

BRIAN FRIEL AND THE YEATSIAN MODEL:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Though much attention has focused on the issues of Irish language and culture in Yeats' earlier dramatic production of the *Abbey Theatre*, Brian Friel's with his contemporary *Field Day Theatre* worth examining since he reveals a great resemblance concerning Yeats' thematic dramaturgy especially those challenging the cultural identity. The current study aims at proving that Yeats' dramatic vision, in which Irish language and culture were primary goals for his works, has been revived in the present time by works of Brian Friel. The study proved that Brian Friel follows Yeats' steps in presenting Irish culture. The significant areas of influence include the glorification of the Irish culture, the attitude toward politics and history and the establishment of theatres. To sum up, the study proves that though the tools vary, both writers presented Irish language, culture, and history as national markers that were able to face the cultural challenges of the past and contemporary Ireland.

الكاتب المسرحي الايرلندي بريان فرييل

ونموذج يتس :دراسة مقارنة

ملخص

تم تسليط كثير من الضوء على المسرح الايرلندي الأول- مسرح ايبي - متمثلا بالأعمال المسرحية للأديب الايرلندي (يتس) الذي قام بتوظيف كلا من الثقافة واللغة كركنين اساسيين في الهوية الوطنية لما لهما من أهمية في تحقيق الشعور بالانتماء كوسيلة من وسائل مقاومة الاستعمار الانجليزي، الا أن هذه الدراسة تهدف لأثبات أن أعمال(فرييل) تعتبر إحياء لفلسفة (يتس)المسرحية و امتدادا لارائه الوطنية بخصوص رؤيته للجانب الحضاري للغة. وعليه يعتبر (فرييل) مجددا لما بدأه (يتس)فيما يخص الجانب الحضاري والثقافي للغة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ، بريان فرييل،مسرح الحقل النهاري، الحركة المسرحية الايرلندية، الهوية الحضارية، وليام بتلر يتس.

Keywords: Brian Friel; Field Day Theatre; Irish Dramatic Movement; Cultural Identity; W. B. Yeats.

Introduction.

Brian Friel's Field Day Theatre has a distinguished cultural dramatic quality that makes it distinguished in its cultural context. This study investigates how Brian Friel was influenced by Yeats dramatic philosophy by adopting the Yeatsian model which highlighted the establishment of a national Irish identity. By selecting the works of both Yeats and Friel, the researcher aims to prove how Friel's Field Day Theatre was able to respond actively to defy the challenges that confront modern Irish identity by following Yeats' steps in glorifying the Irish material.

Both the great Irish playwrights sought to assert a national identity within the Irish cultural roots; Yeats and Friel alleged in the role of the theatre in reviving the Gaelic language and culture. This attitude is represented in their glorifying of the Irish material, their attitude toward history and politics and finally in their employment of theatre as a weapon by which they can arouse the sense of nationalism among the Irish and form a national identity.

The dramatic achievements of the well-known Irish dramatist Brian Friel's are best described in "Yeatsian terms," since his drama follows the "Yeatsian proposition" [26, P.71]. Thus, it seems that Friel follows Yeats' steps in presenting Irish issues; like Yeats, Friel believed in the role of the theatre in reviving the Gaelic language on the one hand, and in spreading the Celtic culture as well. This attitude is represented in his use of the Irish material such as folktales, dances, and pagan Celtic mythologies. This attitude brings him round to the point that presents him as like Yeats in this context.

Nevertheless; there is a slight difference which lies in this issue, what is worth realizing is Friel's success in presenting the Celtic material in a dramatic form where Yeats failed. Moreover, Grene (2000) regards Yeats' "figures of Cuchulain and Deirdre" as "alien and embarrassing" [13, P. 265]. This employment of the Celtic material presents Friel as an innovator in introducing the Irish material in new contemporary techniques.

Probably the most crucial point that seems to be existent in both playwrights is their attitude towards the role of literature concerning the cultural background. Like Yeats who repeatedly called for the need of going back to the roots, most of Friel's works "underline both the questionable aspects of the search for unalienable roots" and reveal Friel's attraction of the "intercultural communication and understanding"[1, P.3]. This depiction of the Irish material enforces his view of the Irish culture as a juxtaposition of the spirit of strangeness which is creeping over the Irish culture and endangering its purity with a sense of alienation.

Taking the cultural accordance between the two dramatists, Friel complains of the sense of rootlessness as a "Northerner." Like Yeats, he looks forward to a great degree of Irishness away from the "sense of exile" that threatened the modern generation [24, P.20]. Concerning this issue, in "Recording Tremor" Christopher

Murray (1997) comments on Friel's conflict between roots and "rootlessness" even though he is indigenous Irish. In an interview, Friel states that he suffers from a feeling of rootlessness due to his Northern origins and his "inheritance of being a member of the Northern minority 'where you are certainly at home, but in some sense, exile is imposed on you [...]. In some way, I think Field Day has grown out of that sense of impermanency of people who feel themselves native to a province or certainly to an island but in some way feel that disinheritance is offered to them' [24, P.20].

Ket Words : FRIEL. YEATS. Irish language and culture. thematic dramaturgy

Yeats and Friel: The Origins and Continuity

Irish theatre has an identical national and cultural quality that made it distinguished from its European counterparts. Because when the identity of a nation is endangered, one of the priorities of language is cultural resistance. This great purpose started with Yeats and the Abbey Theatre during the colonial period. Brooks in *The Hidden God* (1978) regards that Yeats embodied "National Culturalism" rather than mere "Provincial Culturalism" for the latter is an embodiment of the English colonized perspective of Ireland as a "province" of England. This view undermines Irish literature and thus Irish writers, including Yeats, rejected this exclusive colonized attitude toward their literature as being secondary or "disposed culture" [5, p. 44]. Thus, Yeats put the reviving of Irish Celtic culture on the top of his priorities. To achieve this goal, he asserted the necessity of the revival of the Gaelic language and culture as a way of declaring a distinctive Irish identity.

Consequently, Yeats searched for an effective way to fulfill his goal, and it does not take him a long time when he realized the necessity of having an Irish theatre so that he can fulfill his dream and make an actual reality. In colonial Ireland, Irish playwrights sought English theatres to present their plays, which mostly rejected and if performed, they presented Ireland within the frame of provincialism a fact which most Irish writers refused.

Realizing the importance of having an independent Irish theatre, Yeats and Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn discussed the possibility of establishing a National Irish Theatre in Dublin. On 27 December 1904, this dream became a reality by the establishment of The Abbey Theater which plays an active role in the Irish national struggle for redefining their identity. Yeats had his philosophy regarding theatre and its function in society. Richter in *The Development of Critical Tradition*, states that Yeats did not prefer theatre to be "didactic," but he rather sought a theatre that exhibited "passion" which as Yeats believed gave art its "value" [27, p.121]. What Yeats meant by passion is the degree of interaction that a play achieved; "Yeats aimed to create what may be called a "drama of silence, a drama whose meaning lies not in what is said but what it evokes." [33, p.123].

In other words, Yeats was careful in choosing his themes for he attempted to achieve twofold goals: first, to revive Irish Gaelic culture and make it familiar among Irish people since they have a distinctive culture and language different from the English. The second goal was to foster the Irish people sense of nationalism. Probably, this attitude of having the passion of the audience is best indicated by Yeats himself. In Essays and Introductions, Yeats wrote:

I have always come to this certainty: what moves natural men in the arts is what drives them in life [...] they must go out of the theatre with the strength they live by strengthened form looking upon some passion that could, whatever is a chosen way of life, strike down an enemy. [33, p. 265].

It is in this sense, that drama is believed to "enrich" the audiences' nationalism and give the Abbey theatre further authority. This feature of the theatre was probably the key which Yeats held firmly which was later resumed by Friel's Field Day. However, Yeats faced a significant challenge which is related to his desire to link the national and cultural material without sacrificing any of them placed a heavy burden on Yeats and thus encouraged some critics to accuse him of not being national as he claimed. Yeats declares:

We who are struggling to keep alive Irish Civilization and drive out this new English Civilization are really striving to keep alive the old poetry of the world, and I think it is a [...] part of a great war, of a war of the past and the future, of noble past that tries to keep itself unchanged, hoping that the dove will someday return bringing with it a green bough" [6, pp.10-11].

Another challenge that faced Yeats in his attempts to preserve Irish culture, the Irish language is one of the significant challenges facing the formation of the Irish identity. For instance, Duncan in "Language and Identity in Post- 1800 Irish Drama" comments on the relation between the Irish language and the cultural identity. He writes:

When one language pushes aside another language, the cultural identity begins to shift. The literature of a nation provides evidence of the shifting perception. Drama because of its performance qualities, provides the most complex and complete literary evidence. The effect of the performed text upon the audience validates a cultural reception beyond what would be possible with isolated readers" [8, P.97].

Revealing a high degree of awareness of the Irish critical historical and cultural situation, Yeats was aware of the challenges that undermine the elements of Irish identity including the Irish language. Thus, Yeats urged the Irish to be proud of their belonging to the Gaelic culture. This was a kind of a national creed or even more a philosophy which Yeats puts at the top of his priorities. He aimed at reviving it to play a more active role than its role in the colonial era. For instance, Michael Mac Liammoir and Evan Boland in W.B. Yeats comment on Yeats' dedication to his country as he did

not separate between his love of his country and love of the "unseen life" which were presented in Yeats' interest in ancient Celtic myths and legends. In other words, Yeats attempted through the medium of literature to "weave them together into a complete philosophy" [19, P.38].

Yeats' importance can be seen in the attempts of contemporary Irish writers to adopt his literary and national philosophies. Thus Yeats' plays have been revived by the continuous and ever-present reference to his plays, this fact is seen in his works that have been referred to as a literary landmark in the Irish theatre. Nowadays, the same philosophy has been carried out with the tremendous efforts of Brian Friel's The Field Day Theatre. Many prominent critics point out to the fact that Yeats directly influenced Friel. For example, Christopher Murray in "Friel's Emblems of Adversity and the Yeatsian Example" emphasizes the great influence that Yeats had on Friel. For Murray, Friel "shows himself a worthy successor of Yeats"[25, p. 87], this fact is also emphasized by in Politics of Irish Drama, Nicholas Grene argues that Friel's use of rituals and myth is one example of Yeats influence on him. He states that Irish drama in general, and Yeats' plays, in particular, have been distinguished by "folklore to underpinning myth and ritual," He also states that "towards the other end of the twentieth century, the tendency has been developed again, in particular in Friel's later drama." (Grene,pp. 246-65).

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[A]s Ireland is posited as a place of the pre-modern, Irish drama has been able to reach down through folklore to underpinning myth and ritual. This was a distinct feature of the early national theatre movement with Yeats and Synge seeking below the surfaces of Catholic Christian belief a pagan substratum that was primal, deeper, truer. Towards the other end of the twentieth century, the tendency has been developed again, in particular in Friel's later drama. [12, pp. 246-65)

Thus, the study attempts to analyze Friel's greatness considering Yeats' influence especially concerning the issues of identity and cultural challenges facing the Irish character.

Politics and History in Friel's and Yeats' Works

Irish theatre was greatly influenced by the political milieu. Both Yeats and Friel responded to the events that was seen as a challenge for their identity formation. In

Likewise, Friel's treatment of the political disorder as the central theme in his plays merely exhibits his national reaction but not only political propaganda. In this sense, he is seen in the same line of the Yeatsian philosophy of the relation between art and politics. In "Friel's Emblems of Adversity' and the Yeatsian Example," an interview with Friel is quoted:

When asked in an interview about *The Freedom of The City* "Are you afraid that in certain circumstances an audience might take a very crude and a very blunt political message from it?" Friel immediately thought of Yeats: "That would not worry me anyway. "Have I sent out certain young men? That sort of thing would not worry me at all." [22, p. 17].

It is in this light that we can understand Friel as "anti-historical and anti-political writer", O'Toole writes, he considers Friel so far from politics because as O'Toole argues: "[t]he committed writer is a writer who has faith in politics, in history and above all in the power of language, not merely to communicate things but also to change them. Friel is a writer in despair at, or in flight from, all of these things." [25, p.205]. No doubt then, Friel is not a committed politician who converts literature to be a political tool; he remains neutral who "refuses to posit fealty in either the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland." [25, p.207]. Thus, the study can argue that this position gives him a "freedom which enabled him to stand outside his own cycle for history and politics and judge it as he would." [11, P. 93]. Friel reminds us of Yeats' reaction to the Irish political disorder after the fall of Parnell at the beginning of the twentieth century. O'Toole sees this point in common between both Yeats and Friel since like Yeats, Friel has regarded the theatre as "filling a political vacuum. Filling a vacuum, though, also means operating in one. In the same sense, and the same consequence [...] Friel is a post-nationalist one" [25, p.207].

In other words, Friel's political opinion only represents him since he refused, as mentioned above, any political commitment to any "particular part or faction." Still, "his later plays especially are dependent upon the dialectical method." [3, p. 366]. In this respect, he is identical with Yeats' refusal of any political commitment, on the one hand, and putting the theatre under the authority of the revolutionary politicians on the other. Probably this feature is one of the most significant gestures of adopting Yeats' philosophy by rejecting using literature as propaganda for political issues. Here, the study differentiates between two different concepts which are national as opposed to political. Both writers gave priority to national literature over the political one since the former carries noble goals and features permanent by the passage of time; while the latter is of a temporary influence and value. It will be secondary if compared to the attitude of having national literature. Using theatre for political propaganda contradicts with his aesthetic attitude toward literature. Considering Yeats' view of the entity "national literature", for instance, Kiberd in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of Modern Nation* (1996) specifies that", Yeats remarked that a national literature is the work of writers who are moulded by the influences that are moulding their country and who write out of so deep a life that they are accepted there at the end." [14, p.128] . Reading the works of both Yeats and Friel will prove them to be writing from such interaction with events that affected their country. Yeats and the same can be said about Friel,

Friel has always been aware of the responsibility to use theatre "in such a way to explore national identity [...]. The priority has always been to serve art and not faked reality". [ibid].

Another point in common is "the bond" which "lies in the matter of audience." Both demanded an audience of national and cultural awareness, with a great mind-openness, "to respond to the image provided." [22, p.71]. Thus, the audience should be aware of the cultural, political context beyond the theme of the play, the majority of Friel's as well as Yeats' plays are about cultural and historical significance. If this aspect is not taken into considerations, the audience will find itself unable to get the message beyond action. For example, Hugh Leonard (1998) comments on this issue as:

The considerations of theme and genre seem to have taken precedence over Geography. Nowadays, when a sense of nationality is the guiding factor in a discussion of art, one usually becomes aware of society with a problem of identity or with a culture that is yet relatively unknown outside its frontiers [.18, p.20].

Similarly, Friel's sense of nationalism is embodied in his works which glorify "a passion for the land" and "devotion to a romantic ideal we call Kathleen" [7, p. 17]. Also, Dantanus pinpoints Friel's influence by the different Irish reality. He states:

Friel is keenly aware of the problems of split identity, as occasioned by the political, religious and social divisions that he has experienced in Northern Ireland. (He refers to it as living in a schizophrenic community). He has a strong belief in racial memory [...] which leads him to conclude that there is a "foreignness" in English literature that makes it different from Irish literature, it is the literature of a distinctive race. [7, pp. 18-19]

Like Yeats who at the beginning of his career witnessed a temporal attraction to the nationalist movements, Friel was a member of the Nationalist Party in Derry, but he withdrew and justified it saying, "I felt the party had lost initiative" [7, p.19]. He had a steadfast national creed; Dantanus epitomizes Friel's attitude that he "cannot accept the legitimacy of the border and believes that there will be no solution until the British leave this island" [ibid].

Also, a common feature that can be unveiled is their frustrated reaction of Irish politics. Like Yeats who was sick of politics, Friel was frustrated because of the Irish civil war, Dantanus states:

Though there are specific questions on which he is not prepared to compromise [...]. The event of post-1969 Ulster has had him moving between deep despair and complete certainty of civil war on the one hand and a more optimistic note on the other. Still, I don't think the gap is too wide to be reached [...] the same can apply to our religious and political differences. [7, pp. 19-20]

Surprisingly, Friel always referred to the Irish past and Gaelic civilization as "if nothing can change" and if this proved to be right, then "nothing can die." The work of history is manifested in its "inner logic" which is always "subverted in Friel by the workings of the force that torments [...] his characters – the force of chance". [25, p.204]. Maxwell (1990) also sees Friel in this tradition since as he states, and his theatre "enunciates the interpretation of Irish history that all its changing circumstances reiterate and inveterate pattern of conflict: Catholic/ Protestant [...] English/ Irish". [21, p.4].

No doubt then, this complicated vision of history made Irish theatre so particular; such a reality presented itself so powerfully on the Abbey stage as seen in Yeats' works and many years later Field Day stage as represented in Friel's works. However, though they are similar in their adoption of history as the main subject for their plays, nevertheless there is a slight difference between them. While Yeats was optimistic in his vision of the Irish past and referred to it as a source for his inspiration, Friel deals more pessimistically with the Irish past. Consequently, Friel elucidates this pessimistic attitude of Irish history as:

Friel presents the resultant loss of Irish self-confidence in socio-linguistic terms- briefly, language creates history, a people who do not keep faith with the historical names of their location lose their identity; a people without a sense of their history become vulnerable for take-over. Vagueness about the past leads from a loss of self-confidence either to hopelessness or violent crisis. Thus, [...] the relationship between the historical context and present Irish problems is relayed to the contemporary audience. [3, p.369].

Friel's and Yeats' glorification of Irish Culture

A common feature that can be detected in both Yeats' and Friel's work is their glorification of the Irish heritage and culture. For example, Friel's works explore "issues of cultural identity and collective and personal memory." He "explored the cultural roots, of the Anglo-Irish conflict." [17, pp. 220-21]. In other words, Friel is always seen to be "pursuing the topic of intercultural relations, the question of choosing between home and abroad, between stability and change" (Achilles, 1992, p. 3). It is in this light that Friel advocates the importance of the theatre, a fact that will be enforced if we take his role in the establishment of Field Day Theatre into consideration. Indeed, this fact reminds us of Yeats' efforts in the establishment of the Abbey Theatre; what is interesting here is the belief that the Field Day is like Yeats' Abbey in some of its dramatic philosophy taking into consideration the difference between the developments of drama through time. Regarding this topic, Murray writes:

It can be said, in turn, that the enterprise of Field Day and its cultural ambitions follow on from Yeats's design. Understandably, since he is a modest man, Friel has found difficulty in even suggesting such a parallel. However, in an interview at least, he is reported as invoking Yeats. "The purpose of Field Day, he says, after tiptoeing around it [...] is to provide a strong and vibrant theatre that in some way express his country . [22, p. 7].

The Field Day looks like the Abbey in the fact that it presented the Irish theatre and the urgent issues of Irishness with a slight chronological difference of a post-colonial reality. Worthen clarifies this fact saying that the Field Day's production of the plays has put a major goal that is "to unveil the contradictions and divisions inside the Irish society, of the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, of north and south, of Protestant and Catholic', as [...] central image and instrument of political change" [32, p. 24].

In other words, Friel's Field Day is like Yeats' since both took the burden of correcting the misinformed approaches that distorted the image of the Irish people. In

Friel, let it be known that he would no longer write for the world at large, but for Ireland. If others – Britain, we inferred wanted to look over his shoulder that was their business." (p. 25). Friel believes that the Irish drama "should make a statement, [...] However, to the nation as a whole. Not to do so [...] is a betrayal of one's birth right"[18, p. 26].

Such circumstances have continued to bear on what Friel regards writers' interaction and response to the major events in Ireland. With regard, this point in particular Friel is seen in the light of "social commitment" while he is in, " the process of structuring drama." [9. p.149]. So, most of Friel's plays focus "either on public events [...]. Or private traumas, but always on the moment which is taken to be the crisis, the fall, the moment which is to be the origin of and the key to all subsequent moments" [2, P.34]. Thus, Friel's choice of themes is believed to be moving and agitating which gives his theatre a flamboyant success. For example; Achilles comments on this point concerning Friel's works. He writes:

Friel's work oscillates between the poles of self- alienation, and preparedness to identify not only on an individual but also on a social and political plane. The inner conflicts of Northern Ireland, torn between the claims of unionists and Nationalists, Catholics and Protestants [...] occupies Friel as it does with everybody else in Ulster" [1, P.6].

No doubt then that the recurrence of the national themes hints at Friel's serious awareness about the national identity, which was a common theme in Irish literature a fact that attracts the attention of many scholars, researches as well as critics.

Conclusion

The study proved that Friel was greatly influenced by the Yeatsian dramatic model, especially with the issues that are concerned with the national identity. The study investigates the degree of Yeats' influence on Friel by discussing how they employ the authority of theatre as a tool for strengthening the national feelings and the sense of belongingness among their audience. Also, the study proved that there are many common points between Friel and Yeats because both Yeats and Friel believed in the role of the theatre in reviving the Gaelic language and culture. This attitude is represented in their use of the Irish material such as folktales, dances, and pagan Celtic mythologies. Like Yeats, Friel shows a great interest in folklore and ancient myths ; yet the study proved that though there is a difference with regard to the techniques and tools that Friel employed to express his dramatic philosophy, both writers adopted the same dramatic philosophy ; for , both writers focused on the Irish language and culture as a marker of nationalism that was able to face the colonial cultural challenges of the past; and the challenges of globalizatio in contemporary Ireland.

Thus, both Yeats and Friel are considered significant figures who played a great role against the cultural challenges that faced Ireland. Yeats put the frame of the cultural nationalism and Friel followed his steps and carried out the Yeatsian vision from dream

to reality. To sum up, the relation between Yeats and Friel can be pinpointed in two - word formula: inspiration and continuity.

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