

2012

A Language Without Words: Music as an Agent of Identity in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*

Catherine Tetz

This research is a product of the graduate program in [English](#) at Andrews University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/honors>

Recommended Citation

Tetz, Catherine, "A Language Without Words: Music as an Agent of Identity in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*" (2012). *Honors Theses*. 49.

<http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/honors/49>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.



Seek Knowledge. Affirm Faith. Change the World.

Thank you for your interest in the

Andrews University Digital Library

Please honor the copyright of this document by not duplicating or distributing additional copies in any form without the author's express written permission. Thanks for your cooperation.

John Nevins Andrews Scholars
Andrews University Honors Program

Honors Thesis

“A Language Without Words”: Music as an Agent of Identity in Brian Friel’s

Dancing at Lughnasa

Catherine Tetz

March 28, 2012

Advisor: Professor Beverly Matiko
Secondary Advisor: Professor Trina Thompson

Primary Advisor Signature: _____

Secondary Advisor Signature: _____

Department: English and Music

Abstract

Music has consistently played a major role in the work of Irish playwright Brian Friel and provides a steady backdrop for *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), a memory play about a family in Northern Ireland struggling to stay together in the August of 1936. This paper examines the function of music within the context of the play to see how it heightens the themes of identity, otherness, and memory. It also examines the history and various genres of selected works from the play to further investigate how Friel's selection of particular songs reflects the emotional states and ideologies of the characters.

Catherine Tetz

HONS497

Dr. Beverly Matiko

28 Mar. 2012

“A Language Without Words”: Music as an Agent of Identity in Brian Friel’s

Dancing at Lughnasa

In his 1990 play, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel explores the complexities of a society on the brink of change. Michael, the play’s narrator, looks back on childhood and reminisces about the August when he was seven, a time right before major external forces completely altered his family’s dynamics. Michael’s family – the five unmarried Mundy sisters – reside on a farm on the outskirts of the fictional town of Ballybeg in northern Ireland, where the action of the play takes place. This precarious location, caught between the town and the mountains, represents the conflicting identities within the Mundy home. Throughout the play, the Mundy sisters war with persistent dichotomies, including pagan tradition and the Catholic religion; rural lifestyle and increased industrialization; and outward propriety against inner longing and instinct. These inner and outer clashes help to create intricacy in character and identity – what characters say may not be what they mean, and their outer appearance masks a very different inner emotion. The characters in the play battle the challenges of communication with often unfavorable results – even when social propriety deems it appropriate for the characters to explain their feelings, their own struggles with comprehending or voicing their emotions often produce distortions or misrepresentations. Robert Welch notes:

We cannot but speak in our social context, but to speak is almost invariably to distort. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find a just correspondence, a perfect 'congruence' between the words used and the material expressed. Again, Friel's theatre is an arena for observing these lacks, so that it is, like Synge's and Beckett's, a theatre obsessed with language; but unlike its predecessors this theatre conveys the difficulty of communication by underlining the normality of failure rather than the failure of normality. (228 – 29)

As a playwright, Brian Friel displays particular skill at exploring dimensions of the human experience that cannot be articulated by the characters of the play. Matt Wolf comments, "More than any dramatist since Beckett, Friel has made a career out of expressing the inexpressible – of giving voice via words, music, and most crucially, silence to those vast reaches which language cannot fill" (14). In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the Mundy sisters abide by the strict social conventions of their Irish Catholic identity, as interpreted and enforced by Kate's recurring chastising. These conventions dictate how they are to feel, act, and speak, and as such, the sisters often suppress their own opinions and emotions. However, Friel offers a glimpse into the sisters' psychology, allowing the audience to glimpse what the characters themselves do not admit or even realize. As Nicholas Grene notes, "Friel seeks to give his audience access to a level of understanding that his characters do not have. . . want to evade . . . or cannot articulate" (138). To this end, Friel relies on techniques outside of the characters' conversation and dialogue. In *Lughnasa*, Friel augments characterization through the use of the backward-glancing monologues of the nostalgic narrator, the pivotal dancing sequence of the first act, and the uncanny

commentary of the sporadic music from the highly anthropomorphized Marconi radio.

Friel himself acknowledges these different approaches. In a 1999 set of program notes, the playwright explains:

In the theater that has engaged me words are at the very core of all. The same words are available to the novelist, to the poet . . . but there is a difference. The playwright's words aren't written for solitary engagement – they are written for public utterance. They are used as the story-teller uses them, to hold an audience in his embrace and within that vocal sound. So, unlike the words of the novelist or poet, the playwright's words are scored for a very different context. And for that reason they are scored in altogether different keys and in altogether different tempi. (173)

It is no mere coincidence that Friel turns to musical terminology. Music is a constant presence in Friel's plays, and *Lughnasa* is no exception. At least ten specific songs are mentioned in the text of the play, and four out of the eight characters sing at some point. According Harry White, in *Lughnasa*, as in many of Friel's works, "the substantive presence of music in Friel's repertory of expressive and technical reasoning extends considerably beyond the parameters of emotional mood and colour" (6). The music in *Lughnasa* does more than contribute to the overall atmosphere of the play. Rather, the songs Friel selects elaborate on the inner motivations and emotional landscape of the characters and the complex dynamics of the Mundy family. When writing about the music in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel comments, "Since words didn't seem to be up to the job it was necessary to supply the characters with a new language . . . that is what music can provide in the theater: another way of talking, a language without words" (177).

Through his musical scripting of this “language without words,” Friel delves into the character of the Mundy family. Whether found in Maggie’s singing, Gerry’s dancing, or the sporadic music from the family’s temperamental wireless radio, music lies at the heart of the action in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The characters’ choice of and reaction to music leads the audience to a fuller understanding of both the family’s identity and their feelings regarding external events. Furthermore, many of the songs that the characters sing have additional connotations relating to their genres, composers, or lyrics. These connotations contribute to characterization and development throughout the play. Music reveals character both by the choice of songs that the characters themselves sing and the way the characters react to the music that they hear.

What may well be the most memorable examples of music in this play accompany the dancing, particularly the crucial dance sequence of the five sisters midway through Act One. While the sisters attend to various household tasks, Chris turns on Marconi, the wireless, which begins to play “The Mason’s Apron,” a traditional Irish dance song. Although the audience’s attention initially focuses on the pounding rhythm of an Irish *ceili* band, once the sisters leave their chores and begin to dance, their created rhythm and shouting becomes the main focus. Mundy sisters do not dance quietly. Rather, they become, in Michael’s words, a group of “shrieking strangers,” making such a cacophony of sound that when the wireless breaks in the middle of their dance, none of the sisters initially notice (2). Friel devotes a full four paragraphs of stage direction to this dancing sequence, describing not the dances themselves, but rather the manner in which the sisters dance, and vocalization is essential to establishing this manner. For Maggie and Kate, entering into the dance is prefaced by a loud shout, and all the sisters except Kate repeatedly call to each

other with what Friel refers to as a “sing-shout.” At the height of the dance, the directions read, “With this too loud music, this pounding beat, this shouting–calling–singing, this parodic reel, there is a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being produced” (22). The key here is the idea of a “conscious” subversion – the sisters are purposely and intentionally entering into the dance. Although Michael half-jokingly accuses the wireless of practicing “voodoo” on his aunts, they are not passively submitting to the spell of music (2). Rather, the sisters sing and shout along, creating and actively participating in the music that accompanies their dancing. When dancing, the sisters ignore the conventional propriety that so often prescribes their lives; instead, they act instinctively, following their emotions. Their singing represents a purposeful spurning of society’s dictates; what is offered instead is a defiant expression of emotional alliances. The music created during the dancing becomes the medium by which the audience can apprehend the characters’ feelings.

Of course, opportunities to analyze the characters through music punctuate the play in more than just the dancing scenes. Song is another main focus of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, with more than half the cast singing at some juncture. Friel pointedly specifies every song that is sung or heard in the play, from the lengthy rendition of “Anything Goes” that Gerry sings as he dances with Agnes to the ten-second burst of “The British Grenadiers” that Marconi manages to play before breaking down again. By using particular and well-known music, Friel taps into a world of history and connotation for each song, and, White notes, “varieties of music in Friel signify varieties of symbolic and allusive meaning” (6). The songs extend well beyond the surface purpose of accompaniment or

entertainment. By examining facets of these songs such as the lyrics, genre, style, and composers, readers can better understand the motivations of the characters that sing them.

For instance, an examination of the songs that Friel has given Maggie to sing further reveals the values that matter – and do not matter – to the Mundy family as a whole. Maggie is the character most prone to singing, offering no fewer than five different songs during the course of the play. Maggie sings to pass the time while doing chores, to amuse and entertain her sisters, and also to alleviate tension within the family. Her songs will often follow particularly tense moments, such as when she sings “The Isle of Capri” the first time to cheer up Rose after Chris has scolded her. Maggie’s music becomes a comforting backdrop for the Mundy household, as she tries to push aside fears and tedium and replace them with familiar songs. At one point in the play, Kate, the most overtly religious of the sisters, snaps at Maggie, “If you knew your prayers as well as you knew the words of those aul pagan songs!” (35). Although Kate apologizes for the comment, she touches on an uncomfortable tension for Maggie and the other sisters – Maggie’s songs are popular Irish tunes and never religious in nature. Kate relentlessly reminds the sisters that as a family, they are good Catholics, but when Maggie sings, a form of expression that is neither self-conscious nor focused on appearances, she ignores Catholicism completely. These songs clearly illustrate the dichotomy between religious tradition and pagan tradition – and show that the pagan tradition is dominant. Christina Hunt Mahony notes that in conventional readings of the play, “critics have tended to credit the distaff side of the cast in *Dancing at Lughnasa* with providing Michael with a securely Irish identity” (18). Maggie’s songs are distinctly Irish – the Irish lyricist Jimmy Kennedy penned both “The Isle of Capri” and “Play

to Me Gypsy” – but they are also always secular in nature. In singing, at least, Maggie never derives comfort from religion, but always from Irish tradition and identity.

Furthermore, while many of Maggie’s songs establish her character as a the comic relief for the family circle, some of her more juvenile songs offer sobering indications of the family’s perspective. Michael terms Maggie “the joker of the family” in his opening monologue, and in many ways the family treats Maggie as a sort of jester figure (1). Her sarcastic quips and interjections amuse the sisters, but they are never taken entirely seriously. Her frequent and absurd riddles are met with an almost automatic response of “Give up” – even when she offers real advice. After hearing that Agnes and Rose might lose their jobs selling mittens, she tries to suggest a solution to Agnes: “I had a brilliant idea when I woke up this morning, Aggie. I thought to myself: what is it that Ballybeg badly needs and that Ballybeg hasn’t got?” to which Agnes replies, “A riddle. Give up,” echoing Young Michael’s overall indifference to Maggie’s teasing. Ultimately, the family sees Maggie’s jokes and riddles as amusing but unimportant.

Maggie also reveals her humorous personality in the way she sings. The stage directions indicate that she should sing in a “parodic style,” exaggerated and playful (Friel 6). Maggie’s penchant for childish songs, while providing comfort and humor for the family, chillingly hints at how small is the family’s scope and interaction with the outside world. Many of the songs Maggie sings play off her jokester identity, in both the “parodic style” that Friel specifies, and the sing-song quality of the songs themselves. Included in her repertoire are Irish popular songs (such as “The Isle of Capri” or “Play to Me, Gypsy”), as well as children’s nursery rhymes, as heard when she sings cheerfully towards the end of Act One:

Agnes: (*Almost aggressively*) I make the tea every evening, don't I? Why shouldn't I make it this evening as usual?

Maggie: No reason at all. Aggie's the chef. (*Sings raucously:*)

'Everybody's doing it, doing it, doing it.

Picking their noses and chewing it, chewing it, chewing it. . .'

Kate: Maggie, please! (37)

Maggie's songs are funny, immature, and occasionally even inappropriate. If they horrify Kate, they at least slightly amuse the other sisters and Maggie herself. Yet even these mocking snatches of song offer a glimpse into the values and priorities of the sisters. The first song Maggie sings is a parody, with lyrics that Friel himself wrote:

"Will you vote for De Valera, will you vote?

If you don't, we'll be like Ghandi with his goat.

Uncle Bill from Baltinglass has a wireless up his –

Will you vote for De Valera, will you vote?" (4)

This song grounds the 1936 Irish setting of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, with its references to Irish politician Éamon de Valera and the link between the colonized India and Ireland (Lojek 86). Maggie fills her parodic song with snatches of current events and political awareness. But she only mentions them in this song – outside of this one moment, the sisters never reference or discuss the political climate of 1930s Ireland. Irish independence, industrialization, the De Valera Constitution – all are confined to the joking, childish, simplistic songs that Maggie sings to amuse herself. The Mundy family's concerns lie on a much more personal, day-to-day level. As Len Falkenstein observes:

Dancing at Lughnasa hearkens back to a time when the unchanging daily domestic routines of cooking, sewing, shopping, and running the farm are infinitely more important to the Mundy sisters' lives than politics or current affairs both foreign and domestic names such as Mussolini, Gandhi, and de Valera cross their lips only in the lyrics of a nonsensical children's rhyme.

(272)

Maggie sings about the outside world as if it was a nursery rhyme or a fairy tale, and for the most part for the Mundy family, the world outside of their farm and village might as well be a fairy tale. It makes it all the more tragic when industrialization sweeps into Ballybeg, opening a new factory that puts Rose and Agnes out of a job and serves as catalyst for their departure from the farm and their resulting impoverished lives on the streets of London. Maggie's music illustrates how close-knit the Mundy family circle is. Outside forces seem unreal and unimportant compared to the stable identity that the Michael's family has cultivated, and as such, when outside forces disrupt the lives of the Mundy sisters, they have trouble facing and dealing with these conflicts and foreign ideologies.

Much of the tension in *Dancing at Lughnasa* stems from the conflict between the Mundy family and these various outside forces. The action of the play takes place entirely on the Mundy homestead. The sisters bring gossip and news of outside events, such as the pagan harvest rituals, the Harvest Dance in the town, or the report of a new factory and increased industrialization, into their family home and evaluate it against their established ideologies. Although many of these outside intrusions are events or ideas, two characters, Father Jack and Gerry Evans, specifically disrupt the established security of young

Michael's life in the summer of 1936. In Michael's opening monologue, he highlights their influence and disturbance in the Mundy family:

And even though I was only a child of seven at the time I know I had a sense of unease, some awareness of a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was, of things changing too quickly before my eyes, and becoming what they ought not to be. That might have been because Uncle Jack hadn't turned out at all like the resplendent figure in my head Or maybe it was because during those Lughnasa weeks of 1936 we were visited on two occasions by my father, Gerry Evans, and for the first time in my life I had a chance to observe him. (2)

Both Jack and Gerry serve as outside catalysts that upset the order and stability of the family – Jack for his turn away from the church and towards Ryangan rituals, and Gerry for his continual manipulation and false promises to both Chris and Michael. The music associated with Jack and Gerry stands in sharp contrast to the popular Irish songs that Friel assigns to Maggie, Rose, and often Marconi. Jack creates his own African rhythms out of Michael's kite sticks and quotes Handel's secular and Ovidian masque *Acis and Galatea*, while Gerry sings and dances to "Dancing in the Dark" and "Anything Goes," popular American show tunes from the 1930s. In both cases, the music enforces how Gerry and Jack turn away from the Irish identity that Michael's mother and aunts offer to him.

Kate, the caretaker and primary breadwinner of the family, finds hope for a further establishment of religious values in the return of her elder brother, Jack, a missionary priest. Jack returns to the family after spending twenty-five years as a missionary priest in Uganda, and Kate clearly expects him to become a pillar for the faith of the family and the

town. The family has long depended on Jack's role as a priest for their own social standing. Michael narrates early on, "Ballybeg was proud of him, the whole of Donegal was proud of him . . . it gave us that little bit of status in the eyes of the parish. And it must have helped my aunts bear the shame Mother brought on the household" (9). Kate's concerns go beyond social snobbery, however. When she loses her teaching job, the readers realize that the family's economic stability pivots on Jack's community standing. As the play goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that Jack is "no longer able to distinguish between Irish harvest rituals and African tribal practices" (Kiberd 616). This transformation is slowly revealed through his memorabilia, his anecdotes, and his music and dancing. In the climactic final scene of Act One, Jack finds a pair of sticks in the back yard and begins to tap them together. The stage directions inform the readers, "The sound they make pleases him. He does it again – and again – and again. Now he begins to beat out a structured beat whose rhythm gives him pleasure" (42). While the five sisters dance to the music on the radio and add their own music, Jack creates his own rhythm, which is presumably derived from his memories of Ugandan music and dance. As the family watches in shock, Jack dances to the beat he has created, completely unaware of any perceived lack of decorum. At this moment, the extent of Jack's devotion to the Ryanga people becomes completely clear. Friel uses music – in this case, rhythm – to demonstrate Jack's total conversion to the Ryanga mindset. And though Kate quickly takes the sticks away from him, the family – and the audience – now knows that Jack has adopted a rhythm much different from anything that would be accepted in Ballybeg.

Faced with this drastic change, Kate convinces herself that Jack's fixation on the Ugandan culture is a result of his illness. She believes that he will soon recover and once

again establish himself as a prominent figure in the community. However, as the play continues, it becomes clear that Jack, though recovering, has no intention of resuming his ministerial duties. In the middle of Act Two, Jack also sings a song: “O ruddier than the cherry / O sweeter than the berry / O nymph more bright / Than moonshine light / Like kindlings blight and merry.” He cheerfully remarks to his sister, “You see, Kate, it’s all coming back to me” (46). Nevertheless, while the song does hint at Jack’s return to Western convention and culture, it simultaneously distances him from his Christian affiliations and role as religious head of the village.

Jack recites lyrics from *Acis and Galatea*, a pastoral opera written by George Frideric Handel. In many ways, this work from Handel exemplifies British tradition. Though born in Germany, Handel lived much of his life in England, and his later years as a composer were based in London. During the composer’s life, Handel’s operas and oratorios were beloved by the people in England, and their popularity continues today. In many ways, listening to – or singing - Handel represents sophistication and a conventional acceptance of English-speaking society. From this perspective, *Acis and Galatea*, Handel’s first work in English, does symbolize a sort of common culture that Jack is finding once again. This particular aria, however, does little to assure Jack’s commitment to Western religion. The aria “O ruddier than the cherry, o sweeter than the berry” comes from Act Two of *Acis and Galatea*. In the aria, the “monster Polypheme” elaborates on his licentious desire for the maiden Galatea, singing, “I rage, I melt, I burn!” in the opening lines. Later in the opera, Polypheme kills Galatea’s lover, Acis, out of this rage. This is hardly a song for a priest to be reciting. Handel wrote some of the most popular sacred oratorios of all time, and yet Father Jack chooses to sing an aria from one of his most popular secular works. Jon Solomon reminds

us that *Acis and Galatea* is “a masque whose essential plot is based to a large extent on the account of Acis and Galatea in Book 13 of Ovid’s *Metamorphos*” (37). This background further aligns Jack with pagan rituals and traditions. While the culture and language are certainly coming back to Jack, his role as a religious figure never resurfaces. Friel selects a song for Jack that both develops Jack’s reconnection with Western society and underscores his apathy towards the Catholic religion. Kate’s apprehension is completely justified.

Traditional pagan rituals find conflict with more than the institution of religion; modernization also poses a threat to the family’s simple, rural lifestyle. Although the outside forces (such as the opening of a factory that forces Agnes and Rose out a their knitting job) generally take place offstage, Gerry, Michael’s father, embodies the idea of a modern force that disrupts the Mundy household. Gerry is portrayed as fast-talking, charismatic, and optimistic, but also as extremely unreliable, consistently making promises that he never keeps. It is debatable whether or not he ever intends to keep the promises he makes, but his presence undeniably hurts the family. Gerry dances in turn with Chris, Maggie, and Agnes at separate times throughout the second act. On these occasions, he sings snatches of the famous 1930s song, “Anything Goes”: “In olden times a glimpse of stocking / Was looked on as something shocking / But now heaven knows / Anything goes. / Good authors, too, who once knew better words / Now only use four-letter words / Writing prose, /Anything goes” (Porter).

The lyrics of the song match Gerry’s philosophy perfectly, but more than that, the musical style summarizes Gerry’s relationship with the family. Cole Porter’s famous musical, *Anything Goes*, achieved instant success when it opened in New York City in November of 1934. No less than five songs went on to become popular singles, including

the title number (Swartz 134). The madcap plot of *Anything Goes* follows gangsters, nightclub singers, and stowaways on an ocean liner as they lie, swindle, and seduce their way out of trouble and into fame and romance. The song “Anything Goes” celebrates the loosening morals and changing times. The play was controversial, edgy, and wildly popular in 1930s America. Cole Porter’s “texts were in the height of fashion, seldom sentimental, and filled with *double entendres* and witty rhymes, even referring directly to sex and drugs. At first his songs were too shocking for the theatre” (Root and Bordman). Friel’s use of “Anything Goes” extends beyond the morally questionable lyrics. The very genre of music that we come to associate with Gerry encapsulates the risqué and the carefree, a perfect compliment to Gerry’s dashing but ultimately untrustworthy persona. The modern, upbeat, and syncopated 1930s swing contrasts sharply with Maggie’s Irish songs. Where Maggie’s traditional music represents the comfort and constancy of home, Gerry’s rendition of *Anything Goes* stands as a representation of the outside forces that disrupt Michael and the family’s traditional, rural life.

A final outside force, also mentioned in Michael’s opening monologue, is the news and music broadcasted “all the way from Dublin” from the wireless radio set (2).

Though not an actual character, the wireless remains a major player in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Michael introduces the radio within the first paragraph of the play:

We got our first wireless set that summer – well, a sort of set; and it obsessed us. And because it arrived as August was about to begin, my Aunt Maggie – she was the joker of the family – she suggested we give it a name. She wanted to call it Lugh after the old Celtic God of the Harvest . . . But Aunt Kate . . . said it would be sinful to christen an inanimate with any kind of name, not to talk of

a pagan god. So we just called it Marconi because that was the name emblazoned on the set. (1)

In the opening lines of the play, Friel quickly establishes the tension between pagan tradition and Catholic religion, and the music from the wireless continues to be emblematic of this tension. More importantly, from the start, “Marconi” lives in the family’s mind as a named being, despite Kate’s protests. While Kate refers to the wireless as “The Marconi,” the other sisters call it simply “Marconi,” turning the brand name into a given name and identity. Throughout the play, the sisters treat the wireless as if it were a living creature – a very temperamental, stubborn creature. The wireless’s tendency to break and suddenly stop playing adds to this illusion. Though the audience rationally knows the wireless is inanimate, the sporadic nature of the electric entity is reminiscent of a stubborn horse, and it becomes extremely easy to animate Marconi. Hunt agrees, noting that Friel “used a radio, not only as his central prop, but gave it a ‘face’ and a name – ‘Marconi.’ Marconi, the radio, is very much a character in the play – a member of the Mundy family” (16). The sisters’ dialogue tends to reflect this personification, with all of the sisters, even the mild-mannered Agnes, continually remarking on how old and useless it is. Maggie even addresses the radio directly, saying, “Marconi, my friend, you’re not still asleep, are you?” when she notices that the wireless is broken.

Furthermore, much of the action of the play centers on Marconi. The first act is divided between the anticipation of Kate’s return from town with a new radio battery, the dancing sequence once the battery has been replaced and the wireless plays music once again, and the futile but repeated attempts to fix Marconi as it frequently shorts out, even with a new battery. The second act starts with the wireless broken, and a major part of the

second act is devoted to Gerry attempting to repair it, ultimately ending with Chris breaking it again. The wireless is plainly a major element of the sisters' everyday lives and, moreover, a major force within the play. Through the interactions with this everyday object, the Mundy sisters reveal much more complex emotions. As Welch writes, "[Friel's] work remains always attentive to the minutiae of ordinary everyday life; but his calm and lucid realism . . . [translates] those interiors that are dark and hidden into a language that incorporates the world as we perceive it under normal conditions" (227). With Marconi, Friel skillfully uses the everyday to show the inexplicable. For example, the family's interactions with Marconi always come at emotionally significant times. When Chris sees Gerry dancing with Agnes, she becomes understandably jealous. She eventually responds by angrily shutting the wireless off, declaring that she is "sick of the damned thing" (65). Earlier, in Act One, when Gerry first visits Chris, Agnes acts out of the same confused romantic tension, but in the opposite manner – she refuses to turn off the radio, even when Kate asks her to. The wireless first plays directly following Maggie's long and emotional speech about Bernie O'Donnell, a former friend whose return to Ballybeg leaves Maggie visibly upset. In all of these cases, the wireless set connects to a strong emotion, generally distress of some sort. This serves a twofold purpose. First, turning on or off the music becomes a cathartic resolution for the sisters, an avenue by which they can easily express their frustrations against external events. Though Kate, Chris, and Agnes do not themselves sing, they still express themselves in music through their interactions with Marconi, turning to the music from the radio in order to channel their own emotions.

Additionally, the wireless becomes a reflection of the events themselves – the interactions with Marconi reveal the inner stresses within the family. In a way, even the

sporadic nature of Marconi is reflective of the Mundy's situation. Kate laments, "You realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; and that the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held together much longer. It's all about to collapse" (35). Just as the sisters cannot fix the old and broken wireless set, they also cannot prevent the social ostracism, unemployment, and even death that will befall the family later that summer.

Friel bookends his play with narration by Michael, who reflects on the nature of his memories. The song "It is Time to Say Goodnight" sounds in the background, not played by Marconi and only heard by the audience. The song is not part of the story of that Michael narrates, but rather connects to Michael's memory as a whole, an overarching summary of his recollections of the summer of 1936. Michael narrates that "the air is nostalgic with the music of the thirties" as the characters slowly rock back and forth to the music, no longer an accurate recreation of the past but now truly as a tableau, a caricature of Michael's memory. Laurie Gagné writes on the larger-than-life ending narration:

It is a child's faith in the mystery that surrounds life and love that comes to the fore in Act Two. The narrator introduces his account of the third dance he remembers from the summer of 1936 by saying that it 'owes nothing to fact' (71) There is a reality that can be known, the narrator suggests, which is inaccessible to our ordinary means of perception. (128)

Michael remarks that the dancing in his memory seemed as if "language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary" (71). The music in this scene, and indeed throughout the entire play, carries a similar quality, taking over when words themselves no longer suffice. The music within *Dancing at Lughnasa* creates an avenue to understand

more fully the identities of the characters in ways that dialogue cannot. Through the songs they sing themselves and the way they react to the music around them, the characters reveal alliances and opinions that social propriety generally silences. Music provides more than a mere backdrop to the dancing, but joins with it to help the audience better understand and appreciate the complexities of the Mundy family.

Works Cited

- Falkenstein, Len. "Critical Remembering: Reading Nostalgia in Contemporary Irish Drama and Film." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 25.1/2 (1999): 264-76. Print.
- Friel, Brian. *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, Interviews, 1964-1999*. Ed. Christopher Murray. London: Faber, 1999. Print.
- . -. *Dancing at Lughnasa*. London: Faber, 1990. Print.
- Gagné, Laurie Brands. "Three Dances: The Mystical Vision of Brian Friel in *Dancing at Lughnasa*." *Renascence* 59.2 (2007): 119-132. EBSCO. Web. 9 Mar. 2011.
- Greene, Nicholas. "Friel and Transparency." *Irish University Review* 29.1 (1999): 136-44. Print.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996. Print.
- Lojek, Helen. "Dancing at Lughnasa and the unfinished revolution." From *The Cambridge Companion to Brian Friel*. Ed. Anthony Roche. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.
- Mahony, Christina Hunt. "Memory and Belonging: Irish Writers, Radio, and the Nation." *New Hibernia Review* 5.1 (2001): 10-24. Print.
- Porter, Cole. *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*. Ed. Robert Kimball. New York: Knopf, 1983. Web. 4 Apr. 2011.
- Richards, Shaun. "Placed Identities for Placeless Times: Brian Friel and Post-Colonial Criticism." *Irish University Review* 27.1 (1997): 55-68. Print.
- Root, Deane L., and Gerald Bordman. "Porter, Cole." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.

Sadie, Stanley, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. Vol. 1. New York: Macmillan, 1992.

Print.

Schwartz, Charles. *Cole Porter: A Biography*. New York: Dial, 1977. Print.

Welch, Robert. *Changing States: Transformations in Modern Irish Writing*. London:

Routledge, 1993. Print.

White, Harry. "Brian Friel and the Condition of Music." *Irish University Review* 29.1 (1999):

6-15. Print.

Wolf, Matt. "Epiphany's Threshold." *American Theater* Apr. 1994: 14. Print.