both the anger and profound tragedy within the narrative (Cave, 1999). The music and the dance that emerge in moments of spontaneity offer the Mundy sisters a fleeting escape from their harsh realities, yet it also highlights their powerlessness in a world that has little place for their desires and dreams.

Brian Friel demonstrates a profound sensitivity to both national and universal issues throughout his personal and professional life. He consistently conveys his struggle for identity and the hardships of his people, themes he cannot ignore in his works. Through the layered criticisms in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Volunteers*, Friel aims for one central goal: to shape a contemporary and developed Irish society that maintains harmony, without extremes and without denying the past or the present. As seen in these plays, he never believes that the complexities of identity in post-colonial Ireland can be solved by adhering to a single ideology. Instead, he emphasizes the need to blend personal, cultural, and political elements. For a society attempting to define itself, one rooted in personal experience, cultural heritage, and self-definition, national and spiritual feelings should neither be lost entirely nor be glorified. Rather, Friel encourages those who maintain cultural unity with the North to critically examine its significance and costs. Through works that explore these sentiments, readers and viewers are invited to reflect on the resilience of individuals facing economic struggles, political unrest, and societal expectations. With his nuanced characters and intricate storytelling, Friel creates a rich tapestry that not only captures the essence of specific historical moments in Ireland but also resonates with universal themes of human struggle, identity, and survival in adversity. At the

same time, Friel weaves his signature style into the fabric of the plays, incorporating folkloric, cultural, and symbolic elements to envision a strong, fully independent Irish people who must understand their past and adapt to the challenges of the modern world.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Personal Information

Name & Surname : Kevser KAPLAN

Education Information

Undergraduate

University : Hacettepe University
Faculty : Faculty of Letters
Department : English Language and Literature
Graduation Year : 2016

Master's Degree

University : Gaziantep University
Institute : Institute of Educational Sciences
Major : Department of Foreign Language Education
Graduation Year : 2022

Academic Publications

Kaplan, K., & Görmez, A. (2023). AVRASYA 7th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL SCIENCES. In *OKUR-TEPKİSİ ELEŞTİRİ KURAMININ ÖNCÜLERİ ARASINDAKİ YAKLAŞIM FARKLILIKLARI* (pp. 261–269). ACADEMY GLOBAL PUBLISHING HOUSE. https://www.avrasyakongresi.org/kongre-ki-tplari

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T.C.
VAN YÜZÜNCÜ YIL ÜNİVERSİTESİ
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü

Lisansüstü Tez Orijinallik Raporu

Öğrenci Bilgileri	
Adı-Soyadı	KEVSER KAPLAN
Öğrenci No	229200160
Anabilim Dalı	İNGİLİZ DİLİ VE DEBİYATI
Programı	İNGİLİZ DİLİ VE EDEBİYATI
Statüsü	☒ Yüksek Lisans ☐ Doktora

Tez Bilgileri	
Başlığı/Konusu	"Socio-Cultural Assets Belonging to Irish Folklore in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *The Volunteers* (Brian Friel'ın *Dancing at Lughnasa* ve *The Volunteers* Adlı Eserlerinde İrlanda Folklörüne Ait Sosyo-Kültürel Ögeler)"
Tez Orijinallik Raporu Bilgileri*	
Sayfa Sayısı (Kapak sayfası, Giriş, Ana bölümler ve Sonuç bölümleri)	viii+98
İntihal Tespit Programı	Turnitin
Benzerlik Oranı (%)	%5 (Yüzde Beş)
Tarih	28 Nisan 2025

*** Orijinallik raporu, aşağıdaki filtreler kullanılarak oluşturulmuştur:**

- Kabul ve onay sayfası hariç,
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- Gereç ve yöntemler hariç,
- Kaynakça hariç,
- Alıntılar hariç,
- Tezden çıkan yayınlar hariç,
- 7 kelimeden daha az örtüşme içeren metin kısımları hariç (Limit match size to 7 words)

Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Lisansüstü Tez Orijinallik Raporu Alınması ve Kullanılmasına İlişkin Yönergeyi İnceledim ve bu yönergede belirtilen azami benzerlik oranlarına göre tez çalışmamın herhangi bir intihal İçemediğini; aksinin tespit edileceği muhtemel durumda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimizi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğumuz bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederiz.

Gereğini bilgilerinize arz ederim.

	Danışman	**Öğrenci**
Adı Soyadı	Doç. Dr. Memet Metin BARLIK	Kevser KAPLAN
İmza		
	Tarih	23.05.2025