

# *English*

## **A Departure from Catholicism in the Works of Brian Friel**

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Brian Friel, the prolific Irish playwright, writes plays and adaptations that often focus on one or a few individuals versus some larger-than-life force. It is the portrayal of the institution of Catholicism, however, and the divergence from it, that is both an intellectually captivating, and somewhat unnerving component to his work. Because of the specific and intense Irish setting of his work, most of Friel's characters are in some way entangled with Catholicism, and the rules of Catholicism, from a very early age. In some cases there is a pagan takeover of this pre-existent Catholic presence, whereas in others the divergence is as simple as a character's foray into the old-fashioned sin of sexual indulgence.

It is the conflicting forces of rigid Irish Catholicism and human indulgence that create enticing tension in Friel's work, as he illustrates the potential difficulties that arise from such rigid religious devotion. About Friel as a writer, William Pratt explains,

His famous contemporary, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, has written sympathetically of Friel that 'we and our language still possess a religious unconscious, whether we are striving consciously to secularize ourselves or are being secularized, willy-nilly: Friel's journeys to nowhere are part of his religious searching, and they appeal to audiences by propelling them into communion with their deeper, older selves. (445)

Whether represented as a school or a religious institution, Catholicism is often characterized in Friel's plays as a strict, unyielding force for uniformity, and often of self-denial. In this way, as is represented in many other plays by Friel, a slight deviation from the harsh rules of Irish Catholicism creates a wild, blithe release of tension in Friel's characters.

In order to gather a base understanding of the vein of Irish Catholicism as represented in Friel's work, one must first be familiar with the religion's history within that country. Catholicism as a whole has been an important part of the Irish national psyche, or the collective myth of the society. For example, Thomas Cahill describes Ireland's first missionary, known as Patricious as a revitalizing force for Catholicism in Ireland. He was a specifically anti-religious man who was spoken to by God, and led to be a missionary throughout all of Ireland. Today, he is often referred to as simply "Saint Patrick" (88). Cahill explains that Saint Patrick

focused on the individual's relationship to God, and is said to have had a remarkable understanding of Christian truth (226). To this day, his teachings greatly influence the specificity of Irish Catholicism to Catholicism in general.

The delineation between the pagan aspect of Irish culture and the staunchly religious, Irish Catholic cultural layer has also been a very influential part of Irish culture. Cahill argues that Saint Patrick's success in spreading Catholicism in Ireland was largely a result of his assigning to pre-existing pagan values and stories a new, Christian significance (101). This close link between old world pagan religions and new work Catholicism is a topic that is constantly developing and evolving.

In *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, Mary Kenny explains that the formal "Church of Ireland" is falling quickly into controversy. Often viewed as too strict for modern society, it is becoming less and less popular to support such ideals (339). The rigidity of the church's rules, in particular, is specifically difficult for modern audiences not to sympathize with those characters who break those rules. In March of 2012, for example, the Church of Ireland admitted that measures needed to be taken to address the rigidity of moral decision-making in the church, as Ian Ellis explained in his article for *The Church of Ireland Gazette*:

It might well be said that the unthinkable happened last weekend, with the proposed Anglican Communion Covenant coming to grief in the Church of England of all places (report, page 1). Yet, that is precisely what happened, and it will surely go down in the annals of Anglican history. The Covenant had been intended as an agreement with procedures that would help keep the Anglican Communion in one piece when facing contentious issues. Undoubtedly, it arose as a result of the inter-Anglican same-sex relationships controversy that has now seen its own fraught manifestation in the Church of Ireland playing out since last autumn and occasioning, earlier this month, a unique Bishops' Conference on the topic for General Synod members... The moral of the story has at least two dimensions. First, from a practical perspective, when faced with a divisive crisis, setting up a bureaucratic procedure that is going to take years to get anywhere, if it is to get anywhere at all, is hardly a good idea. If anyone thought that 'buying time' would allow the same-sex relationships imbroglio to subside, that was a very mistaken notion, and we in the Church of Ireland do need to take note of that as we face our own difficulties over the issue. (Pollock 1)

Modern Irish Catholicism is not quite as strict and unforgiving as it once was, however. Although this relaxation of society's expectations is not seen in Friel's plays, because of the time in which they are set, it is important to realize what direction the religion was headed. More recently, as Louise Fuller describes,

“Catholicism changed from being dogmatic to being more dialogical. It was less concerned with the imposition of rules and regulations than it was with the spirit of Catholicism” (229). It is, however, the imposition of such rules and regulations and the subsequent breaking from them that create tension in Friel’s plays.

Before one can fully appreciate the transformations that Friel’s characters undergo with respect to their Catholic roots, it is important to understand Friel’s own religious experiences, and how influential these have been to his life. Raised in the Catholic faith, Friel actually attended seminary for several years, although he did not go on to become a priest. His particular divergence, which can also be seen mirrored by his characters, has been described by him in an interview with Paul Delaney, as follows:

I suppose I’m a sort of practicing lapsed Catholic. It’s one of these attitudes I’m not prepared to defend, because I’m a volatile sort of person and next week I could be crawling up Croagh Patrick on my knees. And I don’t see any great contradiction in this either...The result now is that I am not as intensely Irish Catholic as I was. (81)

Friel plainly admits that the divergence has happened in his own life.

Not only does Friel admit that such a change has occurred in him, but he seems to take a rather relaxed approach to the whole situation, and he often questions even himself. He explains, in an interview compiled by Christopher Murray,

From the religious point of view, I’m a very confused man. The only thing that is of absolute importance is life—being alive and holding on to this condition of existence—but this in itself isn’t really a cause for joy... This is heretical religion. And especially the Irish Church, which teaches that the only thing worth living for is the afterlife—this is total heresy. If there is an afterlife, the only way one can merit it is by being totally involved in the here-and-now. (26)

This, if anything, is a tremendous departure from typical Catholic tradition. Friel’s independent thought suggests an independence and lack of regard for society’s pre-existing notions of truth and illusion, and he later questions the very existence of a God, as Friel explains in Murray’s interview: “Oh, I’m not an atheist. I’m probably closer to agnosticism. This is a very searching and groping sort of area where one can’t have any sort of scientific truth. You can’t prove to me that there is an afterlife, and I can’t disprove that there isn’t. So it really is an area of speculation” (26). Throughout Friel’s interviews, he seems to struggle with this uncertainty regarding how he was raised versus his personal opinions and beliefs concerning religion. This indecision can be traced in his work, as many characters suffer with similarly conflicted emotions regarding their religious upbringing.

One of Friel’s most popular plays, *Lovers*, is broken into two, separately performed sections entitled *Winners* and *Losers*. Part one, *Winners*, in particu-

lar holds prime examples of central characters deviating from the Irish Catholic expectations placed upon them in favor of more instantly gratifying, personal pleasures. The play, which is set in 1966, focuses on a young engaged couple, Joe and Maggie, both in their late teens. Maggie has become pregnant by Joe, and this serves to be a tremendous problem, because the pregnancy occurs out of wedlock. The two have subsequently been kicked out of their Catholic school, because it is against the rules to have premarital sex. The school has graciously allowed them to finish their exams, but their indulgences have forbade them from finishing out their semesters. However, it is in this time of seeming exile that Joe and Maggie find true happiness, and essentially find a sense of spiritual freedom.

As Joe, and more specifically Maggie, are swept up with the emotions of their new situation, Maggie abandons her comforting old way of life for the non-traditional adventure that awaits her. As Richard Pine details in his book entitled *The Diviner: The Art of Brian Friel*,

It is fundamentally important to realize that all...emotions are homeless, because it is in the test-tube of homelessness, when the emotions become restless and start to rampage through the junk-room of memory, that Friel can most effectively explore the nature and – more importantly – the consequences of freedom. Thus in 'Winners' Mag and Joe are leaving their families to commit the tribal offence of exogamy.... (108)

The couple is still allowed to complete their final exams, however, and this is why we find them at the play's beginning seated on a warm summer hill, attempting to study. As the couple's witty banter unfolds, a male and female narrator seated on either side of the hill slowly reveal in a newscast that the couple will shortly drown in a nearby lake, and neither get married nor have the baby. Despite the bitterly tragic end to this play, one aspect that is crucially important is the theme of Catholicism. The Catholic dogma of Joe and Maggie's school dictates that they must not be together, that their very happiness is in some way evil. When Joe and Maggie are finally free from the oppressive force that is their Catholic school, however, they find true happiness. Finally, they are free to make fun of their harsh nun schoolmistresses and actually celebrate their love for one another without having to endure a tremendous dose of guilt. In fact, their primary source of entertainment on the hill is poking fun at the nuns who were their teachers, as the young couple revel in much more secular conversations than they are meant to be having. The harsh rules of their Catholic schools always seem sharply out of place in their newly discovered pre-wedded bliss on the hill, and that Irish Catholic world seems so far removed from them. Murray explains this phenomenon precisely when he states,

They say...that God is dead and that all traditional values died with Him. They say that man can create new values only by becoming God- that the only alternative to nihilism lies in revolt.

They say... that this revolt is born of the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition. They say that the Church as a divine institution is an absurdity and that as a human institution it is an imposter, practicing what it doesn't preach and preaching what it doesn't practice; therefore, as it stands, it must go. (21)

Murray goes on to explain that in fact they say that all social structures and establishments that society has grown accustomed to should now be held suspect in the moral and virtuous lessons that they presume to teach. He continues that if all man has is his time on earth, with no certain promise of anything existing before or after, and since God has died, thus also killing the idea of Tragic Hero, then the only thing any modern playwright should bother trying to tell a story about would be man and his relationship to society, "in conflict with community, government, academy, church, family—and essentially in conflict with himself" (20). Thusly, Maggie and Joe enjoy their freedom from the judgment they would have experienced at Catholic school, if only from a day, but that winds up being the happiest day of their lives.

This sense of extreme euphoric happiness is again and again found to be Friel's characters' reward for severing allegiance to the regulations of the Irish Catholic Church, as they take a heathen turn. Dancing at Lughnasa is a play that perfectly encapsulates the topic of paganism versus Christianity, specifically Irish Catholicism. In the play, five poor sisters whose ages range from their mid twenties to forty, struggle to make ends meet. They spend the beginning of the play waiting for their beloved Uncle Jack to return from an extended missionary trip to Africa. Having always been viewed as the spiritual leader of the family, the sisters cannot wait to receive Jack's spiritual guidance when he gets home from his trip. However, it seems as though Jack has been gone too long in the wild African countryside, because when he returns home there are specific and devout elements of paganism in his daily devotions. In fact, he seems to hardly recognize, much less care for the Catholic devotion that he has left behind. This greatly alarms the sisters, who do not know how to react to his new religion. They spend the majority of the play attempting to remind Uncle Jack of the way he was and the "correct" way to worship, but in the end he influences them far more than they change him. An initially extremely religiously devoted family finds that only after a degree of paganism enters their house are they able to relax into a wildly free, if a little unsettling, display of joy, which characterizes the climax of the play. When Uncle Jack explains,

That's what we do in Ryanga when we want to please the spirits, or to appease them: we kill a rooster or a young goat. It's a very exciting exhibition—that's not the word, is it?—demonstration? —no—show? No, no; what's the word I'm looking for? Spectacle? That's not it. The word to describe a sacred and mysterious...?

You have a ritual killing. You offer up sacrifice. You have dancing and incantations. What is the name for that whole—for that--? Gone. Lost it. My vocabulary has deserted me. Never mind. Doesn't matter... I think perhaps I should put on more clothes.... (1.5. 39)

Although specifically this monologue details Jack's divergence from the English language, it also serves as a metaphor concerning his release from the Catholicism that his nieces still assume he follows. This at first destroys the family and puts all at ill ease, as Scott Boltwood describes in his book *Brian Friel, Ireland, and the North*, "In this later play the collapse of the family's utopian gambit to construct a less restrictive society is intentionally synchronized to the creation of the Republic. Uncle Jack dies 'within a year of his homecoming' in mid July; as if he cannot live in an Ireland repressively allied to the Catholic Church..." (59). Despite their initial reaction, however, the strict, hand to mouth existence that the sisters have gotten used to is disrupted rather violently by Uncle Jack's unceremonious return, but the climax of the play sees a shockingly pagan dance that unfolds, entwining all of the sisters into it. They share in a wild dance, and for the first time in the entire play, all are having a good time, and none are worried about their deviation from Catholicism. They seem to temporarily forget that this paganism could be in any way sinister, instead getting wildly lost in the moment.

Dancing at Lughnasa was published in 1990, and in the early 90s it was being shown at such venues as the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. As Anna McMullan explains in her article "In Touch With Some Otherness," the 90s are characterized as being a time that celebrated the body, particularly the female form and its relationship to the world around it. While these ideas, and even the very focus of such worldly things seems to be in antithesis to the otherworldly focal point of Irish Catholicism, they nonetheless drive the spirit of Friel's play. The play, while predominantly female, is actually told from the point of view of Michael, one of the sister's sons, in a reflective manner, as the play is essentially a flashback to Michael's childhood (90). McMullan relates this to Catholicism by explaining that the dancing scene in the play is the most pivotal moment of the entire work, she elaborates by explaining,

A contrast is established between the frugal lives of the sisters, ruled by strict Catholic dictates, and the wildness and spontaneity of their "pagan" dance. Michael's speech also draws attention to the opposition between language and its corporeal 'other', dancing, which reverberates throughout the play. Each mode of expression is shown to have its own distinct access to the past. (90)

Like Joe and Mag's pregnancy and expulsion, the sister's dance may be unorthodox, but it does unchain their restraint, however temporarily, and allow the play's euphoric explosion. The mad-cap dance is remembered by Michael as a flashback:

When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with eyes half-closed because to open them would break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement - as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. (2.5.33)

Even the way in which the dance is remembered takes on a pagan feeling in its description, and it is easy to see why such a memory would haunt a young boy for many years, and also how shockingly different such a dance would be from the sisters' standard behavior, which is rooted in harsh realism.

This disconnection from reality is a theme seen not only in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, but also in Friel's 2005 play: *The Aristocrats*. This is a play that takes a distinctly historic turn from other works by Friel. This play demonstrates the way Irish Catholicism is, in a sense, a dying way of life, and must constantly rage against new, liberal ideas. In this way, the old, traditional family that the play centers around becomes its own metaphor for Catholicism in Ireland, particularly the strict, stubborn rules for which it has come to be known. In this play, old Catholicism must make way for new progressivism, creating a binary between stiff rules and looser modern views. As described by McGrath,

an American scholar stays with a family in one of the old Irish houses to study 'Recurring cultural, political and social modes in the upper strata of Roman Catholic society in rural Ireland since the act of Catholic Emancipation' ... But his every effort to ascertain facts about the declining family fortunes of his hosts is met with individual memories of the past and conflicting versions of the present (542).

The action centers on the O'Donnells, an upper-class Irish Catholic family whose fancier way of life is collapsing all around them. One of the sisters, Anna, is closely related to a convent but the respect such a connection might inspire becomes a farce, even to Anna herself. F.C. McGrath states that in this play, Friel refuses to acknowledge the nostalgia of such a dying age, instead focusing on a more pathetically realistic portrayal of a class that is fading (148). Here, in direct contrast to the two previously mentioned plays, Friel's Catholic characters experience no brilliantly happy break from their strict religion, but instead even make fun of themselves and their own tragic situation, describing it mockingly as

A great big blockbuster of a gothic novel called Ballybeg Hall—  
From Supreme Court Justice to Sausage Factory: for generations of a great Irish Catholic Legal Dynasty; the gripping saga of a family that lived its life in total isolation in a gaunt Georgian house on top of a hill above the remote Donegal village of Bal-

lybeg; a family without passion, without loyalty, without commitments; administering the law for anyone who happened to be in power; above all wars and famines and civil strife and political upheaval; ignored by its Protestant counterparts.... (2.8. 63)

This is a new and interesting perspective for Friel's audience. Typically, the protagonists of his plays have been struggling against some immovable protestant force, however in this play the protagonists are that force, not only being Catholic, but also of the upper class. As McGrath explains, "The Aristocrats deals with the decline of an Irish family from the traditional upper or upper middle classes, or at least as upper as Catholic families were capable of achieving since Penal Laws" (146). Being tied to these old ways creates genuine unhappiness for the characters, and if only a freedom from this strict way of life would have been possible, then perhaps true family bliss could occur. However, it is the family's own dogged determination to cling to the old ways that makes their situation so sad, as their unwillingness to drop the fantastical illusion is the very thing that holds them back.

This divergence from reality that becomes the spirit of the family in *The Aristocrats* can also be found to be a critical vein in *Faith Healer*. According to McGrath, the idea of the mistakes made by memory is explored (59), as three different people each relay the events of a death from wildly different points of view, and the audience must determine for themselves what really happened. While the play does not specifically deal with the Irish Catholic faith exclusively, the faith that is discussed takes on spirituality in a slightly broader sense. This play directly engages Friel's personal anxiety towards the God question, and indirectly serves as an outlet for the author to explore his own faith in God and religion. In this way, Frank's monologue can be directly removed from context and be read as Friel's own inner thoughts concerning his own faith:

Precisely what power did I possess? Could I summon it? When and how? Was I its servant? Did it reside in my ability to invest somebody with faith in me or did I evoke from him a healing faith in himself? Could my healing be effected without faith? But faith in what? – in me?—in the possibility?—faith in faith? And is the power diminishing? (1.2.10)

Faith in general, as opposed to the structure of a devoutly Irish Catholic group of characters, is a refreshing change from Friel's typical work. Indeed, religion as a whole is approached differently in this play than in any others that have been previously discussed. The "correct" way to be spiritual, in this play, is taught to be by placing faith not in rules or strict dogma, but in the unseen feeling. Karen DeVinney, claims that

in *Faith Healer*, faith in the impalpable is more valuable than knowledge of the necessarily palpable. 'Seeing' is not necessarily 'believing,' because authentic faith depends on trust in the

unseeable. The unreliability of sight extends to the audience as well; ... a truth beyond the physically realized world that we see onstage. (111)

This process of trusting blindly in something, but because of emotion, and not simply because that is the rule, or "how it is done," makes Faith Healer's deviation from the standard works of Brian Friel so telling about Friel's own ideas concerning his attitudes towards religious devotion, what is really important.

This binary now established between a dogmatic approach to religious devotion and a more meaningful, deeper spiritual awareness mirrors a similar religious binary found in "The Freedom of the City". This Brian Friel play allows a historical approach to the topic, and a chance to explore the binary between Catholic and Protestant, North and South. The different social groups found in Ireland, and the constant binary that is established between Protestant and Catholic Ireland creates the conflict, while the action centers around three oppressed, Northern Ireland citizens from the Catholic faction. The play's action begins after a Roman Catholic Civil Rights meeting, and follows three protestors who happen to stumble into the wrong place at the wrong time, and are eventually put to death. As George O'Brien describes, the three central characters are finally able to reject the binding rules placed upon them and comfort each other:

The freedom they assert is the freedom to constitute a miniature community, or family, the normative social keystone, with Lily taking the motherly role, a natural one, presumably, since she is the mother of eleven children. Michael and Kinner lend themselves to this enabling, humanizing fiction, as they do to others. In this respect, Michael seems the more obvious casualty of illusion. He retains a touching faith in social possibility; he is a slightly older version of Joe Brennan from *Winners*. Civil rights, for him, is a question of social mobility and stoicism.... (80)

At least that quietly rebellious spirit of Joe Brennan can be counted on not to die. In a way, it is that character who represents a pseudo version of Friel himself, sarcastically rejecting his Catholic upbringing, while clinging to the very traditions that have shaped who he is.

In order to understand the undercurrents of this time, it is important to become familiar with what this discrimination between Catholics and Protestants entailed, particularly in the Civil Rights period of the 1960s. Christopher Hewitt describes the situation in his article, "Catholic Grievances, Catholic Nationalism and Violence in Northern Ireland during the Civil Rights Period: A Reconsideration", in the following excerpt:

It is generally argued not only that Catholics were denied political rights and their 'fair share' of government goods and services, but that they suffered from economic discrimination. The Stormont government concentrated funds for economic devel-

opment in the heavily Protestant areas east of the Bann while ignoring the more Catholic west. Protestant firms refused jobs to Catholics or only gave them menial jobs. Certain examples of discrimination such as the low proportion of Catholics working in the Belfast shipyards or the placing of a university in Colerain rather than Londonderry are cited ad nauseam. (364)

This unfair prejudice continues in some small ways even today, yet putting aside the historical, social battle between Catholics and Protestants, it is the citizen's personal dedication to what he or she believes, and his or her spiritual health, that creates interest in the piece.

In the end, it is this personal connection to their own spirituality that makes Friel's characters enduring. *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, originally performed in 1966, showcases a last, desperate attempt for a man to connect with his upbringing, and this is a connection that he feels he needs. This play focuses on the last night in Ireland for Gar, who is leaving for Philadelphia in the morning. He seeks comfort in religion from his companions before he leaves, but is left feeling empty and unfulfilled. He turns to the religion he has always heard of Ireland being so famous for as a final comfort from Ireland, but is left cold. In a moment of final frustration, he rages:

You know what you are doing, don't you, laddybuck? Collecting memories and images and impressions that are going to make you bloody miserable; and in a way tat's what you want, isn't it? '...because you could translate all this loneliness, this groping, this dreadful bloody buffoonery into Christian terms that will make life bearable for us all. And yet you don't say a word. Why, Canon? Why, arid Canon? Isn't it your job? - to translate?'. 'Impermanence - anonymity - that's what I'm looking for; a vast restless place that doesn't give a damn about the past. To hell with Ballybeg, that's what I say! (Episode 2.79)

Tragically, Gar never in fact gets to Philadelphia in the play, and it always just seems to hover like a tantalizing dream of perfection, just out of reach. According to O'Brian, the play becomes a broader metaphor between choosing the old, traditional way of life as opposed to the new, tempting Western way of life (46). O'Brian continues that Ballybeg, where Gar currently resided,

has meant lovelessness, boredom, and the fecklessness of imperfectly realized ambitions. As his Ballybeg life presses in on him for the last time, its emptiness and stultification become evident. Gar's loutish friends, the unctuously banal clichés of the parish priest, the demoralized stat of Gar's old schoolteacher, and above all Gar's non-relationship with his father bespeak an emotional and cultural wasteland. (48)

Every aspect of his old town that Gar reflects on, as explained by O'Brian, rep-

resents a dull, lifeless husk of a life that Gar is desperate to be free from. He has become sick of the desperately predictable Catholic priests, and in his milk toast world of Ballybeg dull, cliché Catholicism is an ever-present base fact.

Catholicism is a vein that runs strong in not only the works of renowned playwright Brian Friel, but also in the very psyche of the Irish people. It remains an immovable wall behind which many of Friel's characters either collapse or barrel through, but always with some form of judgment gathered from those with whom they surround themselves. Regardless, it is the very act of overcoming this force of binding rules and expectations that becomes impressive, as the individual struggles against society and even the expectations that he places upon himself. Through *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *Lovers*, *Aristocrats*, *The Freedom of the City*, and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, Friel portrays a personally relevant and beautifully accurate depiction of the pressures of being an Irish Catholic. Whether through a pagan invasion into daily ritual, moral sexual deviance, or a refusal to bend from old traditions, the individuals struggle not to be religious simply for the sake of being religious, but because of some deeper meaningfulness, or a last misguided effort to connect to one's culture, Catholicism is the central element, whether obviously or subtly, to all conflict. As Friel has learned, and as the reader can learn from many of his characters, it is only from a forceful, and often times quite scary breaking away from these expectations that one can be free from the control, and able to experience the blissful relaxation that comes with religious freedom.

Brian Friel's personal soul searching when it came to his religion in the end is what gives these conflicts exciting life. Without his own personal experiences to draw from, both from being raised Catholic, and simply from being raised in Ireland, the integrity and complexity with which the religious and spiritual aspects to the characters' lives have been layered in would be lacking and farcical, in danger of becoming a caricature of Irish life, rather than an accurate representation. The Catholic tradition has remained an integral part of the entire psyche of the Irish lifestyle, and Friel recognizes this importance, while expressing his own opinions on the matter.

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