

Music, Songs, and Dances in Friel's Plays: A Cultural Perspective

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Abstract—The study aims to highlight Brian Friel's employment of non-verbal communication methods to present the major themes in his plays. Friel applied music, song, and dances as nonverbal language. Unlike other dramatists who applied these elements as a way for entertainment, or as marginal theatrical aids. However, this study attempted to reveal how these nonverbal elements played a very important function in expressing the inexpressible. They function at moments when language breaks, and are unable to express the characters' motives, inner feelings, or even repressed wishes and desires. The plays that are selected for this study are *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), and *The Faith Healer* (1979). The study will use cultural materialism as a critical approach that helps in shedding light on the historic events that shaped Friel's vision. The study concluded that music, song, and dance were employed as a language that revealed repressed desires, and hidden secrets.

Index Terms—Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Irish Dances and songs, *The Faith Healer*, music and art, Northern Irish Theatre

I. INTRODUCTION

Brian Friel was born in Northern Ireland, on January 9, 1929. He is considered one of the greatest Northern Irish dramatists. In 1980, with the collaboration with Stephen Rea, Friel, founded a new theatre in Northern Ireland which is known as Field Day Theater Company. Friel's importance is in his attempts to provide Irish dramatists with a new theatre to present plays of social and political significance. The study aims to present a re-reading of Friel's plays in this line of criticism to shed light on Irish culture and his efforts to present an Irish national identity. This study is an attempt to illuminate the main argument concerning Friel's nationalism as well as his endeavors to introduce the culturally independent Irish identity. Therefore, a cultural perspective of Friel's national efforts is particularly adopted concerning two of his plays: *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), and *The Faith Healer* (1979). In other words, this study will attempt to answer the following questions:

First, to what extent was the Irish political, and historical reality reflected in Brian Friel's works?

Second, to what extent was Brian Friel influenced by the Irish national movement?

Finally, the study will draw upon the dramatic texts of Friel to trace his sense of nationalism and his endeavors to find an outlet for the Northern Irish identity crisis. The plays that are selected for this study are *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), and *The Faith Healer* (1979). These plays have been selected among Friel's plays since they are relevant to the topic of this study.

In this study, the researcher will explore how music and dances are considered a language for they share many elements with language. In other words, they could be seen as symbols and meanings that we feel relatively confident to be shared with others. A major feature of music and dances is their subjectivity; they are seen as a medium to express people's experiences. About the major feature of music, the study focuses on its "subjectivity" because it has the power to urge individuals not to be contented that their musical taste is something personal and so it is a rare experience not to be shared by others. This has resulted in the attempt to decode music into words or to express musical phenomena in words, to express this sensuous experience (Dorian, 1992, p. 2). Music, song, and dance could be considered one of the most effective arts. They play a very important role in theatrical production. They are used as new ways of visual expression in theatrical performances and main forms for many fine artists of Impressionism and Post Impressionism (Thomas, [HTTP://rupkatha. Com/dance -in-impressionism](http://rupkatha.com/dance-in-impressionism)).

Dances became the most imperative art movement especially in France with the appearance of a movement called "the fin de siècle", this event steered a dance to the greatest theatrical development of Modern Art in the twentieth century (ibid). In this regard, the study aims at highlighting the treatment of dance in Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* as an example of dance as a language. Of all Friel's plays, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is regarded as his most popular play. In this play, the dance becomes an essential element in the action, even more, important than the action itself. Dance is considered a language that could express repression, desires, and even aspirations.

II. METHODS

Taking historical facts into consideration, Friel attempts to embody Northern Ireland's hopes, fears, and expectations. Therefore, the study will make use of cultural materialism as a critical approach that helps in increasing the

understanding of the great historic events that shaped Friel's vision. According to this theory, "the primary task of anthropology is to give causal explanations for the differences and similarities in thoughts and behaviors of human groups" (Harris, 1997, p.13). According to Harris, there is also an interaction between the individual of a specific society and his environment because he, "sees people and environment in interaction from one system" (p.12). Thus, in this light culture is a "system of the different aspects of religious politics, kinship as having interaction" (p.12), and these different cultural aspects as "more interrelated forming a system" (p.12). In other words, applying cultural materialism as a method of examining Friel's interest in culture and his role in its revival to be presented in a modern context. No doubt then, cultural materialism gives the study a chance to investigate the interaction between the cultural, political, and economic forces that had a great influence on Brian Friel's drama in particular.

Fine arts, music, and dance are distinguished cultural markers. Hence, the study investigates Friel's dances and music as typical artistic cultural forms. The study adopts multi-culturalism as a method of investigating the cultural representation of dance. What is worth noting is that Friel introduces various kinds of dance- sermons such as the pagan Celtic dance of Lughnasa, the African dance of the "Ryangans" celebrating the African goddess "Obi" and finally the implicitly Catholic dance rituals. The study aims to prove that Friel's unfolding of the dances and songs is a part of post-modern dramaturgical modernism. Michael who is the main character and the narrator describes the incident when his mother, as well as his aunts, participated in this dance with the influence of the music coming from their "Marconi" wireless radio. In this sense, Friel links music and dance with time to give a further dimension of nostalgia. In other words, Friel's experimentation with the form should be highlighted since he is revealed as a "post-modern" dramatist. As Andrews argues, Friel's linking of the music and dance enables him to address "the postmodern agenda", by using an assortment of self-reflexive methods, a fact which enables him to go through revealing the discrete perception of individuality and history and unmasking the veiled misrepresentation of the accredited manners (Andrews, 2005, p. 72).

Friel's employment of music in *Dancing at Lughnasa* is of great significance, it functions as a "coordination between man and time" (Stravinsky, 2020, p.91). The study tries to prove that Music is not an additional element, on the contrary, it plays an important key role in expressing people's feelings, to translating dramatic situations into a sensuous experience. Music is used to transmit man's experience in different times and places. Hence, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel's treatment of music, song, and dance was a source of cultural markers that reflect human moments of happiness and distress, fears, hopes, and inner consciousness. The play shows different cultures, instead of presenting a direct reference to the differences between cultures: he uses dances to attract the audience's attention to these cultures: the pagan Celtic dance of Lughnasa, the African dance of the "Ryangans" celebrating the African goddess "Obi" and finally the implicitly Catholic dance rituals. In this context, dance and music become unifying factors, blending different cultures.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Friel's interest in music and dance is to be noted for he was careful in modernizing his theatre and presented a revolutionary development of the traditional drama. Highlighting Friel's achievements in this respect, Friel is entirely willing to adapt to the modern theatrical production experience. What the study realizes then, is Friel's unfolding of the dances and songs as a part of this post-modern dramaturgical lesson. Thus, dance can "illuminate a script and consequently, provide an audience with a "range of signals which can add to the pleasure of the evening in the theatre" (Dowling, 2003, p. 187).

A. Dances as Cultural Markers

Culture throughout history has constantly subjugated the probability of linking the artistic function of dances with the cultural aspects. Dances can reflect popular culture by reflecting their attitude and reaction to the issue of dances themselves. Every culture has its way of dance, a fact which could be shared among all cultures of different backgrounds including the highly developed cultures to the most primitive cultures. In other words, one can state that dance is a universal human art, one of the most popular art forms that humanity practices.

Culture varied in their employment of dances in their life; some of them merely used it as an expression of their emotional state regarding certain events such as marriage ceremonies, or even death rituals. Dance is not merely physical, rather it has a spiritual function. Dance was the main element in the sacred and secular rituals of all cultures throughout history. Perhaps a plain example is the ritual of pilgrimage that is found in different cultures. This religious tradition includes in some parts of it a kind of rhythmic ritual of body movement with the purpose of its praise and worship to its creator. We can't frankly call these religious rituals "dance", but they shared dances with that regular rhythmic pattern of body movement. The same is said regarding prayers, many cultures employed dance as an important element in performing their prayers. In other words, dances have been a chief part of ceremonials, rites, and festivities for amusement from the ancient eras of human history. For instance, archaeological discoveries carved on rocks that dance is an ancient art referring to "prehistoric times, dating back as far as 10 000 years ago. Such as in the cave paintings in the rock shelters of Bhimbetka which depict the powerful vitality of primitive dances"(Senza, 2020, p.1).

If we trace the employment of dance as a means of worshipping, we will find many examples, starting from the primitive and pagan cultures to the religious and believers in different religions such as Islam and Christianity and Buddhism, and others. The study will present just some examples to confirm the idea that dance is found in pagan and

religious cultures, and played an important function. Regarding primitive culture, the study presents shamanic civilizations as examples, in this type of dance happiness pursues the "unnatural". The supernatural power is exclusive to the magician or shaman. (ibid)

For the Greeks, there was a special form of dance which was called "Chorea ". In Christianity, dance was used as a part of liturgical rituals. As stated by Senza, especially for the early congregations of Christians, a form of "ecstatic" dance was accomplished to bring the spiritual experience to its supreme and most complete means of their spiritual practice" (Senza,2022, p.1). Moreover, for Hindus, the whole Cosmos come to being as a display of the dance of the great dancer, "Nataraja".(Ibid)Also, in Judaism, dance has also been used as a way of revealing delight in the perceptiveness of god, thus; it functions an essential role in religious performance. Perhaps both "Ashkenazi" and "Sephardi" are also other forms of dance that are associated with significant occasions such as weddings or ritual festivities (Senza, p.1). In Islam, on the other hand, the revolving "Dervishes" are actual men who belong to the Sufi movement; they follow mystical unification with Allah, the only One God, by performing a certain practice of dance, in which they twizzle around on themselves until they became dazed. In conclusion, dance is used not only as a way of entertainment but also as a part of religious rituals.

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel introduced many varied types of dances. Dancing replaced language and body movement replaced words or even language itself. Even more, dances are considered a ceremony where rhythmical body movement worked because language no longer has a positive function. After all, words were unnecessary. In other words, dances dominate where language leaves off, where spoken words are transformed into dance. Dances should not only be regarded as a means of entertainment, they also revealed complex actions that or even actions failed to convey. Friel used this aspect of dance as an essential part of the religious festivals revealing different religions, but dance was a common thing in all of them where the characters join this dance together. For example, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Kate, the schoolteacher, criticized the pagan dance in County Donegal, which is a Catholic community: "Savages. That's what they are! And what pagan practices they have are of no concerns of ours—none whatever! It's a sorry day to hear talk like that in a Christian home. A Catholic home" (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, 1992, p. 35).

In Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, a major part of the play's events is presented through dances, and "most exciting visual and theatrical possibilities" could be seen in the frenzied dancing customs". However, the stage directions presented a "detailed realism" against the domestic common details of the daily life that the sisters had (Dowling, p.187). Besides, there are other indirect inferences of the uses of music and dance in psychiatric therapy, and as a way of rectification faith in its power to affect human activities (Epperson, 2021, p.1). Thus, among the psychotherapy "signals" of the dance's function is the intensification of the moment with reality, in which time neither stops, nor history is ignored. On the other hand, both of them can be molded and give us the enjoyable combination of music and dance"(O' Toole, 213). This combination of both dance and music can augment an adversative vision of history and society. This mixture of these audio and kinetic elements is seen, as a way of remembering the past and transforming the present (White, 553). By presenting a nostalgic dimension, Friel attempted to give his play a "sentimental tone"(Krause, 1997, p.368). Nostalgia is defined by Krause as or exceptionally emotional longing for a return to a specific period in the past (1997, p.368). Obviously, in the presentation of the dance as a cultural marker, Friel revealed awareness of dance as an important dramatic device. Metaphorically, *Dancing at Lughnasa* "conflates boundaries", negating both realism and fancy because they are equally limited, and signifying that "the cycle of life, like the body's dance of self-exploration, although short, can affect transformation"(Fusco, 1996, p.109). At this point, one can see how Friel attempts to assimilate this ritual experience with the cultural perspective since he is always stressing the inter-cultural relations of selecting between constancy and transformation.

To clarify more, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel uses its principal image of dancing to convexity the repressed harvest festival practices of pre-Christian Ireland with correspondent African rituals of the festival. Likewise, Grene highlights the mythic significance of the dance, he argues that "the ritual patterns remain buried within the representation of a believable social reality"(Grene, 2000, p.265). Dance, festive and unrestricted, is Friel's metaphor. If acknowledged and seen in its context, it enables the women to "challenge and escape the boundaries of ideological containment"(Fusco, 1996, p.109). Symbolically, Friel establishes that the dance, "longed for but forbidden", is the recognized or noticeable aspect of an allegorical code that could be deduced and understood.

If we take the relationship between the sign and the signifier, the study argues that the dance signifies the metaphoric meaning of the play as a whole. In this regard, the dance which Friel presented in the play indicates the allegorical meaning hidden within. This is established in the women dancing scene: They were moving in circles clapping their hands while dancing and laughing hysterically and dancing madly. This dance had a symbolic depth since it expresses affection and warmth of feelings between those who joined the dance.

Also, if we take this action from a psychological angle, the dance can be seen as a type of projection where repressed emotions or desires find an outlet in another acceptable form. To clarify this point, it is important at this fact to take into consideration that the sisters are unsatisfied in their lives. All of them searched for love, but no one of them had this experience at all. None are married. In other words, the study argues that the hysterical physical movements of the dancers which lasted for a long time, indicate their sense of detention and "unfulfilled desire" (Fusco, 1996, p.110). Dance Movement intervenes in the clash between "word-bound" reality and "potential transcendence". The women's longing to dance is a metonymy of "oppression, repression, and rebellion" (Fusco, 1996, p.110). The brief euphoric

dances of the Mundy women, hesitating between limitation and relief. In other words, dance can be a metaphor for the link between the hidden "ideological powers" and their physical and emotional "containment" (Fusco, 1996, p.109).

Moreover, by employing the dance technique in his plays, Friel introduces dance within a historical dimension. For instance, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, through the technique of dancing, songs, and music, Friel attempts to reflect the world as a "Ritual" dance, and by ritualizing this world he looks forward to "give shape and significance of a ceremony while accepting the lack, of power of the theatre to affect it" (O'Toole, 1993, p. 212). There is a clear contrast between the African dance as a representative of the Ugandan culture and that of Lughnasa. Father Jack himself declares that the people of Raynga are astonishing for they don't show any division between the religious and the secular in their culture. Here Friel indirectly conveys a message to the Irish people whose culture is still stumbled with religious division.

He introduced an intercultural manifestation represented in the dance rituals; in this light, however, the study concludes that Friel experimented with these techniques and discovered their powerful function as interaction with the audience on the one hand and the symbolic implication of repressed motives and desires. So, the study argues that the tension in the play is presented by "those charming auditory pleasant sounds, in addition to the visual folk dances, "dancing sounds became so sweet and mesmeric" (Krause, 1997, p.369). Consequently, in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Gerry's character is a representative of this attitude, he believed dance could abolish the trouble of the world. Because he is a dancing teacher, Gerry believed that dancing "conquers all" (Krause, 1997, p. 369). To conclude, Friel presents dance within a social, psychological framework where dance can be a way of dancing is a way of communication between different people and cultures. Dance is a natural outlet for individuals' repressed desires, hopes, or dreams.

B. Music and Songs as a Language

Music is a variable art; it is associated with verse, as in lyrics, and with movement, as in dance. Throughout, music as art had an astonishing feature which is its influence on moving people's emotions. On the other hand, songs have always been related to music. Because music has varied ecstatic possibilities, many cultures have recognized it as one of the distinguished high arts, and so much of music has usually been admitted into practice under different conditions, including happy and sad or even inflexible throughout history, songs, and music have been important assistant to ceremonial dramatic production and has been recognized for with the capacity to "reveal and affect human sensation (Epperson, 2021, p.1). No doubt then, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, shows Friel at his most innovative skills, his awareness of the importance of music and songs should be highlighted at this particular point since they are relevant to that dance. What makes Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* an extraordinary play is Friel's employment of music to convey the text message in an elevated and extraordinary manner identical to his intention. This professional skill must always be the prevailing objective of any production of Friel's plays. Like Yeats who employed music and songs to intensify "the heroic impulse" in which the action is manifested in a form of dance" (Ellis, 1999, p. 278).

Similarly, Friel has introduced varied forms such as popular music, common tunes, and sacred songs, which are all used to preserve the ecstatic and reverential attitude of the play (Krause, 1997, p.367). Therefore, the music and song can heighten the dramatic proficiency in the effect expected to be seen among the audience. Furthermore, the interaction of music and dance will surely maintain the desired reaction. Formerly, Yeats discovered this close interaction and considered it as a "paradox of intimacy" which is achieved "through watching the miming and dancing... that whereas the performer was very close to his audience... and dispensed with all but the simplest stage trappings, the effect was one of distance" (Murray, 1993, p. 84).

Likewise, focusing his eyes on the audience, Friel attempted to reach the ultimate emotional interaction between him and the audience. To do so, he presents scenes where music, songs, and dances all work in interaction together when words are unable to express the character's dilemma, dance technique if accompanied by song and music can signify the facts that language breaks down to convey because they are twofold measure towards the unutterable, where speech fails to express when linked to understanding, duplicates the musical patterns (White, 1996, p. 560).

Thus, the study sees it rather important in this context to explain another function of the music and songs where they are regarded as 'further narrative' that demonstrated and exemplified the conflict which is prevalent in the plot. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel used music to denote past time, Michael from the beginning of the play's action assures his audience that this is the memory of an event that took place in the summer of 1936, the time in which the play is set. Moreover, as the play commences drawing to a close, Michael contemplates that "the memory of that summer is like a dream to me, a dream of music that is both heard and imagined" (Friel, p.51).

Referring to these aspects, Friel estimates music and dance for their "verbal effects" (White, p. 560). This is best seen in *Translations* "where Friel conjectures that dance is a kind of language; a means of communication and self-expression. This belief is held by Chomsky who defines music as a communication system, exactly like language but presented in a symbolic system (Chomsky, 2020, p.32).

Taking Chomsky's definition into consideration, the study can confirm that both music and dance are surely "symbolic systems". Dances then become "an active sign" and their importance is consequently seen as an action of identity-creation and self-expression (Barko, 1977, p.296). What is more important here is that dance could identify culture and history; in other words, we could interpret it as indicative of identity. Regarding this attitude toward dances, Stewart and Armitage in *The Modern Dance* state that wherever we go, modern dance is an expression through body language. Even more, dance can express a spiritual message, for the meaning of dance, could be transformed into imperceptible mental impulses which are expressed in movements. This context must quote Friel's own words regarding

the technique of dance in Lughnasa. Friel ends his play with Michael remembering the scene of his parents' dancing together; the "Frenzy of uninhibited dancing" of the festival of Lughnasa could be seen as a symbol of the theme of "repression and sublimation" (Krause, p. 369).

Taking dance as a sign of 'repression and sublimation', the study could exemplify this fact in the character of a missionary priest, Father Jack, who spent nearly twenty-five years in the African colonies. However, Father Jack had identified the pagan ritual of the Lughnasa festival with the African ritual of the harvest. No doubt, Father Jack's "embracing" of the 'powerful African ritual' ironically indicates his "exchanging" of his religion, for a conversion to the Ugandan faith (Krause, p. 397). Nevertheless, his recalling of the African dance while others were dancing the Lughnasa dance led to the revelation of this secret that Father Jack was hiding all the time.

While speaking to Kate, Father Jack identifies himself as a member belonging to the African Ryangan community. He describes the festivals at the Ugandan harvest time. He told her that they celebrated two great festivals; are the festival of the New Yam and the festival of the Sweet Cassava. These ceremonies are pagan dedication to their Great Goddess, "Obi". The ritual of the festival began with the ceremonial sacrifice of a bird, calf, or lamb near the river bank. At that point, the ritual gathering and smearing of the first harvest. Then many prayers start to express the people's gratitude. After Thanksgiving is over, the dance starts; fires are well-lit near the border of the fire circle, and The villagers shade their faces with stained dust and start singing folk songs; and "dance – and dance – children, men, women ... dancing...for days on end" (Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, p. 48).

Like *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the use of songs and music in *The Faith Healer* is perceived as "balanced" between the 'absurd' and "the momentous" (White, p.555). The study highlights Friel's use of songs and music in *The Faith Healer*. Friel's choice of songs assumes for each of the three characters, but particularly for Teddy (who presents the third monologues, the eminence of reality itself).

Friel's insistence on the combination between songs and dance produces a creative power, thus it turns out to be an "apostrophe" in the simple outspokenness of the songs which unveils the love between Grace, Frank, and Teddy (White, p.557).

Thus, the song signifies, the 'status of the truth' as indicated above. Here once again, "The stage space as a factor in dramatic meaning" (Knowland, p. 165). This dramatic meaning could be maintained in multiple dramatic forms including the song itself. To exemplify this fact, the song here functions as a dream-like situation, an "escape mechanism" a means of tranquilizing therapy, and a "momentary solution for the characters". It links between the "nostalgic function of the song and the people's "rooted consciousness" (Andrews, p. 185). This justifies why Friel's characters reveal the incapability to live in the present: they are either stumbling in the past or dreaming of the future (Andrews, 2005, p.185).

Finally, Friel's use of dance and song has resulted in a high artistic quality theatre that is universally acknowledged as a "distinctly marketable phenomenon" (Greene, 2000, p.262).

IV. CONCLUSION

The study provided a new reading of Friel's drama from a cultural standpoint of literature. Friel applied music, song, and dances as nonverbal language. Unlike other dramatists who applied these elements as a way for entertainment, or as marginal theatrical aids; Friel attempted to use these nonverbal tools for special functional purposes, in specific situations where characters found themselves unable to express their unutterable feelings. What is worth noting is that Friel's experimentation with music, songs, and dances in his plays proved to be an assertion of the national treatment of the Irish culture. The cultural gestures are proved to be constantly apparent as a background for Friel's plays on the one hand, and as a source of assertion of national identity. The study proved that music, song, and dance are major dramatic techniques that helped in establishing a distinctive cultural color of the play. They reflected national and cultural identity by reminding their audience of the ancient dances and songs in an attempt to revive Irish culture and bring it back to life.

Friel's *The Faith Healer*, and *Dancing at Lughnasa* reveal a trend that usually places Friel's plays as landmarks in contemporary Irish drama. From this perspective, the results of the study conclude that Friel's greatness is due to his experimental theatre especially his usage of music, song, and dance as a language that expressed the character's repression, desires, and even aspirations, and as a cultural motto of national identity.

Friel's works revealed much identification with the Irish history and culture through his employment of songs, dances, and music as major elements in his dramatic experimental productions. Therefore, by using music, songs, and dance as tools to reflex the cultural depth of the Irish reality, Friel proved to be an innovator, and hence he played a significant role in analyzing the northern Irish habitat with its conflicts and contradictions. The study proved Friel's revival of the classic Irish national themes by restaging his plays in new techniques in a more modern context, the fact that enabled the Irish theatre to be a phenomenon not only on the national literary scene but also on a global scope. Finally, the study analysis of selected plays beginning with *Dancing at Lughnasa*, followed by *The Faith Healer*, proved that Friel succeeded in presenting the Irish culture as vivid and still reflects a distinguished independent cultural Irish identity. By doing so, the study has proved Friel's success in employing music, songs, and dance as cultural markers of the Irish identity, with a focus on the Irish roots as presented in folk songs and dances.

On the other hand, the presentation of different dances and songs from other cultures conveys a message that Friel calls for openness toward intercultural interaction and this fact makes his plays a great reception all over the world. To conclude, Friel is regarded as an innovator of theatre since he reveals a deeper understanding of dances and songs as cultural phenomena that can respond to global challenges. Finally, the study proved that both music and dance are indicative of cultural identity, and hence, they could identify culture and history.

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