

A Cultural and Historical Study of the Character Maggie in Dancing at Lughnasa

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Abstract

Dancing at Lunasha is the most prestigious masterpiece of the 1990s by contemporary Irish theater master Brian Friel. Through a close reading of the text, combined with the analysis of the contemporary context, this paper examines the characterization of Maggie, the second sister in the play, from multiple dimensions, and at the same time excavates the cultural connotations projected on her by the playwright. In her family relationships, Maggie reflects the qualities of the mother figure in the Irish literary tradition. The multiple predicaments suffered by her and other family members are a disclosure of the difficult historical situation of the Irish nation in the early twentieth century. Meanwhile, Friel also uses the character of Maggie to implicitly express his attitude towards Irish culture in the nineties, conveying the idea of embracing and promoting ancient Celtic culture and tolerating heterogeneous cultures in order to reshape the unique Irish national cultural identity.

Keywords

Dancing at Lughnasa; Maggie; motherhood; dilemma; cultural attitudes.

1. Introduction

Dancing at Lughnasa (1990) is the masterpiece of Brian Friel, one of the most influential and internationally acclaimed playwrights in contemporary Irish theater. The play had its world premiere at the Abbey Theatre in April 1990, and has subsequently been performed on the National Theatre and Broadway, where it has been a huge hit with audiences. Set in Ballybeg, a fictional town in County Donegal, Ulster, Northern Ireland, *Dancing at Lughnasa* tells the story of the Mundy family from the perspective of Michael, the adult narrator. The five Mundy sisters experience different changes in their lives in the summer of 1936. In the double difficulties of material and spiritual life, they were supported by the music of the radio and the ancient Celtic Lunasha dance in the back garden [1].

As one of the reserved plays of many theaters, *Dancing at Lughnasa* has bagged almost all the awards in the British and American theatre world for Friel, and has attracted the attention of a large number of researchers in the domestic and international academic circles. Overseas, the relevant research can be roughly divided into three phases to be sorted out, namely, the 1990s, the beginning of the twenty-first century, and from 2010 to the present. In the 1990s, there were two lines of research, thematic research and narrative technique research, in which the keywords of thematic research include memory, ritual, body, subject, authority, language problem, etc. Representative scholars are Ron Rollins [2], David Krause [3], Richard Allen Cave [4], Joanne Tompkins [5] and Anna McMullan [6], among others. In terms of narrative devices, scholars Nicholas Grene [7] and Catriona Clutterbuck [8] have explored the opaque and imperial narratives in Friel's writing, respectively. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the research perspectives on *Dancing at Lughnasa* have become rich and diverse, and scholars have begun to consider it from the perspectives of gender criticism [9], historical criticism [10], and so on. At the same time some scholars have started to explore the function

of dance in the play, such as J'aime Morrison [11], Laurie Brands Gagne [12]. Some scholars have continued the study of its narrative devices, such as Prapassaree Kramer [13]. It is worth mentioning that scholar Christina Hunt Mahony [14] innovatively explored the writing of radio memories by Irish writers by linking a number of Irish dramatic works including *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Related studies since 2010 have generally continued the characteristics of the previous phase, yet scholars like Martin W. Walsh [15], Jeong Youn Gil [16], Lin Yu-chen [17], Stephanie Boeninger [18], Chaeyoon Park [19] have become more in-depth in exploring the issues of women and memory in this work. In the mean time, some scholars began to analyze the stage performance form of the play, such as Jeong Youn Gil [20] and Valerie Barnes Lipscom [21]. Additionally, some scholars began to pay attention to the translation and performance of the play in foreign countries, such as Anna McMullan [22], Richard Rankin Russell [23], Martine Pelletier [24], Maria Gavina-Costero [25].

Domestically, perhaps due to the lack of translation, the number of studies on *Dancing at Lughnasa* is relatively small, with only five relevant papers that can be retrieved and read on academic platforms. In her dissertation, researcher Zhao Li [26] discusses in some detail the narrator, narrative process, narrative perspective, and other artistic techniques used in presenting personal memories in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The rest of the related studies can be broadly categorized into two types. One is to interpret the image of the Other and the dramatic strategies of the female characters in the play from a postcolonial perspective, such as Qi Yaping [27,28], Zhang Jianhua [28], and Mao Zhihong [31]; the other is to explore the ritualistic function of the dance in the play, such as Wang Jing [30].

In general, there is a high degree of convergence between the concerns and research perspectives of domestic and foreign researchers on *Dancing at Lughnasa*, such as narrative strategy, function of dance, women, postcolonialism, etc. However, compared with international studies, domestic studies start later, are few in number, and are of a single type. Notably, studies on this work in recent years have either limited themselves to interpreting the theme of the play from the perspectives of postcolonialism and feminism, or emphasized the playwright Friel's stage narrative strategies, such as religious rituals and physical performances, etc. What's more, the discussion of the image of the five Mundy sisters has remained in the analysis of the "other". This study, therefore, on the basis of a close reading of the text, tries to break through the existing discussion of the five Mundy sisters as a group of Irish women in a specific historical period, and conducts a more comprehensive excavation of the individual image of Maggie, the second sister, who is easily overlooked by readers in *Dancing at Lunasha*, in order to analyze the deeper connotations that Friel has projected on her.

2. Sustaining the family: Reproduction of the image of mother

In *Dancing at Lunasa*, the Mundy family is actually made up of complex family members. Among the five sisters, the eldest sister Kate, as a Catholic parish teacher, is the only one having a stable job and is the main source of financial support. The third sister Agnes and the fourth sister Rose can only rely on the sale of handmade weaving to subsidize the family's income on weekdays. Maggie and the youngest sister Chris are primarily responsible for the running of the household. The relationship map of the Mundy family includes, in addition to the five sisters, the eldest brother Jack who has just completed twenty-five years of missionary life in Africa, the illegitimate son Michael born to Chris, and Gerry Evans, Michael's biological father. By focusing on Maggie's relationships with the other members of the family, it is notable that she plays an integral role in the day-to-day maintenance of the family's relationships, and even makes up for the lack of a "mother" role in the family.

Maggie is a constant lubricant in the sisterly relationship, keenly aware when verbal conflict arises between the other sisters and able to ease the tension with a physical gesture or word.

In Act I, when the sensitive Rose is upset by Agnes's correction that the Abyssinia in the lyrics is not the same place as Uganda, where Jack preaches, Maggie sings the same melody as Abyssinia and "catches her hand and sings softly into her ear" [31] as a way of comforting her, assuring Rose that they "should both be on the stage" [31]. The arrival of Michael's father infuriates Kate, and when she sees Chris dancing with him in the yard, she is inconsolable and complains that it seems to her "the beasts of the field have more concern for their young than that creature has" [31]. This leads to a verbal altercation with Agnes. When Agnes leaves in an emotional breakdown, Maggie patiently persuades Kate that "she's worried about Chris, too" [31].

In addition to acting as a lubricant in sisterhood, Maggie also in her own way gives unique attention and care to the three marginalized members of the family: the childhood Michael, her elder brother Jack, and Michael's biological father, Gerry. As the only child in the family, Michael lacked the companionship of his peers and father in his daily life, and was quiet, and Maggie chose to play the role of his peer companion in her own way, and to spend time with him as an equal. This could explain why Michael recalls Aunt Maggie as "the joker of the family" [31]. In contrast to the way Kate and Chris cared for Michael, Maggie always brought out the lively side of the adult in Michael--making bets with him about whether the airplane he built would actually fly, using witty riddles to make him impatient and retort, and finally not forgetting to throw him a piece of candy.

Jack returns from the distant continent of Africa in poor physical and mental condition, and the years of absence have left him with an unspeakable sense of strangeness and alienation in his family relationships. As a family member, Maggie shows the delicate side of her character by caring for Jack's health while understanding his changes. When talking to the other sisters, Maggie worries about whether Kate remembered to buy the medicine to help Jack with his malaria, and doesn't forget to remind Agnes to put some of the roses she picked on the windowsill in Jack's room and to attach the names of the flowers to a small card. As she spends time with Jack, she inquires about his condition and recognizes that he is getting better. When Jack laughs at himself for being "cold as usual" and "complaining about it as usual"[31], she says bluntly "Complain away – why wouldn't you? And it is getting colder. But you're looking stronger every day, Jack." [31] Compared to Kate, Maggie shows more understanding and optimism about Jack's changes and recovery, as seen in her conversation with Kate:

Kate: I told you – you wouldn't believe me – I told you.

Maggie: Shhh.

Kate: What do you think?

Maggie: *He's not back a month yet.*

Kate: Yesterday I heard about their medicine man who brought a woman back from death –

Maggie: *He needs more time.* [31]

Although Gerry is unable to enter into a marriage with Chris, the presence of his son Michael makes him inevitably a marginalized member of the Mundy family. Unlike Kate, Rose, and others, who are filled with loathing and contemptuous attitudes toward Gerry, Maggie gives him basic respect and objective validation throughout the play. This is evident not only when Maggie is the first of the sisters to notice Gerry's first return and offers to entertain him to dinner, but also when Kate marvels at "How dare Mr. Evans show his face here" [31], she speculates understandingly that "he wants to see his son, doesn't he?" "Maybe he just wants to meet Father Jack." [31] Viewing Gerry and Chris, who are dancing, Maggie also can't help but praise "He's a beautiful dancer, isn't he?"[31]

Maggie's commitment to family relationships is also evident in her calm and decisive decision-making in times of crisis. In Act II, Rose, who is out picking wild blueberries, claims to be sick and separates from Agnes, and her sudden disappearance alarms the rest of the family,

including Kate. As Kate frantically asks for all the details, Maggie steps in and takes over the responsibility of being the backbone of the family, and with a clear head, she assigns everyone their tasks for the moment, stating firmly, "We're going to find her." [31] After Rose returns home alone, Agnes and Chris repeatedly ask where she has gone, and the attentive Maggie points out in a motherly manner that "She's home safe and sound and that's all that matters" [31], before subtly changing the subject to that day's dinner.

As a matter of fact, in the existing studies on the five Mundy sisters, some scholars have already noticed the patriarchal culture from the Irish mainland represented by the eldest sister, Kate, who, as Qi Yaping points out, "Kate represents the conservative religious forces and patriarchal cultural traditions of the mainland, which attempt to confine the other sisters' bodily desires and deprive them of the right to speak. As her nickname 'the goose' suggests, she is like a male, always spying on what the other sisters say and do, always defending the moral code she follows from the encroachment and corrosion of pagan ideas, as if she were a defender of Irish patriarchal culture." [27] However, few scholars have paid much attention to the motherly qualities of the Irish literary tradition that are reflected in Maggie--wisdom, humor, tolerance, and the bond and pillar of the family at critical moments. Thus, although Maggie cannot be defined as a mother from a physical point of view, because her role within the Mundy family is fully characterized by the role of motherhood and echoes the patriarchal power presented by Kate, readers can see her as a variant reproduction of the traditional image of motherhood in Ireland as presented by Friel.

3. Facing the dilemma: Exposure of Ireland's historical situation

Dancing at Lughnasa character profile notes Maggie as "thirty-eight, housekeeper" [31]. Like Chris, Maggie earns no income, always wears an apron and long boots with untied laces. In the play, Maggie is always worrying about the family's dinner, and feeding the chickens is part of her daily routine. However, the role of the embarrassed housekeeper does not present her with the impression of negative dissatisfaction and self-hatred. Under Friel's pen, Maggie is the comic figure and the speaker of individual and collective embattled reality.

The only time in the play that Maggie is gloomy occurs when she learns of the recent death of her old friend Bernie O'Donnell, a friend who was separated by misunderstanding when she and Bernie shared this part of Ireland at the age of 16. Twenty years later, Bernie returns to County Donegal for the first time from London in a dignified manner, with her own twins, born to a Swedish man. In Kate's description, Bernie today is still "stunningly beautiful," with "the figure of a girl of eighteen", "beautifully dressed from head to toe," with "hair as black and curly as the day she left it" and "practically a movie star" [31], in stark contrast to Maggie's current situation. The usually cheerful Maggie, faced with the great disparity, did not speak of her disappointment, but simply "goes to the window and looks out so that the others cannot see her face" and "holds her hands, covered with flour, out front her body" [31].

Being housekeeper is a responsibility that Maggie is powerless to escape, and a common dilemma faced by Irish women of the same period. "The adoption of the Irish Constitution in 1937 and the explicit enshrinement of women's natural rights and proper status locked women firmly into the domestic sphere. Under this statute, Irish women assumed the social role of full-time wife and mother. But at the time, people did not see this as a straitjacket for women. Instead, they felt it was a sign of respect for women and shaped femininity on a cultural level. Women have since been visualized as a spiritual icon in Irish national culture." [30] In the play, the mentally disturbed Jack always refers to Maggie as Okawa, his domestic manservant from his missionary work in Africa, and Maggie jokes after learning the true meaning of Okawa, "I thought it was Swahili for gorgeous", while also mocking herself by saying "That's the very thing we could do with here--a house boy" [31].

At the age of sixteen, with her crush Brian leaving for Australia, Maggie never saw him again. Like the other sisters in her family, Maggie is still unmarried, yet readers can sense her strong desire for marriage in her words. At the end of Act I, when Jack learns of Michael's life, Maggie adds "We're all in the same boat, Jack. We're hoping that you'll hunt about and get men for all of us." [31]. In Act II, Maggie again conveys similar pleas to Jack, "Maybe I should go to Ryanga with you, Jack" and "Could you guarantee a man for each of us?" [31]. Maggie even admits, "If I had to choose between one Wild Woodbine and a man of say – fifty-two – widower – plump, what would I do, Kate? I'd take fatso, wouldn't I? God, I really am getting desperate." [31] The reality reflected by being unmarried is harsh, only undercut by the fact that Maggie tells it in a playful way that undercuts the bitterness by a few degrees. The reality is that "rural Irish women in the early twentieth century had an entirely different fate compared to their urban counterparts. They were bound to the barren land and suffered from poverty, and practiced farming and breeding in conditions of great mental deprivation. They were hit hard by the waves of emigration. Young women had to deal with the difficulty of getting married because of the mass exodus of men" [32].

The more serious collective dilemma facing the Mundy family gradually emerges with the return of older brother Jack, and as the adult Michael states in his recollections, "Even though I was only a seven-year-old at the time, I know I had an uneasy feeling of realizing what seemed to be a widening chasm between what was and what was, that things were changing before my eyes too quickly into what they were not supposed to be" [31]. Jack's acceptance of African pagan culture causes him to lose his godfather status and be sent home, which also causes Kate to lose her teaching position at the Catholic school, and the family's main source of income is ruthlessly cut off. The arrival of textile factories under the wave of industrialization makes it impossible for Agnes and Rose to earn a living by hand-knitting and the family's financial situation becomes more and more difficult. At the same time, the soft-hearted Chris and Michael are facing the possibility of being deserted by Gerry once again. All these family crises leave big sister Kate in deep pain, and Maggie becomes the only person she can talk to. When Kate confesses to Maggie that everything she has worked so hard to maintain seems to be about to collapse, Maggie reassures her that "Nothing's about to collapse" [33]. By the end of the story, although the Mundy family goes through a series of changes, Maggie becomes the pillar that holds on.

As mentioned above, Friel projects in Maggie the individual and collective crises faced by Irish women in the 1930s, both on a material and a spiritual level, thus reproducing the internal and external problems of the Irish nation in that period and demonstrating the "challenges to traditional Irish life in the face of the European economic crisis and the impact of industrialization" [33]. At the same time, Maggie, who faces multiple dilemmas head-on, presents the reader with a portrait of a resilient, optimistic Irish woman.

4. Embracing the diversity: Reflection of Brian Friel's cultural attitudes

In the play, the eldest sister Kate that clings to the traditional Irish Catholic culture, the other sisters embracing the ancient Celtic culture represented by the Lughnasa Festival, and the older brother Jack enamored with the exotic cultures of faraway Africa, showcase three distinct cultural tendencies within the Mundy family. Maggie, however, presents an open and compatible attitude toward the latter two, the non-mainstream Irish culture.

Lughnasa is an ancient Celtic harvest celebration, named after Lugh, the god of the harvest, and usually celebrated on August 1 every year. As a remnant of ancient Celtic culture, Lughnasa has not been assimilated into the British colonial culture nor completely indoctrinated by Catholicism, but rather has survived to this day as a pagan culture lying dormant on the fringes of the dominant culture [28]. Michael's recollection tells us that it was Maggie that suggested

the name “Lugh” when the five sisters received their first precious wireless radio on the occasion of Lughnasa. Although this was unsuccessful due to Kate’s objections, the details reflect Maggie’s admiration for ancient Celtic culture.

The fondness of Lughnasa dancing shows another dimension of Maggie’s acceptance of ancient Celtic culture. At the beginning of Act I, when Kate, who is strongly opposed to her sisters attending the Backwoods Holiday Dance, is not at home, Maggie and her sisters discuss dressing up without fear. As the harvest dance approaches, Maggie and her sisters discuss dressing up with great interest. As Rose dances and lifts her own skirt, Maggie even lifts hers higher. Even after Kate returns home, when the traditional Irish dance music “The Mason’s Apron” comes on the radio with the batteries changed, Maggie immediately wakes up from her loss and leads a tap dance in the kitchen, starting a Lunasa orgy of her own. The playwright depicts this scene in great detail:

Then Maggie turns round. Her head is cocked to the beat, to the music. She is breathing deeply, rapidly. Now her features become animated by a look of defiance, of aggression; a crude mask of happiness. For a few seconds she stands still, listening, absorbing the rhythm, surveying her sisters with her defiant grimace. Now she spreads her fingers (which are covered with flour), pushes her hair back from her face, pulls her hands down her cheeks and patterns her face with an instant mask. At the same time she opens her mouth and emits a wild, raucous ‘Yaaaah!’ – and immediately begins to dance, arms, legs, hair, long bootlaces flying. And as she dances she lilts – sings – shouts and calls, ‘Come on and join me! Come on! Come on!’ (31)

In addition to embracing the culture of the ancient Celtic peoples, Maggie retains a curiosity and respect for the exotic African cultures shared by Jack, which is in stark contrast to the attitude of Kate, who vigorously resists and opposes it. In the play, Maggie is an important target for Jack’s recounting of his personal missionary experiences in Africa. While Kate is horrified by the primitive African religious rituals that Jack shares, Maggie is not at all intimidated. In addition, her curiosity about exotic cultures is fully evident in her conversations with Jack, such as asking Jack if he needs to speak Swahili all the time in Africa and if Africans also raise hens. When Jack talks about polygamy, which is a serious departure from Irish Catholic culture, Maggie is even curious about the responsibilities that come with being that type of wife.

In deed, for a long time, due to the dominance of Irish Catholic Gaelic culture, the remnants of ancient Celtic culture have been excluded from the multicultural structure in Ireland and regarded as pagan [33]. In the play, it is the ancient Celtic culture, symbolized by the Lughnasa Festival and the Lughnasa dance, that is viewed as pagan by the eldest sister, Kate. However, at a time when the Mundy family is struggling to make ends meet, it is only the Lughnasa dance that can give the five sisters basic spiritual comfort. The exotic African culture that Jack is obsessed with is in fact a symbol of the colonized culture. As a Catholic godfather, he was attracted to the culture of the mission field during his long missionary journey and eventually brought it back to his homeland. This may seem like a betrayal of his own culture to those around him, but for Jack, who has nothing else to turn to, this exotic culture is the only source of spiritual sustenance.

Returning to the playwright himself, the fact that Friel places three completely different cultural orientations in the space of the Mundy family in his writing inevitably makes the reader ponder what his intentions are. The spiritual conflict in the family is a metaphor for the cultural conflict in the larger Irish society, while Maggie’s compatible attitude towards the ancient Celtic culture and the regional culture of other people is an extremely important hint of Friel’s advocacy of multiculturalism. *Dancing at Lughnasa* was released during the Celtic tiger period of Ireland’s economic boom, a period of material prosperity that inevitably triggered reflections on national cultural identity in Ireland. The confrontation between the old and the new, the local and the foreign, embodied in the different cultures of the country during this period was a problem that needed to be faced and solved by the Irish nation. The answer to the question of how to shape

a unique cultural identity in the context of globalization cannot be separated from embracing and promoting ancient Irish cultural traditions and tolerating heterogeneous cultures, which is also the cultural attitude that Friel conveys through Maggie.

5. Conclusion

To put it in a nutshell, Friel gives a deep historical and cultural dimension to the vivid Irish female figure Maggie. Maggie is not only an indispensable sustainer of family relationships, acting as a lubricant for sisterhood, a caregiver for marginalized members, and a pillar of the family at critical moments, but also a confronter of individual and collective crises and an embracer of multi cultures. Maggie reflects the qualities of the mother figure in the Irish literary tradition--humor, wisdom, and the pillar of the family--while the personal and collective hardships she faces are a disclosure of the difficult historical situation of the Irish nation at that time. With the help of the character of Maggie, Friel implicitly expresses his attitude towards Irish culture in the nineties, conveying the idea of embracing and promoting the ancient Celtic traditions and embracing heterogeneous cultures in order to reshape a unique Irish cultural identity.

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