

## ABSTRACT

The Limits of Myth and Place in J.M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*  
and Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*

M. Marianna Fountain, M.A.

Mentor: Richard Rankin Russell, Ph.D.

This thesis considers the limits of myth, nature, and place in J.M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*. In *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, I argue that Synge remythologizes the Irish Deirdre myth in such a way that intends to remove fantastic elements from the tale. As he does so, he replaces the sentimental with characters that attribute enormous power to nature, maintaining the sense of fate inherent in myth while giving characters more agency than in previous versions. Nature is paradoxically both beneficent and indomitable, and Deirdre is empowered by submitting to it. Friel's *Faith Healer* retells Synge's *Deirdre*, and his characters struggle with the limits of their implacement even as they perform as artists. Myth, nature, and place all give boundaries that influence Synge and Friel's writing and empower their characters.

The Limits of Myth and Place in J.M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*  
and Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*

by

M. Marianna Fountain, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of English

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Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Thesis Committee

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Richard Rankin Russell, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Emily Setina, Ph.D.

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DeAnna M. Toten Beard, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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*for Lois*

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk,  
Or who laid its cornerstone,  
When the morning stars sang together,  
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Or who shut in the sea with doors,  
When it burst forth from the womb;  
When I made clouds its garment,  
And thick darkness its swaddling band,  
And prescribed bounds for it,  
And set bars and doors,  
And said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,  
And here shall your proud waves be stayed’?

*Job 38:4-11, The New Oxford Annotated Bible*

## CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: A Framework for The Limits of Myth and Place  
in J.M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*

And I walked across that yard, over those worn cobbles, towards the arched entrance, because *framed* in it, you would think posed symmetrically, were the four wedding guests; and in front of them, in his wheelchair, McGarvey.... And as I moved across that yard towards them and offered myself to them, then for the first time I had a simple and genuine sense of home-coming. Then for the first time there was no atrophying terror; and the maddening questions were silent. At long last I was renouncing chance.

Frank Hardy in *Faith Healer* 375-6, italics added

Frames provide necessary boundaries for works of art, limiting dimensions.

Artists create with the knowledge that their artwork will snugly fit within these limitations for its protection and aesthetic enhancement. Like art, humans are “framed” or limited, operating within a host of natural boundaries, such as body and place. Whether or not we acknowledge our limits, we are mortal, contained, and subject to higher powers. In theatre, actors are art framed by their bodies and the stage. Actors have a heightened awareness of the theatre space’s potential and of their bodies’ abilities. Both cognizant of the boundaries and aware of the unique and powerful art that can only exist by submitting to the limits of the stage, they elect to walk into and operate within these limiting frames.

Arguably the most important playwright in modern Irish drama, John Millington Synge wrote drama, poetry, and prose that stemmed from his fascination with peasant culture. His works memorably shocked audiences with his at times distastefully realistic representation of Irish peasant life. J.M. Synge was born in 1871 in Rathfarnham, a



suburb of Dublin, as the youngest of five children in a devout Protestant upper class family. In his youth, Synge grew disenchanted with the organized religion of his family, choosing instead to essentially worship nature. After studying Irish language, history, and culture at Trinity College Dublin, Synge studied music in Germany and philology at the Sorbonne in Paris before following William Butler Yeats's suggestion to return to Ireland for artistic inspiration. Synge's greatest stimulus was his observation of life on the Aran Islands: rugged, Gaeltacht islands off the West coast of Ireland where peasants lived simply and at the mercy of nature. In addition to publishing records of his five visits to islands in *The Aran Islands*, Synge included stories from these visits as well as from tales told in other regions of Ireland in his plays. His plays include *When the Moon Has Set*, *Riders to the Sea*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *The Tinker's Wedding*, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. All of his plays are united around themes of love of nature but a simultaneous recognition of its harshness, musical language, and simple life, with most of his plays also controversially upturning traditional views of gender and domesticity. Synge battled tuberculosis for a few years while writing, dying in 1909, before completing his final play *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

Synge's last and unfinished play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, is an adaptation of one of the core myths of Irish culture, the Cuchulain myth of the Ulster cycle. In an attempt to demythologize the tale—to strip it of fantastic, sentimental trappings—the playwright decided to turn from his peasant drama to make the characters in the foundational myth more human. However, his version unintentionally remythologizes the story: he reinscribes the mythic qualities into the tale by amplifying the role of nature and the agency of the characters. He wrote the main character, Deirdre, to be played by his love

interest actress Molly Allgood, and she directed and performed in the play after Synge's death. The legend is a tragic love story in which Deirdre is fated from birth to be so beautiful that she brings about her own ruin as well as the demise of the sons of Usna and all of Ireland. Attempting to avoid this fate, King Conchubor raises her to be his bride, but she escapes with the handsome Naisi, even though she recognizes the doom she must face. The two travel and live happily in nature with the sons of Usna until they are all summoned back to their death. Conchubor kills Naisi, and Deirdre stabs herself instead of marrying the aged king. The play chimes with Synge's marked love of nature, and Deirdre acts with a degree of agency as she recognizes the limitations imposed on her by nature and fate.

Another one of Ireland's greatest playwrights, Brian Friel was born in 1929, twenty years after Synge's death. Raised in a Catholic family in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, he attended St. Columb's College in Derry City and seminary at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, before electing to be a teacher and writer instead of a priest. Friel began as a short story writer and then wrote radio plays before penning his major dramas for the stage. His works highlight the shortcomings of institutions like the church in attempting to repair broken relationships and fragmented individuals. Additionally, he exposes negative effects of modernization and offers hope through community and ritual. Among his most widely acclaimed plays are *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, *The Freedom of the City*, *Aristocrats*, *Faith Healer*, *Translations*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and *Molly Sweeney*.

Written in 1977 and first performed in April 1979, *Faith Healer* is a four-act play with each act delivered as a monologue. Faith Healer Francis "Frank" Hardy, his wife Grace Hardy, and Frank's manager Teddy each narrate memories differently, leaving the

audience to quilt together stories using their own judgment of what is trustworthy. The three characters travel around Scotland and Wales in a van, and though often ineffective, Frank occasionally succeeds in healing people at his performances. The last event recounted is Frank's sacrificial death, which occurs when he returns home to Ballybeg. Grace, who has left her comfortable, predictable upbringing for the charlatan Frank, loses an infant along the way and dies after prolonged mental illness that follows Frank's death. Throughout the play, characters struggle with the limitations of place, but they ultimately yield, finding resolution.

In these plays and in others, Synge's legacy is imprinted on Friel's drama. In "Friel and Synge: Towards a Theatrical Language," Anthony Roche demonstrates many of the ways that Synge influences Friel's work. Roche makes clear that neither Synge nor Friel "works with pre-existing models or forms, realizing...the colonial implications of imposing a foreign sense of order on native subjects" (147). Even while inventing novel approaches to drama, they both adopt and recreate plots, themes, and characters from earlier sources, and the inspiration Friel takes from Synge is noteworthy. Roche draws parallels between the paternal-filial relationships in *Playboy of the Western World* and *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, shows how *The Well of the Saints* influences *Translations* and *Molly Sweeney*, and recognizes a common presentation of Catholicism and paganism in *The Shadow of the Glen* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (148, 155-6). Roche agrees with Richard Kearney that *Faith Healer* in some ways responds to *Playboy of the Western World*, since Frank and Grace seem to be descendants of Christy Mahon and Pegeen Mike (Roche 154). Kearney states that Friel writes "a cautionary tale in response to the romantic optimism of Synge's *Playboy*" (132). Indeed, *Faith Healer* interacts with *Playboy*, but its response to Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*—itself a rewriting of an

ancient Irish myth—introduces questions about the limits of demythologizing and remythologizing texts, especially myth.

In “Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer*,” Declan Kiberd further shows the enormous debt Friel owes to Synge for his inspiration for *Faith Healer*, arguing that Friel models the play on the Deirdre myth, and specifically on Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. The parallels Kiberd draws between the two texts are plentiful and convincing. The destiny-driven Northern Irish female leaves her guardian’s privileged home to live with a charming vagrant in Scotland. Additionally, Teddy plays the role of Naisi’s brothers, helping the couple to live happily, for a time, as wanderers. In both stories, the characters are fated to return to Ireland, where they find their graves awaiting them. Kiberd acknowledges that “one of the great themes of Synge’s play and of the original Gaelic legend is Deirdre’s love of place. Before her final departure from Scotland, she lists the names of all the abandoned places with tender care” (Kiberd 212). Also noting Grace’s incantation of place names, Kiberd insinuates that Deirdre and her counterpart Grace share a love of place, despite the fact that the more modern Grace “fouls up the order of her husband’s incantation” and grows “so distraught that she cannot get beyond the opening lines” (213).

Even as he links the two versions, Kiberd notes two key differences in Friel’s retelling. First, Deirdre’s nearly immediate suicide after Naisi’s death contrasts Grace’s year-long struggle before her death; in this aspect Friel’s version of the myth is truer to the original myth than Synge’s version. Second, Friel adds the picture of the “artist as inspired con-man” who “reshap[es] past events” (213, 221). Friel himself acts as an artist reshaping Synge’s existing myth, and Synge, as one who recreates the version of the Deirdre myth he inherits. Kiberd’s examination of the two myths, especially regarding

the Deirdre characters' contrasting attitudes toward death and Friel's addition of artist-as-conman, leaves room for another, deeper contrast to be drawn regarding nature and place.

A significant difference between the two tales that has heretofore been neglected is the way the plays portray the natural world and place. As Kiberd states, Synge and Friel are both known for their love of place, and characters in both *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and *Faith Healer* exhibit a special attraction to place. In this thesis, I will discuss nature as well as places both built and natural. Synge focuses more on nature; for Synge and for his characters in *Deirdre*, natural landscape functions as artistic inspiration, limiting but also inspiring them. Friel, on the other hand, focuses more on place; in *Faith Healer*, Friel emphasizes more the limiting power of built places and calls into question the concept of home. In both plays, characters interact with the natural world, such as through animals and natural light, and both acknowledge the importance of place in regards to geography and villages.

Whereas Synge's characters appreciate nature and ultimately yield to nature's control out of respect for it, Friel's characters struggle to master place, undermining its authority and silencing it before ultimately acknowledging its power. Kiberd's identification that Frank Hardy primarily functions as a distorter and a manipulator introduces this difference in the two myths without stating it outright; Frank attempts to manipulate the natural state of places and human bodies. He embodies the modern human's pursuit of supernatural power and demonstrates the inevitability of and empowerment that come with yielding to the limits of place.

Synge cherishes nature in his drama. In *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*, Oona Frawley examines Synge's autobiography, his reflections on *The Aran Islands*, and his plays to discuss his "profound preoccupation with Irish

landscape” (Frawley 81). Along with others, Nicholas Grene has discussed Synge’s transformative encounter with Darwinism, which affects his treatment of nature in his works. The playwright’s strong reaction to Darwin’s hypotheses drives him to leave his family home in favor of living for a time in the harsh natural conditions of Aran (85). Like the mythical Deirdre, Synge prefers nature, even with hostile conditions, to civilized culture. The *Deirdre* playwright travels to Aran “hop[ing] to find a way of bridging the gap between himself and the natural world as separately evolving entities” (85). As Synge shows a desire to be dominated by nature and to thereby become part of nature, he imparts that yearning to his characters as well. He attaches emotion to his experiences in nature, and he even finds deep emotional pleasure in being overcome by nature, in recognizing his relative weakness in respect to the power of nature and the limits imposed on him by implacement. Seemingly as an outgrowth of his own longing to be swept up by the natural, Synge writes controlling natural places and willingly submissive characters into his plays, especially *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

In essays, Synge writes of his observations of and reverence for nature, at the same time proclaiming the merits of wandering through nature as a tramp. In “The Oppression of the Hills,” he describes a sunrise as bringing “a morning of almost supernatural radiance,” supporting the idea that nature and the supernatural exist on a nearly level plane (209). In “People and Places,” Synge also vividly describes the beauty of nature and discusses the benefits of living in nature. He states: “Man is naturally a nomad...and all wanderers have finer intellectual and physical perceptions than men who are condemned to local habitations” (195). Their closeness to nature sharpens their keenness and gives them “unnatural powers,” as he discusses in “The Vagrants of Wicklow” (203). Considering the tramp and art, Synge states:

In all the circumstances of this tramp life there is a certain wildness that gives it romance and a peculiar value for those who look at life in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the arts also. In all the healthy movements of art, variations from the ordinary types of manhood are made interesting for the ordinary man, and in this way only the higher arts are universal...there is another art—sometimes confounded with it—founded on the freak of nature, in itself a mere sign of atavism or disease...To be quite plain, the tramp in real life, Hamlet and Faust in the arts, are variations; but the maniac in real life, and Des Esseintes and all his ugly crew in the arts, are freaks only. (208)

Nature equips those who commune with it—especially tramps who live in and wander through it—as artists who are not only “made interesting for the ordinary man” but also entrusted with “unnatural powers” (208, 203). As Synge wanders through nature, he is inspired as a playwright.

Just as Synge’s composition process seems to hinge largely on his interaction with nature—including his hiking through wilderness and traveling through diverse landscapes and villages in Ireland—Friel shows great personal attachment to the place he inhabits while writing. Unlike Synge, though, Friel is known as a homebody, even as he finally had to travel more frequently for his plays. In a 1968 interview with Alan Bunce, Friel reports that he always writes in his home near Muff, about 150 miles from Dublin. Like Synge and many other authors, Friel finds inspiration most when in a particular place. Friel records solitude and natural place as integral in his creative process: “I never see civilized society at all” (Bunce 76). While Friel’s plays as a whole feature barer stages and fewer overt references to nature than Synge’s works, Friel undeniably attributes great power to place and questions modern humanity’s abuse of nature.

Phenomenologist Edward Casey explores the relationship between humans and place in ways that are pertinent to this discussion in “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena.” He recognizes some

limitations of place but further mines the depths of the symbiotic relationship humans have with nature and place. He argues, “We are not only *in* places but *of* them,” holding that humans can and do shape places (19). Referring to both built and natural places, Casey states: “Perception remains as *constitutive* as it is constituted. This is especially evident when we perceive places: our immersion in them is not subjection to them, since we may modify their influence even as we submit to it (19). Friel’s characters in many of his plays, including *Faith Healer*, wrestle with their relationship to place, continually revealing their modern desire to conquer nature mixed with frustration that results from finding that they are ultimately not supernatural. As characters in *Deirdre of the Sorrows* and *Faith Healer* yield to place, they find their identity and even destiny in a sense controlled by place, and this submission affords them greater freedom.

These limitations are not wholly impersonal forces; nature is personal enough that at times, it can be seen as a relational character in the plays. In “Nature and Silence,” ecocritic Christopher Manes advocates that readers heed the unheard voice of nature in literature. Synge’s landscape is a silent but thoroughly described character that offers protection and relationship to the characters who respect its position as limiter of human life. Critics have already identified Synge’s unique portrayal of nature as both a divisive and unifying figure in his plays, but few have discussed nature’s personal role in *Deirdre*. As Joy Kennedy-O’Neill reveals in her analysis of *Riders to the Sea*, Synge characterizes nature as a relational figure sympathetic to the humans’ plight but with a will of its own; though she does not write specifically about *Deirdre*, the characterization of nature continues in this play as the environment seems to actively protect and grieve for Deirdre and Naisi. In *Deirdre* and *Faith Healer*, place both empowers and limits, seeming to waver between beneficence and cruelty. This very duality that seems paradoxical



demonstrates characters' active symbiotic relationship with place in which they are limited whether or not they are willing to accept those limitations.

The second chapter of this thesis, "'Never fantastic': Nature and the Remythologizing Artist in J.M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*" explores first, the limits of place on characters, and second, the limits of myth on the artist. Synge's marked love of nature pervades the play, and his characters interact with nature much as he interacts with Irish mythology—with reverence and submission that appears intertwined with fate. I define the Syngean artist and demonstrate how these figures must relate to the landscapes through which they wander, in which they dwell, and to which they return. Synge presents the characters lovingly submitting to the sky, natural light, animals, plants, and earth out of a deep respect. Tracing the parallels between the power of nature and the power of myth, I explain the concept of remythologization in the context of *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. As artists, humans must yield to certain limitations; when a storyteller chooses to rewrite a myth, the changes he can make may be manifold but not boundless. Synge's approach to the Deirdre myth intends to strip the ancient tale of any residual sentimentality applied by his contemporaries in an effort to return to the heart of the myth as a twentieth-century playwright. Even though Synge purposes to render the myth de-fantasticalized, his exaltation of creation in his language shows that he views nature, which limits characters, as fantastic. Myth itself holds an inextinguishable spark of the fantastic that limits Synge; he cannot rid the myth of its power.

The third chapter, "The Fantastic Meets the Natural: the Artist and Place in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*," demonstrates how Friel recrafts Synge's version of the Deirdre myth in his greatest play, expanding the role of the artist and reevaluating the artist's relationship to place. Similar to Synge's *Deirdre*, the Frielian artist is migratory, but he

shows less reverence for places, attempting to manipulate them for his own purpose. In Friel, artists are able to exercise even more agency than in Synge, signaling a trajectory towards increased free will and away from a dependence on fate in Irish myth; still, however, characters must eventually yield to their fated end. Place remains a powerful force intertwined with fate and is at times benevolent and at times hostile, depending on the artist's attitude and actions toward it. The artist must suspend self-criticism in order to create his art. In coming home—to himself, to the theatre, and to submission to the power of place—the artist can sacrifice himself for potentially redemptive communal healing. This submissive homecoming is not without mystery for Friel, though. Frank Hardy does yield to a place, but the fixedness of that place remains questionable, as home is always in flux. Throughout, Friel's artists attempt to alter the places they visit just as Synge and Friel both alter the myth they inherit, but they all must continue to operate within the boundaries set by place and myth, willingly walking into the frame of limitations.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Never fantastic”: Nature and the Remythologizing Artist in J.M. Synge’s *Deirdre of the Sorrows*

I do not believe in the possibility of a purely fantastic unmodern ideal breezy spring-dayish Cuchulainoid National Theatre...No drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are *never fantastic*, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulainoid.

Synge, *Letters*; Dasenbrock 136

In his final and unfinished play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, J.M. Synge attempts to remove the fantastic from the Deirdre myth while writing about nature with his characteristically beautiful, musical language. In doing this, Synge brings to life a nature that—like the nature Christopher Manes presents—has agency and voice. The human characters in Synge’s play interact with nature in such a way as to recognize its limits. Their recognition of their limits as humans, similar to an artist’s need for a limiting frame, grants a sort of peace to the characters in the play. Moreover, as Synge attempts to strip his version of the Deirdre myth of fantastic elements in order to present only the “fundamental realities of life,” he unintentionally reinscribes the fantastic into the play with his descriptions of nature. Just as his characters must yield to their natural limits, so must Synge operate within the limits of the myth, which I argue is inherently fantastic.

Based on his own habits and on his characters, Synge and many scholars pose the Syngean tramp as the figure of the ideal artist. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Synge did not advocate a “spiritual immersion in place” (Matthews 172). Synge was more concerned with a detailed description of place than with a mystical attachment to the soil or with the nation as place. From his unique stance grew an appreciation for “nomadism,

vagabondage, and geographical mobility” (Matthews 183). As stated earlier, in his essays “The Vagrants of Wicklow” and “The Oppression of the Hills,” Synge likens vagrants to artists. Citing the recollections of Synge’s cousin Florence Ross, Mary C. King writes about the tramp figures in Synge’s drama: “the tramps and travellers...possess the imaginative vision Synge attributes to the middle-class artist” (King 13). P.J. Matthews agrees, calling Synge’s tramps “vibrant agents of cultural cross-pollination and keepers of cultural memory” as well as “transformative agents of regeneration” (183). As an artist, Synge saw himself and was perceived by others as a quiet observer of people and nature; according to Francis Bickley, he only broke silence to talk about “people and events” rather than opinions (14). In *“Deirdre of the Sorrows: Literature First...Drama Afterwards,”* Ann Saddlemyer shows how Synge has further woven together the roles of the artist and “the lonely, sensitive observer of nature’s moods” not only in his personal writing practice but also as part of the substance of his play (91). She suggests that in some ways, the artist identifies with the hunter and the tramp, who familiarize themselves with all of nature, yet feel unfamiliar to other people. This definition of the Syngean artist aligns with Synge’s tendency to promote escaping to the world outside the home and casts Deirdre as an artist who leaves the safety of her home in favor of the natural wilderness. Deirdre’s escape paradoxically yields her a new degree of independence as the Syngean artist while still subjecting her to the occasionally harsh rule of nature.

A self-identified tramp, Synge interacted with nature in a way that profoundly affected his art. The playwright is known for his retreats to the Aran Islands, where he was in awe of the force of nature and the primitive culture, and for his travel writings on different regions of Ireland, like Wicklow and Kerry; additionally, he explicitly wrote about the effects of nature on his drafting. In his letters to Molly Allgood recounting his

recent writing habits, Synge recalls his long treks through the Wicklow Mountains and their effect on his writing of *Deirdre*. He reports that at the times when he was most inspired to write and was most prolific, Synge was hiking for two and a half hours at a time, going around Little Sugar Loaf all the way to Bray (*Letters* 209). Wandering through and observing natural places undeniably affected both his ability to write and the content of his writing, if for no other reason than to inspire him to write about the effects of nature. Synge defines himself as an artistic vagabond when he signs many of his letters to Molly as “Old Tramp.” That Synge views himself as a tramp and the tramp as an artist shows the importance he places on the relationship between dwelling in natural place to artistic creation.

Not only was the natural world uncontestably instrumental in his composition process, but nature also serves as an important, even controlling character in Synge’s plays. Just as in *Riders to the Sea*, nature replaces the supernatural in Synge’s *Deirdre*, interacting with human characters as a personal ruling force of the universe. In Una Chaudhuri’s description of geopathology in *Staging Place: the Geography of Modern Drama*, she introduces a dramatic type of “ecological spirituality, one in which such things as commanding heights, wide vistas, and dazzling sunlight seem to be more than merely metaphorical representations of the divine” (65). Ann Saddlemyer anticipated this claim, writing that Synge’s experiences on Aran led him to believe that the natural and the supernatural “are all part of the same spectrum of experience” (91). Furthermore, she charts Synge’s understanding of the individual’s relationship with nature: “The individual...could not achieve wholeness in himself until he was in harmony with nature and had attempted a wholeness within the entire cycle of experience” (91). Each human character’s agency is to some degree contingent on his relationship with natural place.

Characters view nature as a teacher, guide, and provider, and the protagonists in *Deirdre of the Sorrows* readily yield to nature's power in the way they order their daily activities around the heavenly bodies. As is evidenced even in the opening scene of the play, the characters in *Deirdre* order their system of time around the natural cycle of the moon. The Old Woman explains to Lavarcham how long Deirdre and the Sons of Usna have been gone hunting in terms of the lunar cycle, and Deirdre decides when to migrate based on the changing of the tide, which is subject to the moon's power. Characters refer to the "moon" and "sun" seventeen times each, demonstrating the importance of the heavenly bodies in their daily lives. Deirdre recalls that at night "the stars were our friends only," intimating that the heavenly bodies not only direct their lives but also are personally acquainted with them (261). Stronger still is the reality that the sun and moon must sanction even the love between Deirdre and Naisi; when Naisi's brother officiates their simple wedding ceremony, he marries them by the power vested in him by nature. He says: "By the sun and moon and the whole earth, I wed Deirdre to Naisi...May the air bless you, and water and the wind, the sea, and all the hours of the sun and moon" (164). During their lives, Synge's characters in *Deirdre* benefit from willingly submitting to the natural rhythms and direction of nature.

Characters show respect for the character of nature as they listen to and respond to its voice, and the most literal way Synge's characters heed the voice of nature is in their relationships with animals. The often-mentioned creatures in *Deirdre* serve as guides and teachers. For example, Naisi is certain he will be able to find his way through the woods because he will "hear the dogs barking...and their noise will guide [him]" (160). Even when hidden behind doors, he hopes the canines will voice directions so that he will not get lost. Earlier in the play, Synge writes that Deirdre "has the birds to school her" (153).

Like the guiding dogs, the teaching birds are given voices that assist the characters and meet their needs. Synge's animals are not given human voices; instead, their own natural voices are heard and heeded for the good of the humans. Each facet of nature is respected and given a unique voice, resulting in a controlling yet ultimately harmonious and ordered environment.

While the prophecy in the original Deirdre myth is emptied of its power, the characters still live under the prophecy of nature: the reality that they will all die. They relate, then, to nature as a controlling figure that ultimately directs the fate of other characters. Synge arguably writes more about the characters' relationship to the wilderness than to each other; for them, nature is paradoxically both a terrifying master and a sympathetic, loving protector. Their speech is laced with nearly worshipful references to landscape, the heavens, and animals. Just as Synge displaces himself to the Aran Islands, at least in part to feel overcome by nature, Deirdre, Naisi, and his brothers feel drawn away from the civilized culture toward the wildness of untamed nature. Like Synge, they recognize nature as an indomitable force, a fearsome figure that ultimately controls their fate.

But even as nature seems to control their fate, the characters hope that it sympathizes with them in a paradoxical way that Joy Kennedy-O'Neill highlights as a theme in Synge's earlier play *Riders to the Sea*. Sympathetic yet at times inexplicably severe, nature as understood by Synge's characters acts as though it has agency. In the play's final lines, Lavarcham demonstrates this Syngean characterization of nature when she insists that nature is so grieved by Deirdre and Naisi's deaths that nature, too, would perish of sympathy pains if it were mutable or mortal. Lavarcham says: "Deirdre is dead, and Naisi is dead, and if the oaks and stars could die for sorrow it's a dark sky and a hard

and naked earth we'd have this night" (187). Deirdre and Naisi both speak of nature as a protector and provider; they repeatedly refer to the "safety of the woods" and being "safe in the hills" (157). Believing that nature controls their fate as they travel and camp, even in Scotland, they resign themselves to whatever misfortunes nature allows them, and their willing submission to its power allows them peace and happiness in their lives.

Unlike characters in previous Deirdre myths, Synge's characters are not completely without agency precisely because of their relationship to nature, but they are empowered as they relate to nature as a friend. Naisi personally identifies with the landscape; in moments of great emotion, he says things like "I see we're as happy as the leaves on the young trees" (229). At times, characters relate themselves to nature, and at times, they perceive that nature relates to humans. As a controlling force in nature, the moon has authority over the characters, yet the female characters can be likened to the moon; this connection to the natural world empowers female characters. Donna Gerstenberger associates women with nature, claiming: "women as keepers of the natural are closely bound to the life cycle as well as being natural agents of fate" (92).

Furthermore, she links the three major women in the play with the three phases of the Moon Goddess, also known as the Triple Goddess. Deirdre represents the crescent moon; Lavarcham, the full moon; and the old woman, the new moon (92). Those Gerstenberger regards as "keepers of the natural" and "natural agents of fate" are uniquely poised to become Syngean artist figures. While Gerstenberger highlights Deirdre, Lavarcham, and the Old Woman largely because of their gender, I argue that these artistic traits also exist in other characters, some of whom are male. Even so, Synge's empowering portrayal of women on the Irish stage is not to be ignored; discussing Synge's unique presentation of gender roles is a rewarding effort but outside the scope of this project. Here, I have



focused on tracing the limits of place and myth on artists, both characters and playwrights.

Synge's Deirdre is a vagrant queen who attempts with some success to redirect her fate because of her harmonious relationship with this paradoxically controlling, teaching, and nurturing nature and because of her recognition that nature is a frame or limitation on her life, not because of a mastery of nature. She constantly longs "to be straying to the hills," and her will is to be "straying around picking flowers or nuts, or sticks itself...gathering new life," according to Lavarcham (*Deirdre* 183, 185). As a result of her appreciation for natural place, Deirdre and others perceive that her surroundings are generally sympathetic toward her. For instance, when Conchubor expresses concern about her being out in the thunder at night, Lavarcham wishfully responds: "She's used to every track and pathway and the lightning itself wouldn't let down its flame to singe the beauty of her like" (185). As an observer of nature and therefore a Syngean artist, it is assumed that Deirdre will be granted special favor; even so, she never directs her own fate or the fate of others without what she perceives as the permission of the higher force of nature.

Furthermore, she uses ecocentric language to conceive of any power she hopes to acquire in terms of natural power, proving that she views nature as the source or ultimate wielder of power. For instance, when she dreams of "hav[ing] the right of a queen who is a master, taking her own choice," Deirdre hopes: "maybe this day I will turn the men of Ireland like a wind blowing on the heath" (199). Her nature-loving language empowers her by linking her to the natural world, harnessing nature's power as her own to the extent that she is allowed. Similarly, her desires are all related in ecocentric language. Her description of her ideal mate—"a man with his hair like the raven maybe and his skin

like the snow and his lips like blood spilt on it”—supports her ardent love of nature and her understanding that her greatest desires are met by a power beyond herself (191).

Deirdre’s recognition of nature as a limitation points to her character, which is, in a way, the character of an artist whose art is her life; we can see her quite literally functioning as an artist from her first interaction with Conchubor as she weaves her tapestry. When the king insults her, she goes to her loom as she talks about wishing for a man. She is “figuring” “three young men, and they chasing in the green gap of a wood” (191). Because these men are undeniably Naisi and his brothers, an audience member might wonder if she has the power to control fate even by her art—if she can weave events into reality. Instead, though, she merely documents what she has observed previously. When inclement weather—a function of nature—drives Naisi to seek refuge at Deirdre’s door, he recounts his initial meeting with the would-be queen. She has already met him, and her weaving, then, is an imitation of what she has observed in her wanderings, clearly demonstrating her role as a Syngean artist. Her bold invitation for Naisi to take shelter in her home can only be valid and accepted if the weather drives him indoors; while she appears strong, she is only as powerful as nature allows her to be.

Deirdre is an artist figure because of her relationship with natural place and not because of her gender, as some have argued; therefore, the other women in the play are not necessarily artist figures. Their relationship to nature rather than their status as women enables them whatever degree of agency they have. Donna Gerstenberger has linked Deirdre, the Old Woman, and Lavarcham with the moon at different stages in the lunar cycle, stating that the female characters are closer to nature than the male ones and therefore may be regarded as artists. To classify these women as the Syngean artist-as-tramp may prove difficult, though; Synge always portrays them doing their duty within

the home, never wandering from place to place through nature. Instead of acting in harmony with nature, they choose not to act because of nature; they are mastered by it. While they fearfully fret about the doom sure to fall on Deirdre and the others, and while they observe the harshness of nature, they never approach natural places as Deirdre does to “gather new life” (185). The Old Woman and Lavarcham begin the play debating over whether they should leave the house and act to keep Deirdre from being caught outside in the dark when Conchubor and Fergus angrily come to call. With noticeable anxiety and “with a sign of helplessness,” they resolve to look busy and let things play out as they will (183). Both the Old Woman and Lavarcham prefer observing events to shaping them. Lavarcham even concedes her powerlessness to redirect the course of Deirdre’s destiny playing out: “It wasn’t *my* wish brought them or could send them away” (183). Furthermore, she refuses to officiate Naisi and Deirdre’s wedding ceremony at the end of the first act, even though she knows the words and customs.

Unlike Deirdre, Lavarcham responds to her inability to direct fate by blaming the other characters for the doom that will occur at various points in the text, assuming they all have control of their circumstances. Though she sometimes refers to nature as powerful, she often either credits Deirdre with responsibility or sees Conchubor as the controller of all fate; sometimes, she blames Deirdre for expediting her own demise by willfully disobeying Conchubor. “In the end of all there is none can go against Conchubor,” states Lavarcham (198). “If any went against Conchubor,” she continues, “it’s sorrows he’d earn and the shortening of his day of life” (199). Though Conchubor is powerful, he is not omnipotent as Lavarcham seems to believe; all the characters are limited by nature. Another time, the questions Lavarcham directs to Deirdre assume great personal responsibility on the queen’s part and little dependence on the outplaying of a

prophesied fate: “Are you mad, Deirdre? Are you choosing this night to destroy the world?” (213). Statements such as these are peppered throughout the play, suggesting that Lavarcham looks more quickly to human action than to fate to explain causation. Interestingly, though, Lavarcham rarely if ever seems to take to heart the personal responsibility she imposes on others. More often an observer of humans than of nature, Lavarcham always appears worried about the doom to come yet can never act to prevent harm. By contrast, Deirdre appreciates and submits to nature and is thereby empowered to exert whatever agency nature allows her.

Synge’s *Deirdre* features a markedly stronger emphasis on natural place and a seemingly greater degree of personal agency than other versions of the Deirdre myth. The dual emphasis may at first seem paradoxical in light of the sense of fated doom pervading the myth. However, understanding the Syngean artist to be a tramp figure—a wanderer and observer who is by his appreciation of natural place given the ability to operate under nature’s jurisdiction in unprecedented ways—affords a new reading of the play that incorporates the otherwise disparate and irreconcilable emphases. Additionally, it acknowledges the artist’s limitations while also acknowledges the artist’s creative acts within this frame.

Synge’s motivation for and method of retelling the Deirdre myth relates to his conception of this role of the artist, and by extension, the role of nature. As he can demythologize the story only to remythologize it—never fully denaturing it—Synge parallels the limits that natural place imposes on his characters. Even his exceptionally spirited characters must ultimately yield to the power of natural place.

At the turn of the century, the Revivalists reawakened ancient Irish tradition, choosing mythological subjects for many of their plays. With the recent publication of

Standish J. O'Grady's *History of Ireland: Heroic Period* in 1878, the common man once again had access to Ireland's great legends (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 176). Of all the myths retold, the Deirdre myth was the most popular of the time, with Synge and four of his contemporaries staging her story; Douglas Hyde, Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, and George Russell all penned versions of the Deirdre myth (Johnson 86). Each of Synge's fellow playwrights portrayed the story in a larger-than-life manner, dramatizing the tale in mythic, arguably fantastic, proportions.

Convinced that the only drama worth sharing is peasant drama, Synge intentionally avoided writing about any Irish myth in his first plays. Soon after Synge's death, Francis Bickley remembered that for Synge, in peasants "the god and the beast were mixed in just proportions; corresponding to that juxtaposition of exaltation and brutality which figures in his theory of poetry..." (25). Because of the radical effect that reading *On the Origin of Species* had on him in his youth, Synge was left permanently distrustful of organized religion and ideas of the supernatural, though he was always interested in the question of belief. I argue that these effects contributed to his avoidance of writing about mythology for the first years of his career, for he could not stomach the determinism on one hand and the sentimentalism on the other that characterized his contemporaries' treatments of myth.

Still, despite his contemporaries' overemphasis of the mystical in their Deirdre stories, or perhaps in order to provide a corrective for their exaggerated tales, Synge decided to fully venture into mythical territory on the stage after merely visiting it in his other, more peasant-focused dramas, and scholars have many theories about his motives. Identifying his impetus for finally embracing the mythic genre will help us discern Synge's conception of the role of the artist and its important connection to natural place.

As Synge demythologized and remythologized the Deirdre story, his characters exercise a greater degree of agency than in previous versions; as they submit to the power of natural place, they are themselves empowered as artists while ultimately still under the control of a higher power. In the following paragraphs, I will outline a few reasons critics cite for Synge's decision to write about Deirdre, commenting on the strengths of each before attempting to synthesize them all in order to better understand the relationship between myth, the artist, and nature in Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

Some scholars see no shift in Synge's work whatsoever; Declan Kiberd leads this school of thought that argues Synge has been interested in writing on mythology since he began writing. They cite his letters, his translation of Andrew MacCurtain's Old Irish text on the Aran Islands in 1901, and his formal study of Irish Gaelic at the Sorbonne in Paris. After all, he admittedly read Irish mythology often; he once wrote in a letter to Lady Gregory: "'*Cuchulain* is still a part of my daily bread'" (Kiberd 90). In his essay "Celtic Mythology," Synge praises Irish mythology as "one of the most entrancing branches of scholarship (366). In another essay, "The Epic of Ulster," he reviews Lady Gregory's translation of the Deirdre myth, praising her work but recognizing certain omissions that he would not have made (369-70). Synge was arguably more familiar with Irish mythology than any of his contemporaries; surely such familiarity should suggest his deep appreciation. In letters, Synge stated that tackling the Deirdre myth would be an "amusing" challenge, not because it would be different from the rest of his work but because his version of the tale would starkly contrast those produced by his contemporaries. When asked about the assumed similarities between his forthcoming play and those of Russell and Yeats, Synge said to Edward Stephens: "People are entitled to use those old stories in any way they wish. My treatment of the story of Deirdre

wouldn't be like either of theirs!'” (Kiberd 177). Even as he champions authorial freedom, he ironically differs from his contemporaries primarily because he sticks closer to the original medieval mythic texts than they do by translating from the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* and using Andrew MacCurtain's text rather than only working from recent translations. He shows great respect for and knowledge of the original texts, regardless of his ultimate conclusions about the myth.

Some critics, on the other hand, believe Synge's decision to write *Deirdre* was an inevitable departure from the rest of his corpus prompted by changes in his circumstances. Motivated by external conditions, Synge may have written about the myth because of his own illness, poverty, heartsick love for the much younger Molly Allgood, estrangement from his family and home, or impending death. One can easily see parallels between Deirdre's story and his own, and he quite possibly approaches the myth in order to make sense of his own experience for himself or for others. If this is the case, then Synge as the artist is arguably drawn to myth from outside events, in a sense proving the power of mythic fate and the limits of the artist's personal agency. Such a claim is relevant to this study but not the immediate focus of it; I do not seek to give a strictly biographical reading of the play. Furthermore, Nicholas Grene suggests that Synge's biographic parallels to the story should be noted and appreciated, but he cautions against the tendency to sentimentalize: “To read *Deirdre* as though it was Synge saying goodbye to the world, rationalizing his coming death by a romantic ideal of young love for ever unspoiled, is a mawkish misinterpretation” (168). Grene expresses clearly both that Synge's environment and circumstances influence his decision to alter the subject matter of his work and that the play need not be viewed only as a reflection of Synge's own life. The situation in which Synge finds himself influences his decision to try his hand at

rewriting the Deirdre myth, and the weight of these implications is felt more fully when one explores the relationship of the Syngean artist and nature.

Still other scholars might blend the first two stances, viewing Synge's embrace of the Deirdre myth not as a departure but rather as a detour on his same basic dramatic trajectory. This final play shows his penchant for parody and his devotion to peasant-like characters, even though the subject matter of the *Deirdre* myth is inherently neither parodic nor peasant. In a famous letter to Stephen McKenna, Synge writes that he "resolutely set his face against the use of myth in his plays" until he chose to parody Cuchulain with Christy Mahon in *Playboy*. Over the course of his brief career, then, he gradually adopted mythic subjects for the purpose of parody rather than exaltation, in contrast to his contemporaries. In addition, *Deirdre*, like all his previous plays, is marked by Synge's characteristic use of language as well as his leitmotif of characters choosing to depart into the outside world, regardless of its associated hostile conditions, rather than to remain in domestic comfort.

These critics who reconcile *Deirdre* with his other works yet understand it to be a new endeavor make much of the fact that Synge's characters in *Deirdre* are more human than those in other representations of the myth: they are driven by more complex psychological and sexual urges and their language is still colored by Synge's characteristic peasant vernacular, despite his rather awkward attempts at linguistic alterations. As Grene notes, the portrayal of class stratification and the poorly paganized language are perhaps the play's two biggest flaws (170-1). These elements are largely deemed unsuccessful precisely because they sometimes fall into Synge's familiar constructions: while the characters are supposed to behave as royalty, they seem to be hybridized peasant-rulers; while the language should be pre-Christian, it sounds like a



stilted version of the Christian language of his previous plays. Whereas in *Riders to the Sea*, Synge's language effectively blends pagan and Christian elements, in *Deirdre* the characters stumble over residual notes of Christian language. Perhaps Synge fails to present truly authentic characters and language, but his failure is rooted in consistency with his previous strengths and tendencies. Even in his attempt to escape his typical style for this play, Synge unavoidably introduces his characteristic tropes and style into his new dramatic undertaking of mythology.

Furthermore, Synge's retelling of the Deirdre myth can be viewed as a different branch of the same corpus by noting the many ways it mirrors themes in his previous works. *The Well of the Saints*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and *Playboy of the Western World* all suggest the superiority of outside to inside, of leaving rather than staying. In *Deirdre*, as in each of these plays, characters choose to leave the comforts of home and established community in favor of the wilderness and the company of less reputable characters. Additionally, Synge continues on the same track as before with his representation of nature, especially as seen in *Riders to the Sea*. Joy Kennedy-O'Neill writes about nature as a character that is dually harsh and sympathetic in *Riders to the Sea*. Likewise, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* portrays nature paradoxically as a beneficent yet indomitable character in relationship with the other characters. In these ways, Synge does not truly veer from his earlier creative trajectory; rather, he merely extends his trajectory to encompass myth.

Taking a nuanced version of the same-but-different stance, critics have argued more recently that Synge sets out, in characteristic Syngean form, to subvert expectations; in this case, he demythologizes the text. Reed Way Dasenbrock states: "In *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, he inaugurated what was to become an important current in

modern Irish literature, the conscious demythologizing of Irish mythology” (142).

Weldon Thornton shows that Synge had been interested in the myth long before he began writing the play, but he states that “Synge did not share his contemporaries’ veneration of Irish myth or their hope of redeeming Ireland through its resurrection” (145). Thornton anticipates Dasenbrock’s argument when he holds that Synge’s goal with the play was to demythologize the story—to make it relational and personal rather than mythic (152).

Synge takes on a completely new venture when he delves into mythology, but he does so for reasons consistent with his motivations for other plays. Nelson O’Ceallaigh Ritschel reminds readers of the similarities between Deirdre and Nora of *In the Shadow of the Glen*: both women take hold of “autonomy” by rejecting old men as husbands.

Furthermore, he argues, “Both, given the context of the native culture, are highly consistent with that culture—and both characters’ decisions are made by an attitude that embraces the culture, rather than the stirring of a hidden ambiguous spirit from within” (Ritschel 54). Ritschel sees Deirdre’s actions not as indications of courageous autonomy but merely as a Syngean trope that is only to be expected in the culture of his plays.

Unlike the third, blended stance, though, which argues for sedimentary sameness within overall variation, this demythologizing would be decidedly intentional. These arguably more important similarities do not sneak in, negatively affecting the quality of the work. Instead, Synge’s consistent decision to subvert expectations attempts here to deconstruct myth. He seeks to replace mystical elements with human psychology and human action in order to mock the valuation of mythology in relation to Irish culture. Synge attempts to demythologize the text: both his omissions from and his additions to the standing legend attest to his desire to give characters a greater degree of agency than myth traditionally allows. Critics refer to several instances in the text that support

Deirdre's power to actively effect change rather than passively be affected by fate in the way Synge's contemporaries present her.

His purposeful avoidance of certain deterministic details that other Revivalists highlight in their versions suggests that he does intend to give characters more agency and thereby demythologize the text. Yeats, for instance, highlights the traditional chess scene between Deirdre and Naisi in which the two serve as symbolic pawns, but Synge omits this detail (Gerstenberger 89). In Yeats's far more mystical rendition, this scene clearly sums up his overall portrayal of characters completely controlled by fate, powerless to act against it as mere pieces in a cosmic game. Synge's refusal to include this chess scene eliminates the tale's most obvious symbol of determinism. By diminishing the role of prophecy, beginning the story at Deirdre's maturation rather than at her birth, and omitting overt deterministic details, Synge's demythologized version of the traditional story deemphasizes the role of fate.

Synge's omissions of traditional material affect the role of fate in the play. In Andrew MacCurtain's version of the Deirdre myth, which Synge translated while on the Aran Islands and which likely served as his source for the play, prophecy plays a much more visible role than it does in Synge's *Deirdre*. Whereas Synge's play begins after Deirdre is mature, the medieval myth spans Deirdre's entire life, from gestation to grave, including a prophecy before her birth. While she is still in utero, a prophecy is spoken over her life at a feast, and the neonate cries out from the womb in response (Johnson 72). To be sure, prophecy still exists in Synge's retelling, but many critics argue that Synge includes the prophecy merely for convention rather than as a decisive force. For example, Ann Saddlemyer states: "He rejected all dependence on prophecy or premonition" (94). Similarly, Jon R. Farris remarks that Synge's version handles

prophecy differently than previous versions: “The prophecy is not made to motivate or even to explain the events in the action of the play; the action proceeds from characterization. Rather than as a plot device, Synge uses the prophecy for mood, for a sense of the inevitable” (245). By limiting the role of the prophecy, Synge attempts to demythologize the Deirdre story and give Deirdre a greater degree of agency.

Just as Deirdre acts under the authority of natural place to exercise a degree of agency over her life, Synge remythologizes the traditional story by acting within the constructs of the myth to subvert it. At times, Deirdre may appear to have complete control over her circumstances, in no way subject to a fate imposed by external forces. Jon Farris and Michael Begnal hold that Deirdre has complete free will and that she determines her own fate; after all, in every act she independently makes a major decision: first to get married, then to return to Emain, then to commit suicide (Farris 246). Unhindered by any power higher than herself, only Deirdre’s “joy of life”—part of her own personality—dooms her to the grave, “rain[ing] inevitable death and destruction and sorrow” on everyone involved (251). Begnal points to Deirdre’s heroic motives and her controlled strong emotions to show Deirdre’s agency. He argues that she acts selflessly, “not intent upon making of herself a myth”; her heroism is fueled by her love of Naisi (93). His overall reading of the story may be summed up by his following statement: “The tale of Deirdre and Naisi, in Synge’s rendering, is thus a celebration of an indomitable human spirit that will preserve itself in the face of any obstacles conceivable” (94). Farris and Begnal’s arguments rightly demonstrate that Synge’s Deirdre has more power over her destiny than previous Deirdres, but they fail to recognize that she can exert such power only to the extent the natural world allows. They cast her as limitless, though an overpowering sense of fate and place prevail in the text.

Using Synge's own works coupled with Saddlemyer's interpretations, we can more clearly see Synge's understanding of and portrayal of the artist, which leads to sharpened understanding of the role of nature and the function of myth within Synge's final play. Even when he recreates myth, he still operates within the constructs of myth. In the same way, even when his characters exercise agency uncharacteristic of the Deirdre myth, they are still by necessity limited by the natural world in their ability to exercise free will. As Synge cannot wholly deconstruct the mythic structure in which he operates, neither can his artist figures act completely freely within the natural world. In short, myth and nature limit Synge and his artist characters.

Synge's portrayal of nature as a controlling force fights his aversion to "spring-dayish" and "breezy" drama; while he does include such pleasant weather conditions in his play, he paints nature as both beneficent and indomitable, and powerful in both extremes (Dasenbrock 136). Synge tries to create an unfantastic drama in a play about Cuchulain, peasantizing the royalty and humanizing the supernatural to demythologize the tale. Even if he can demythologize the text to an extent, he still operates within the genre and thus must remythologize the story. The world is neither wholly fantastic nor purely peasant. A power higher than humans undeniably directs their lives, and the agency they claim, while legitimate, is merely borrowed from that higher power. Synge can write a mythic play trying to deconstruct myth, but only because the myth lends him the ability to do so. He succeeds in overturning myth, but it turns over yet again to right itself. Even characters that seem to exercise the greatest degrees of agency are unavoidably guided and ruled over by the power of natural place, and even peasant drama holds a spark of the fantastic.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Fantastic Meets the Natural: the Artist and Place In Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*

Myth holds certain properties that cannot be diminished, no matter how far a version of the myth veers from the original. As seen in J.M. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, storytellers cannot completely demythologize a text but must rather reinscribe the tale into the genre of myth. Likewise, the artist is one who interacts with place in such a way that involves change tempered by the limits place imposes. By analyzing the relationship between the Frielian artist and place—both natural and built, we see a major difference between the two tales that has heretofore been neglected: their characters' complicated interactions with nature and place. Though Synge's tramp figure—the wandering observer of nature—and the con-man artist in Friel may at first seem irreconcilable, Synge and Friel share a commonality in the way they approach myth and the limitations of the character in regards to place. Just as nature empowers and limits the artist in Synge, so does place in Friel. By contrast to Synge's artists, though, Friel's characters are usually distrustful of the power of place until they suspend intellectual analysis and thereby submit themselves to it.

Friel's adaptation of the Deirdre myth supports rather than dismisses the relevance of the ancient myth for modern audiences. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd holds that "in *Faith Healer* an ancient myth is creatively misinterpreted so that Brian Friel can redefine heroism for the modern Irish audience" (632). While I owe a great deal to Kiberd's work, I disagree with his word choice in his claim that the myth is "misinterpreted," preferring to see the myth as *re*-interpreted: not forgetting or obscuring

the heart of the myth but stating it differently, because the heart of the tale cannot be lost. In “Translating History: Brian Friel and the Irish Past,” Sean Connolly writes of this “inevitable distortion of the past as it is made to serve the needs of the present” as a theme in Friel’s *Translations* (1980) and *Making History* (1988), but the theme was already present in the playwright’s earlier work *Faith Healer* (1979). Kiberd also asserts the importance of myth in modern drama: “Underlying Friel’s depiction of Hardy as a modern Naoise...is the conviction that primitive myths are *not* impositions of a culture but innate possessions of every person” (632). The myth cannot be wholly deconstructed just as the differing accounts of events in *Faith Healer* still overlap in enough ways to reveal some sort of truth. Like Synge, Friel remythologizes the Deirdre myth.

Unlike Synge, though, Friel focuses his attention on the Naisi figure—Frank Hardy—rather than Deirdre—or Grace. Whereas Grace and Teddy each deliver a monologue for one act, Frank delivers two monologues, opening and closing the play. Moreover, the story revolves around Frank’s performances, and the other characters seemingly exist to serve him. This shift of focus is a variation of the Synge version but not of earlier versions, which also focused on Naisi. Friel’s Frank Hardy, though, differs from previous versions of Naisi because he also represents the modern human in his struggle for control and desire to master nature.

Frank begins the play by harnessing the power of places for his own modern purposes; as he repeats the names of villages, his incantation of their names wields power to control light. The play begins in darkness, and Friel’s incantation of other place names illumines the stage: “At the end of the second line bring up lights very slowly, first around him and then gradually on the whole set” (*FH* 331). This repetition of names signifies the power of language in Friel; Frank’s potent words also echo the powerful

language of Friel's artistic inspiration for the play, J.M. Synge. While language itself is powerful in Friel and Synge, this particular instance of language is especially so because Frank repeats the names of *places*. One can view this exercise of power as manipulating the literal light or as lighting the theater for a performance. Additionally, Frank's use of places siphons power away from them through his language.

If, as Richard Russell argues in *Modernity, Community, and Place in Brian Friel's Drama*, Frank Hardy's performance is intended to bring communal healing to his audience, then Frank's light-conjuring incantation serves a purpose for the audience's good. In "Language Play: Brian Friel and Ireland's Verbal Theatre," Richard Kearney casts *Faith Healer* as a play about abstract notions of place, describing language as "the house of Being in which man may poetically dwell" (85). Frank uses the power of place to control light with his language, temporarily usurping nature's position as light-giver, and to keep the performance going so that the audience can remain in a healing community. In this way, Frank acts as a Christ figure, evoking power from place by words in order to create a community where healing is possible.

The Frielian artist is one who sacrifices himself in order to complete his artistic work, potentially healing others through it. Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse write in "'Singing of Human Unsuccess': Brian Friel's Portraits of the Artist" that "Hardy's death becomes more than just the end of his life, it is both his admission of failure and his supreme act of creation" (17). Reading Frank as artist whose self-sacrifice brings about healing for his audience, Anthony Roche and Giovanna Tallone agree that Frank is an incarnational Christ figure, "word made flesh," according to Tallone (Roche 113, Tallone 129). As we will see later, place enables Frank to become a salvific artist figure in that he recognizes his limits and submits, finally, to the death that awaits him.



The tradition of the Irish artist uniting self and others with a physical, natural place is strong. Bertha and Morse write that the role of the Irish *seanchaí*, or storytellers, sometimes involved “symbolically form[ing] a marriage with the land itself” (13). As *seanchaí*, Frank weds humanity with the land in the context of death, when his body and earth are united. Friel’s performing characters are also known for a distinct relationship with place that echoes that of J.M. Synge; they are wanderers as Synge was. In “Restless Wanderers and Great Pretenders: Brian Friel’s Fox Melarkey and Frank Hardy,” Giovanna Tallone upholds the importance of wandering through places and language to both Fox and Frank’s performances (44). Like the Syngean artist—and Synge himself—who meanders through the countryside, Friel’s Francis Hardy performs his healings only as a traveling healer. He brings a form of sacrificial salvation by surrendering to place in what may seem as his body’s union with the earth in his death and a marriage of the artist and place.

Precisely how Frank becomes this salvific artist points back to Synge’s participation with the supernatural even as he attempted to rid the Deirdre myth of the supernatural; this suggests that Friel’s work follows the pattern of Synge’s remythologizing of Deirdre. In interviews and in the character of Frank Hardy, Friel upholds the mystical nature of art. Friel’s artists cannot analyze their art if they are to be successful; this relates to Frank Hardy’s tormenting questions and Kiberd’s definition of the artist as the con man, the artist who tricks himself and his audience. Frank constantly wonders: “*Am I endowed with a unique and awesome gift?*” and “*Am I a con man?*” (FH 333). He continues to be plagued by “those maddening, tormented, nagging questions that rotted [his] life”: “Was it all chance?—or skill?—or illusion?—or delusion? Precisely what power did I possess? Could I summon it? When and how? Was I its

servant?” and so on (334, 333). Only when he forsakes self-criticism, tricking himself and others as a con man, can Frank and others possibly create some type of salvific art.

In interviews, Friel supports the idea that casts the artist as a con man, suspending thought about his own work as he also suspends his audience’s thought, and the playwright consistently stands by his belief that theatre must be wary of primarily targeting the intellect. In a 1978 interview with Elgy Gillespie, Friel tosses out various possible intellectual influences that might create the artist but resolves that “in the end not one of these things alone will make a dramatist. He appears. The very most we can do is make his birth and growth less uncomfortable” (72). Again, in a report of a 1968 interview with Brian Friel entitled “Frank Talk from Friel,” Alan Bunce reflects that “Mr. Friel does not believe a playwright can be trained” (75). Neither the artist, nor the art, nor the audience can be primed intellectually; all must dismiss their careful analysis to an extent. In Bunce’s interview, Friel dismisses intellectual training when he jokes, “Perhaps there are a few relatively unimportant things you can learn” (75). He speaks of the mysterious nature of art, its incalculability. As an example, Friel then expresses as an example his surprise that a record by the Beatles was as well received as it was. Holding that “the Beatles themselves don’t know how it was achieved. It can never be repeated,” Friel does not seek to account for his own works’ reception and influence, nor does he strive to recreate what has already been successful (75). Thus, Friel’s understanding of the work of the artist is, if not supernatural, at least suprarational.

As Friel recreates the myth, consciously embracing and affirming the remythologizing process that Synge already began, he renews and heals not only the audience but also the myth itself. He does this specifically with the way his characters interact with place. In both Synge and Friel, characters interact with place as the artist

interacts with myth: both draw supernatural power from natural setting and at the same time come to recognize the limits of nature and place impose on them. Characters eventually value and yield to their placement, acknowledging that the success of their performance as artists depends on their submission to the power of place and the natural world.

The difference between the two playwrights' place-based inspiration, then, seems rooted in movement versus stasis, in going out rather than in staying in. Friel's fixation on the concept of home contrasts Synge's preference for the wild unknown over the relatively safe domicile. Friel questions whether home exists and whether home can be a fixed place. In an interview, Richard Pine shares that, for Friel, "the idea of home...is a massive preoccupation"; Friel "is not sure that he can accept the idea of home" (Kurdi 311). Frank Hardy has a homecoming at the end of the play, but it is complicated because it involves his brutal murder. Friel tests understandings of home, showing the artist's submission to it, even though it is fluid. Learning the boundaries and submitting to the power of place—for good or for ill—is central to Friel as an artist and to his characters.

Frank Hardy is a modernized version of Naisi; unlike his Syngean predecessor who is identified with nature and takes refuge in the natural world, Frank does not always recognize his limits but tries to gather the power of place unto himself. This duality results in his tormenting questions about his gift and his con-man status, which lead to an inability to perform consistently. According to Friel, whenever someone overcalculates, analyzes, or criticizes his own work, he forfeits artistic success. Teddy asserts that, because of an overly analytical mind, Frank was "no great artist. Course he was no great artist. Never anything more than a mediocre artist. At best" (*FH* 357). As a "mediocre artist," Frank always knows when he will not be able to heal someone, perhaps because

of an innate sense of his abilities, or perhaps because he simply subscribes to a self-fulfilling prophecy, a mental limitation that he unwittingly imposes on himself. Nicholas Grene describes Frank's deluge of self-inquiries as "the artist...liv[ing] always on this sickening seesaw between messianic arrogance and self-abasing criticism" (57). His waffling between the two questions stems from a sense of ambiguity and tension regarding the source and morality of his power. Only in sacrificing his self-criticism, silencing the questions that plague him, and simply submitting himself to the power of place can Frank and other Frielian artist figures perform healing.

The artist sacrifices himself not only for people but also for places; at the same time, submission to place is precisely what empowers the artist to make effectual sacrifices. Friel's major addition to the Deirdre myth is the emphasis on healing; from the beginning of *Faith Healer*, though we assume Frank Hardy is merely an artist who performs healings on people, his focus seems to be more on dying places than on ailing human bodies. Certainly, Frank has an inexplicable ability to occasionally heal individual's maladies. However, whereas one would naturally associate healing primarily with bodies, Friel first associates a need for healing with places instead. After listing the place names that open the performance, he reflects, "all those dying Welsh villages" (*FH* 332). Those first in need of healing are villages, communities. Whether he brings them any lasting healing is debatable, though. He acts as a practitioner to heal places, but he also views the sick places as the source of his power and his own personal medicine, his anesthesia. He uses this incantation to "sedate" himself when he is "tense" before a "performance" and throughout his monologues in *Faith Healer* (332). Each sick place he has visited enables him somehow to keep going; the sick artist and sick places exist in a symbiosis. When he performed healings, "the questions that undermined [his] life then

became meaningless” and he “knew that for those few hours [he] had become whole in [himself], and perfect in [himself] (333). Place first makes possible the stories of the physical healing Frank recounts.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, place makes Frank’s storytelling possible, which offers the audience a sort of communal healing. He uses the names of place to illuminate the stage at the start of the play and to enable him to keep telling the story throughout the play. In his testing of limitations, Frank tries to master light. As Richard Allen Cave discusses in “Friel’s dramaturgy: the visual dimension,” Friel’s masterful stagecraft is made possible by his use of electric light. For Friel, however, light does more than simply illumine space; it signifies characters’ agency and their attempts to dominate nature by siphoning out the supernatural from the natural and appropriating the supernatural to the human. In short, it is a denial of limits. Electric light symbolizes the modernization that Friel critiques in some of his plays; the characters’ rapacious clutching for control of light reflects a modern emphasis on mastering nature. By decidedly operating only at night, the traveling troupe rebel against nature’s order; they insist on using artificial light instead of that afforded them by the sun.

One of the reasons Frank’s healing powers are less than desirable is that Frank also spends most of the play failing to reverence the power of place, traveling from town to town only to see them as all the same and thereby depersonalizing place in harmful ways. Frank does not recognize places as unique—“Welsh—Scottish—over the years they become indistinguishable. The kirks or meeting-houses or schools—all identical, all derelict” (*FH* 332). Similarly, Grace attests that Frank cannot ever remember her hometown. That he cannot distinguish between the towns he visits and that he does not care to remember the name of Grace’s hometown demonstrate his lack of appreciation for

place. Instead of settling down in one place, Frank uses places and forgets them. To be sure, he remembers the names of the Welsh and Scottish villages he repeats in his litany, but even these he appropriates for his own purpose—to summon light for the stage—without genuinely caring about the state in which he leaves the places. Place empowers him in his performing art, yet Frank shows little reverence for it.

He does not merely forget or ignore places, though; Frank also causes harm to places and exerts a degree of power over people that is at times harmful to them and their community. Frank uses the villages to exert power over the natural state of people's bodies even against their will, and the healing services Frank hosts temporarily take over towns. Frank, Grace, and Teddy arrive, sweep, hang their sign, arrange the chairs, and coax community members to come be healed. Some characters, like McGarvey, seem content to concede that nature, or some more powerful force than human force, has caused their infirmity. McGarvey does not appear to seek healing from Frank; rather, Frank imposes his healing on him and as a result brings about his own mutilation. Whereas many others seem content with their ailments, preferring not to ask Frank for assistance, Frank insists on mastering the natural state of their bodies and recreating them. Grace recalls that in his performances, "he'd be...in complete mastery—yes, that's close to it—in such complete mastery that everything is harmonized for him, in such mastery that anything is possible" (343). Frank masters people to make them his fictions. His grasping for superhuman power is ultimately denied; though he is hostile toward nature, Frank is ultimately dominated by it. In the end, he must return to a place of submission, the site of his sacrificial death.

Ideas about physical healing in *The Well of the Saints*, J.M. Synge's play that serves as an obvious source for Friel's *Molly Sweeney*, also bear important implications

for *Faith Healer*. Mary and Martin Doul ultimately reject the physical healing offered to them, for it removes them from community. The wandering saint who insists on healing them closely resembles Frank Hardy, who unwittingly destroys the couple's understanding of each other and drives them to leave the community that supports them. As a result of the saint's innocent desire to heal the Douls, the village grows less charitable, and the couple likely perish in the wild. In *Molly Sweeney*, the title character's restoration of vision unexpectedly results in her loss of community and ultimate demise. Likewise, Faith Healer Frank Hardy never remains in a village long enough to know what havoc his healings might wreck, and according to Grace, he forgets about those he does not heal. As his sign advertises, Frank is involved for "one night only," leaving the healed and the unhealed to figure out how to live the next day. Except for the instance when he insisted on healing an arthritic woman to the point that he stalked her and she threatened to have him arrested, Frank moves on mentally and physically from the places he visits, arguably doing more harm than good. Thus, one can argue that he appropriates places only for his own good, but that he must eventually submit to the power of place in some form of homecoming. Yielding to the power of place over him brings him fulfillment as an artist as he sacrifices himself for the possibility of communal healing.

In Friel's version of the myth, when characters try to grasp supernatural power, place reacts towards them with apparent hostility; when they revere nature, though, as Synge's Deirdre does, nature responds with benevolence. Miss Mulatto of "Miss Mulatto and Her Pigeons" is one whose relationship with nature is exemplary. Highlighted as the only character with the unique gift of communicating intelligibly with animals, Miss Mulatto's rare talent casts her as an oddity, a woman referred to by her circus-act-like title rather than simply by her name. Able to summon hundreds of pigeons to herself at

will, she shows unusual attunement to nature by speaking nature's language, but even her relationship with the pigeons calls into question whether humans dominate nature or whether nature overpowers humans. Teddy remembers, "All those birds would rise up from all over the house and come flying in like a bloody massive snowstorm and smother her on the stage" (356). Despite the fact that this "smother[ing]" seems to suggest that nature and humans are at odds with one another, Teddy's description of the pigeon's response to Miss Mulatto results in lucrative success and fame rather than in her fatality. "Like a bloody massive snowstorm," the kit of pigeons descend on her and precipitate her success.

Later, Teddy remembers another snowstorm, wintry weather that accompanies not an apparent domination by nature but rather a miraculous supernatural event. On the fateful night in Wales that saw every sick person cured, Frank and Grace dance outside in the snow to celebrate (358-9). That Teddy mentions the snow as part of the night's events before he recounts the mass healing hints at the hoary precipitation's important connection to the healings. Both the snowstorm of pigeons and the snowstorm in Wales allow humans a rare occasion to exert power over bodies and enable them as artists, at least for a time. Apart from the benevolence of the natural world as represented by the pigeons and the snowstorm, neither Miss Mulatto nor Frank Hardy would be as successful in their performances. The pigeons also symbolize nature's provision for humans, as they give Teddy cause and money to purchase the van that transports and houses the three travelers on their journey through Scotland and Wales. Were it not for Miss Mulatto's pigeons, Frank, Grace, and Teddy would have no means of travel and therefore no way to perform faith healings. While the van arguably represents technology and modernization, it is significantly nature that provides for the characters to make such



a purchase. The snowstorm of pigeons that deliver Teddy's van insinuate that nature in her benevolence empowers human characters even to temporarily master her, ultimately remaining in control.

All of the narrators in *Faith Healer* alternately struggle for control of and are empowered by place. Although he is the most obvious artist because of his career as a performer, Francis Hardy is not the only artist in *Faith Healer*. As none of the narrators is reliable, each reshaping the past with the varying media of different memories, Frank, Grace, and Teddy are all artists in their storytelling. Declan Kiberd also posits that every person is an artist in that "every man must recast his memories into a pattern that is gratifying enough to allow him to live with himself" (222). Nicholas Grene, however, draws a distinction between artist figures and those who simply repeat the lies they have heard; he sees Frank Hardy as a different kind of character than Grace and Teddy. "Frank is not like the other two, or like any of the rest of us for that matter...; he is a compulsive, even a professional maker of fictions" (56). Even while Frank is set apart as an especially skilled liar and an extraordinary sacrificial artist, all of the characters recast their own personal mythology throughout the play. In the following paragraphs, I will explore how Grace acts as an artist by charting her relationship to place.

Though she is one of Frank the artist's fictions, Grace is also an artist who parallels Deirdre as a wanderer and yields herself to fate. Kiberd asserts that Grace is an artist in that she alone "has the courage to submit herself to chance" ("Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*" 218). He locates Grace's moment of submission in her description of her deceased husband to her doctor, when she surprises herself by calling him an artist. When she ceases to question herself, she speaks clearly and identifies Frank as he is. In her

suspension of self-criticism that allows her to appropriately name and identify another, she becomes an artist.

Additionally, like Frank, Grace grasps for supernatural power in the way she handles natural light; her cigarette smoking and frustrated fire kindling show her modern desire to dominate nature and her inability to do so with full success. Grace seeks to harness the power of light for her own sanity and storytelling as she uses it to light her cigarettes, which she compulsively smokes through her entire monologue. Even here, as she feels that she controls the light, she is empowered by it, relying on the cigarette flame to produce her art. This ability to control light and even to consume light by inhaling and exhaling the cigarette shows her paradoxical grasping to master nature and reliance on the natural light of the flame to go on.

Grace's other memories of fire suggest her frustrated feelings of helplessness toward nature, feelings not shared by her Syngean counterpart. In the "derelict cottage in Norfolk," she "remember[s] kneeling before a tiny grate and crying because the timber was so wet the fire wouldn't light" (346). Frank also recalls this memory of her inability to kindle a fire with the antagonistic wet firewood. By contrast to Deirdre and Naisi, who seemingly live a life of harmony with the natural world in the wilderness, Grace and Frank lack even the power to warm themselves and cook food to feed themselves.

Grace's incapacity to start a fire in Norfolk starkly contrasts the fire blazing warmly in the breakfast room of her father's home; Grace and Deirdre both prefer the untamable and sometimes inhospitable outdoors to the controlled environments in which they were raised (347). Grace emphatically states her rejection of her father's well-manicured place in favor of the hostile, untamed place she inhabits with Frank and Teddy. She wants to curse her father in words he will not understand so that he will

“recognize it as the final rejection of his tall straight poplars and the family profession and his formal Japanese gardens. But more important, much, much more important, recognize it as my proud testament to my mountebank and the van and the wet timber and the primus stove and the dirty halls and everything he’d call squalor” (348-9). Declan Kiberd attests that her rejection of the bourgeois lifestyle of her parents symbolizes part of her renunciation of chance; the critic applauds her for favoring the uncertain life with the mountebank over the settled, orderly life of her parents. Her preference for the wilderness, even when hostile, reflects the Syngean trope of the superiority of wandering through the unknown natural world to settling in the certainties of the indoors. Deirdre’s preference for the wilderness of Alban over the palace of Emain foreshadows Grace’s preference of place but does not perfectly parallel it. Deirdre chooses the natural world both out of a desire to escape the life prophesied for her and out of a simple love for nature. Grace, on the other hand, chooses her life of wandering through natural places and tiny villages not because she appreciates them; rather, she wants to master place and redirect the destiny her father and “his formal Japanese gardens” set up for her. Both wander out of a desire to redirect destiny; both find their destinies fulfilled in a place.

However, Deirdre’s reverence for natural place that contrasts Grace’s desire to consume and wield power over place serves as the difference in their happiness. Deirdre recognizes her prophesied fate and takes action, volunteering herself to the grave when her suicide seems inevitable. The nature-revering action she takes differs from the passive deaths of previous Deirdres on the rocks and from Grace’s prolonged illness and death. Synge and Friel each rewrite their Deirdre figures in a way that ties their personal agency to their attitude toward the power of place.

While there are examples of artists Frank, Grace, and Teddy expanding the limits of place or being provided for by the natural world, the most significant way in which Friel's characters interact with place is found in the necessity of coming home. Despite Synge's noticeable influence on Brian Friel and their shared enthusiasm for place, the more modern characters in Friel's *Faith Healer* exhibit a significantly more antagonistic view towards being controlled by place than Synge's characters take toward nature; even so, Friel's characters understand the need for a homecoming. Critics have rightly hailed *Faith Healer* as a play about language and about homecoming, but a common agreement on that theme does not result in a unified resolution about what it means to come home. In "Friel's Drama: Leaving and Coming Home," Anthony Roche reads *Faith Healer* chiefly as a play about nationality, and he argues that it functions as both a Scottish and an Irish play (Roche 124-5). After establishing that the play is about the nation, Roche states that Frank's "final homecoming is to himself" (127). This theory seems valid to an extent, yet the play and myth on which it is based so value place that to define home as a placeless concept ignores important implications of the artist coming home.

Perhaps recognizing this lack, other scholars have contributed an understanding of homecoming to a more generic place or, on the other hand, to a place even more specific and local than to the nation. As previously stated, Richard Kearney draws abstract comparisons between language and place, joining Seamus Deane in removing political associations from the play (Kearney 85; Deane 19). Nicholas Grene writes in "Five Ways of Looking at *Faith Healer*" that he prefers to read the "fatal homecoming" more precisely and more locally as the village of Ballybeg (58). Richard Russell writes of the theater itself as a place of homecoming for audience goers and actors alike. Russell states that in *Faith Healer*, Friel criticizes modernity's linear view of time, focus on future, and

reliance on empiricism, inviting the audience to enter into a communal ritual time that dwells in the present and produces wholeness. His stance informs this discussion by implicitly offering a reason for the differences between Synge and Friel's treatment of nature and understanding of place: modernization. Friel's critique of modernity also encompasses his negative assessment of modernity's disregard for and even abuse of nature. As is evidenced in all of his works, Friel has a great respect for place, whether built or natural, and this appreciation informs his treatment of place in *Faith Healer*. Friel's version of the Deirdre myth presumes an implacement that cannot be avoided and should not be resented. Characters "come home" when they not only return to the nation, to the stage, or to the self, but also willingly submit themselves to the power of place.

As with nearly every event recounted in the play, each character gives a different account of reasons for returning to Frank's home country of Ireland. Frank's reasons intertwine place, fate, and his role as an artist: first, "because of the lush pickings of Ireland"; second, "because I always knew we would end up there"; and third, because returning might silence the questions that plagued him (*Faith Healer* 338). Even so, returning to Ireland is not his homecoming; he does not come home until the final scene, when he remembers: "for the first time I had a simple and genuine sense of homecoming. Then for the first time there was no atrophying terror; and the maddening questions were silent" (376). For him, coming home is bound to "renouncing chance" (376). Death is not his homecoming as much as sacrifice of self-criticism is. This sacrifice is directly tied to his entering a place—the site of his mutilation. As he walks through the courtyard and volunteers himself, he surrenders himself and comes home.

The place of final homecoming for Frank—the place at which he is dismembered and the place of his remembering, both mental and physical—sympathetically becomes

self-aware even as he casts off his own self-awareness. Whereas he is too self-aware for much of the play's story, in the place described in the final scene he renounces chance as the physical place adopts his self-reflection: "each detail of the scene had its own self-awareness and was satisfied with itself" (376). The sacrificial artist's return home—the theme of *Faith Healer*—requires a physical place to which one may return, even as it bears more abstract interpretations as well. The displaced characters must always find themselves in relation to physical place and thereby submit to its limitations; the displaced are always ultimately implaced just as myth can never be essentially deconstructed, only remythologized. Artists in both Friel and Synge acknowledge a power higher than themselves and come home as they recognize their inability to wholly deconstruct myth and place.

Synge's presentation of reality is ostensibly devoid of the fantastic but actually attributes nature with a mysterious limiting power; Friel, on the other hand, believes that art must leave room for the fantastic, the unexplainable. In his 1971 interview "Self-Portrait: Brian Friel Talks about His Life and Work," Friel discusses the way he regrettably focused too strictly on the intellect, on that which is explainable to the mind, when he taught his students for ten years. "I fancied myself as a teacher because I worked hard at teaching the tricks, and the poodle dogs became excellent performers" (103). One cannot help but associate his students with Teddy's well-trained dog that could leave his slippers out for him when he returned home from work but was unable to perform in front of a crowd; so attuned was the pup to the mentality of his actions that he could not suspend his thought in the way needed to be a successful performing artist. Friel also mocks interviews that expect him to have concrete facts as answers, posing questions to himself and responding with "I have no idea" (100). In his teaching career, his plays, and

his interviews, Friel holds that artistic creation is unlike the poodle type of performing in that art must disconnect from the intellect.

Furthermore, in “Playwright of the Western World,” Peter Lennon’s 1964 interview with Friel, the playwright says ““You are never going to move people intellectually in the theatre”” (21). Friel credits Tyrone Guthrie with teaching him how audiences are actually moved: ““by their hearts and their stomachs”” (21). Both the composition of art and the reception of art involves emotions more than the mind, according to Friel, further coloring the idea that the artist must trick himself and his audience, ceasing analysis in order to perform healing, if healing can even occur. The artist’s forfeiture of self-criticism alone enables him to create art that brings others communal healing.

On several occasions, Friel intertwines places and mystical prophecy, or fate, revealing a reverence for the fantastic. As Richard Russell explores, Frank’s potentially redemptive sacrifice situates his story among other scapegoat myths besides just Deirdre, including Dionysus, Cuchulain, and Christ, and alerts audiences to recognize their own need for a ritual sacrifice. All of the characters in *Faith Healer* are identified with place and when they are introduced; Frank introduces himself as a man from County Limerick, Ireland, and when he first mentions Grace and Teddy, he links them with their places of origins as best as he can remember (*FH* 333-35). When Frank later refers to his coming back to Ireland twelve years after the death of his parent, he speaks as if the return is inevitable—as if his eventual journey back to this place is fated (*FH* 338). Grace believes that Frank’s return to his native land will affect him powerfully; she hopes “Ireland might somehow recharge him, maybe even restore him” (351). Though they do

not desire to submit to place, Grace and Frank both hope that his birthplace will bring about a desirable fate.

Furthermore, a general sense of fate pervades throughout the play. Frank can always tell when he will be able to heal someone, and he seems to know when he will fail, though he cannot voluntarily turn his healing power on and off. Rather, his power is subject to some force beyond himself to which he must submit. Beyond his healing abilities, Frank suggests that his name is even fateful: “The initials were convenient, weren’t they? FH—Faith Healer. Or if you were a believer in fate, you might say my life was determined the day I was christened” (333). Throughout the play, the acts of naming and renaming carry great weight; from the beginning of his Frank’s life, he believes that fate has determined his abilities and the course of his life. Later, when he talks about Teddy’s upbringing, Frank acknowledges that all he knows about Teddy’s background is that he was “born into show business” (334). This sense of being “born into” a place and at the same time a vocation expands the mythic proportions of the text, strengthening the play’s connection to fate. Such a strong reliance on deterministic outer forces clearly connects *Faith Healer* to the mythic, and because of its subject matter, specifically to the Deirdre myth. Thus, Friel seems uninterested in Synge’s attempt to write the fantastical out of the myth.

Friel remythologizes Synge’s version of the myth and recasts the artist as one unavoidably influenced by place. Even when written in vastly different form, the essence of the Deirdre myth remains stable. Not only is Deirdre never demythologized without being remythologized, but also none of the characters is ultimately displaced. They all become artists when they are re-placed, in their return home. For the artist as con man, renouncing chance involves terminating the questions that torment him by relinquishing



control to place and the natural world. When one comes home, acknowledging the inevitable limitations imposed on him by place, he submits to place, and his art benefits from place's power. Place and the Frielian artist then have a symbiotic relationship in which each profits the other. For much of the play, though, characters narrate various occasions on which they did not respect the limitations of place. Many of their accounts center on their endeavors to master and dominate places and all that can be associated with them, from their memories to their natural features.

Brian Friel reworks Synge's *Deirdre* play in such a way that inarguably introduces questions of reliability and individual truth, but analyzing the artists in relation to myth and place yields a new reading that supports the value of the original myth. While we cannot ignore Friel's mastery of dramatic form as he gives each narrative voice a different and often contradictory memory in the monologues, we must also recognize that though they relate details quite differently, Frank, Grace, and Teddy still all tell a version of the same story, and discerning audiences can identify truths on which they agree even in their fragments of stories. Similarly, even as Friel reconstructs the *Deirdre* myth—perhaps intending to shred the myth with his narrative form—he acknowledges some importance of the myth simply by reusing it. Place, likewise, can in this sense be paralleled with the playwright's approach to mythology. Even when characters abandon places, wander through them, use them selfishly for their own gain to the point of the place's destruction, or disregard the power of place by ignoring its limitations, they must eventually return home to the limits of a place.

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