

INTERWEAVING THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL IN CONOR MCPHERSON'S *THE WEIR*

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Abstract: Focusing on the Irish playwright Conor McPherson's *the Weir*, this paper explores how late- twentieth and early twenty-first century Irish drama – set within local places and shaped by the role of the supernatural – offers new ways in which to consider the relations between the national and the global. McPherson's plays represent the interests of Ireland in specific time periods and places but have broader meaning and significance as they offer insight into the human condition. History and the supernatural are prevalent themes of McPherson's works – he incorporates older traditions of ghost stories and storytelling – yet places them in a modern world. This paper argues for a realism that is grounded in the wider recognition of changing global, social and cultural conditions. Yet within these, certain human weaknesses and behavioural patterns remain static. In *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*, White suggests that changing democratic trends in Western societies asks for us to re-examine our role as citizens. White frames his theoretical approach by asking 'what sort of "characteristic spirit" or "sentiment" should we be trying to cultivate as we seek to confront the deep challenges of late-modern life?'; citizens and minds of the future can no longer be inward looking or inward focused, but equally, as McPherson suggests in his plays, citizens rely on the personal associations and past experiences in order to forge an identity.

Keywords: Irish Drama and Theatre – globalisation – realism – storytelling – the supernatural

INTRODUCTION

Between 1991 and 2008, Ireland has experienced an unanticipated and accelerated economic, social, and cultural renewal. Ireland's transformation from a rural premodern community to a postmodern urbanized society is substantiated by several circumstances.

Among which are the European Union membership, direct foreign investment, and social partnership. As a result, Ireland has become an attraction to multinational migrants and tourists which consequently has changed the intercultural nature of the Irish society. The rise in consumer spending has reached unexpected levels as Ireland has attracted designer commodities and become a centre for multinational companies. However, such advantageous transformations have in reality masked other economic consequences of negative and contradictory nature on the individual and social level.

The increased level of social inequality as an effect of globalisation on local economies has occupied a great deal of contemporary debate: modernisation has produced cultural and social collisions between different discourses of life (Kuhling and Keohane, 2007: 13), the correlation between financial success and social failure, that economic growth is not an indicative of social progress (Kirby, 2002:21), personal ambition and social mobility are stimulated by capital equity and not by social equality (Jordan, 2010: 3).

In the light of Ireland's experience of an accelerated urbanisation, this paper will consider McPherson's work within the diverse changes Ireland has undergone during the Celtic Tiger. This chapter will explain how the characters of McPherson develop a

sense of the collective and the change they go through during the course of the play. McPherson's plays have demonstrated a universal need for communication and social integration. Despite the loneliness and sense of dislocation which identifies most of his characters, they at some point or another come to realise the advantage of being part of a wider community. A sense of loneliness dominates the atmosphere of his plays, yet a desire for connection remains a viable preference for his characters. McPherson once says, I really don't think I have an agenda or a message. All I can say is my work is a battle against loneliness. It's an acknowledgement that we all have a fundamental loneliness even though you may not be alone. But all that loneliness can be eased by admitting and sharing that fact. Having said that, it does not necessarily mean that my work is bleak. I don't think it is. I think it is quite optimistic because its intention is to make contact, to make connection. It's really that simple (qtd. in Wood 147). The main argument of this paper will be based on ideas proposed by Stephen White and, in particular his notion of "presumptive generosity". I will also benefit from Patrick Lonergan's discussion of the impact of globalisation on Irish theatre.

McPherson's plays examine how we try to fit into the modern world as citizens. *The Weir* begins with an ordinary scene where a seemingly discontented man named Jack walks into a bar. We are told that he 'wipes his boots aggressively on a mat' (McPherson 13) before helping himself to a drink.

McPherson provides details of decorations on the wall of the pub, which include three black and white photographs depicting an abbey in ruins, a new ESB weir surrounded by 'posing' people, and 'a town in a cove with mountains around it' (McPherson 13).

These details help to set the tone of the interior before the dialogue between the characters begins. The three scenes in the old photographs are significant as they depict human settings, which although appear to have been lost to history, are preserved in time and space by being framed and hung on the wall. The placement of a town within a cove surrounded by mountains seems to be imbued with deeper relevance – the scene might represent, for example, the insular nature of the local, surrounded by natural features, which protect it from the outside world. The ruined abbey, a deserted place of religious, symbolises the loss of old traditions and beliefs, and that the setting of the play somehow intends to provide a backdrop to the exploration of changing and contemporary beliefs and traditions.

The two men, Jack and Brendan, begin by discussing trivial matters which leads into a conversation with the newly arrived Valerie about the history of the town. The photographs then become the focal point of the discussion as the characters pick out relatives and talk about how the area is 'steeped in old folklore' and how 'important' their townland was 'a few hundred years ago' (McPherson 33). Following White's approach, it can be argued that the ethos of McPherson's citizens is to paint their lives to others as being set within a long chronology of tales, beliefs and superstitions. White argues for a set of five expectations which the late modern ethos of citizenship conforms to, which include: cooperation in the justice of social and political structures; reasoning for the origins of our judgements; the requirement of insight in the formation of identity; the need to 'expand our ethical-political imagination' to include human rights and 'global justice' on the part of 'others'; and the willingness to debate the directive future of democracy (8). These conditions and recognitions require self-chastening and moral broadening. McPherson through his work has shown a deep understanding of human relations. In terms of *The Weir*, his characters and audiences alike enact White's two principals. In White's words, "I loosen - may be only minimally and temporarily - the bonds of my identity in encounters with others, especially when they are less privileged than me in an economic or cultural sense" (106). This is what he terms "presumptive generosity". In *The Weir* White's 'bonds' of identity are probed and broadened in the male characters' encounter with Valerie. Equally, Valerie, as a newcomer, seeks to establish connections and to identify with her new surroundings – needs which are counterbalanced by the men's reminiscences and bonds with their native surroundings. White's ideas might be usefully employed in the analysis of McPherson's works because McPherson often draws upon the microcosm technique of dialogue and action, whereby characters are drawn together in a small, confined physical space – a condition that requires them to reflect upon and broaden their roles as citizens and their parts in

local and global communities. The small physical space is thus developed and expanded through dialogue which reveals complex layers of personal, social and political histories, and which has universal relevance. In this respect McPherson's works echo ideas put forward by Lonergan concerning the relation between theatre and globalisation, which he outlines as a 'paradigmatic shift from geographical to conceptual spaces' whereby the 'contested territory ... is not land but meaning' (17). As *The Weir* as a whole suggests, it is no longer viable to hold claim to a piece of land or an area, and yet the stories and identities associated with the area continue to resurface and shape the present through dialogue, reminiscence, and story-telling. McPherson seems to suggest implicitly the importance of connection between enduring features of the landscape and those which are erased – and the corresponding link to human qualities, which endure and fade over time.

This can be also seen, for instance, in the shifting reaction of the natives towards outsiders. At the end of the play, Brendan tells Valerie about Jack and Jim "Giving out like a couple of old grannies" when the tourists arrive as they flee to a different place- The Pot in Carrick. But after their conversation with Valerie, the men's attitude towards the German tourists changes from complete avoidance and indifference to willingness for cultural exchange. PJ Mathews, explaining the wide international appeal of *The Weir*, comments, "Her presence, too, is transformative for them and offers a way out of their cultural stasis" (160). Jack, whose reluctance to even venture to Dublin costs him a life partner, has shown an unexpected enthusiasm to engage with them- "If Valerie is willing to come in and brave the Germans then I'm sure me and Jim'll come in and keep your company, how is that now?". He continues, "I think that is the right attitude. you should stay with the company and the bright lights" (McPherson 73). On the opposite side, we learn from their conversation how the Germans, or whom they call the Germans, try to connect with the natives by singing in pubs old sixties songs "And they don't even know the words." This same feeling of resentment is shown to a lesser extent at the start of the play towards both Finbar and Valerie. Although Finbar is one of the natives, he is not welcomed even though he doesn't show up at the bar "for ages". The reason is explicitly spoken by Finbar himself, "They're only jealous Valerie because I went the town to seek my fortune. And they all stayed out here on the bog picking their holes" (McPherson 26). The same applies to Valerie since her arrival to the country has reminded Jack of the time the Germans arrive (22). An explanation to such xenophobia or public display of resentment and sometimes hostility is given by White as the natives tend to do so because they believe that their indigent identity is threatened by outsiders. White suggested presumptive generosity to restrain hostile responses

(96). This is exactly what happens with Jack, Jim, and Brendan.

The relations between the local and the global in *The Weir* can also be understood in the context of the types of mind that a place needs in order to survive. An introspective view that values only the local and cultivates a sense of belonging to an insular community can no longer hold in a society that is becoming increasingly interconnected globally. This view is evident in, for example, research by Gardner of the types of mind needed to survive in the twenty first century. Gardner proposes that five types – Disciplined; Synthesized; Creative; Respectful; and Ethical – are the most relevant and useful for organizing and leadership in the future. Gardner suggests that global developments in information sharing and communications mean that we are all interlinked, so there is a need to be respectful of people's differences (2). White argues for identity to be recognised through difference – in nationality, language, religion, sexuality and so on, and that this approach – as a 'site of reflection' – forms the basis of his proposed ethos and 'claim to reason' (26-7). Valerie in *The Weir* represents the modern mind. The fact that Valerie comes from the city makes it quite understandable that she doesn't mind engaging with the tourists. The men's reluctance, on the other hand, to be in one place with them can be attributable to the insularity of the country. Yet, their ability to converse with Valerie, who is a stranger from Dublin, paves the way and makes possible for them to welcome people from different parts of the world. Before Valerie arrives, the men, in their conversation, refers to Valerie as a "Dublin woman". Dublin at that time in the late 1990s has undergone a wave of unprecedented changes: economic prosperity, increasing number of immigrants, setting up multinational companies. All are, among other factors, have rendered the city a cosmopolitan and heterogenous place. Consequently, Valerie, and *The Weir* itself by the same token, can be seen as an artefacts of this shift from insularity to cultural hybridity.

To conclude, it is clear that McPherson's works explore and expand the boundaries of the global and also seek to reinforce the boundaries of the local. The relevance of McPherson's human anxieties and concerns to global audiences allows for the widespread success of his productions. There are no stable parameters in McPherson's plays – rather, the works are shaped by the tone and quality of the characters' preoccupations and emotions. These anxieties, which stem from the characters' past interactions in society, have wider significance and applicability because they are rooted in age-old human strengths and weaknesses. White's proposed ethos for the late-modern mind offers a relevant and insightful paradigm that in turn can generate new responses to and interpretations of McPherson's works. As McPherson's characters travel through their journeys on the stage they reflect upon and broaden their moral and interpersonal awareness – a key process in the recognition of a late modern identity.

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