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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Dance Imagery in Dancing at Lughnasa from the Perspective of Anthropological Ritual

**Wang Jing**

*PhD, lecturer, School of Foreign Studies in University of Science and Technology Beijing, China*

**Corresponding Author:** Wang Jing, **E-mail:** [estellawj@126.com](mailto:estellawj@126.com)

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**| ABSTRACT**

Dance serves as the central trope in Brian Friel's celebrated play *Dancing at Lughnasa*. This study analyzes the cultural and social functions of dance through the framework of anthropological ritual. Three distinct forms of dance within the play exhibit ritualistic characteristics: the five sisters' tap dance in the kitchen represents a temporary transcendence of daily constraints and a release of carnivalesque; the waltz shared by Michael's parents functions as a ceremonial affirmation of matrimonial bonds; and Father Jack's African dance signifies his acceptance, appreciation, and assimilation into indigenous cultural practices. These ritualistic dances serve psychological, emotional, and communal healing roles, encapsulating Friel's appeal for acknowledging cross-ethnic commonalities and advancing multicultural integration within contemporary Irish society.

**| KEYWORDS**

Dancing at Lughnasa, dance, ritual, multicultural integration

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Brian Friel (1929-2015), the distinguished contemporary Irish playwright, achieved a landmark success with his most successful play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). The play premiered at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1990, subsequently transferring to London's West End and New York's Broadway. It garnered critical acclaim and prestigious accolades, including both the Laurence Olivier Award and the Tony Award. Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, *Dancing at Lughnasa* dramatizes the impact of industrial change on the rural community of Ballybeg, a fictional village in County Donegal. The play, framed by the adult memories of Michael Mundy, chronicles the demise of his family, constituting an autobiographical "memory play" (Krause, 1997, p. 372).

Apart from its distinctive narrative strategy, the drama's greatest fascination lies in its celebration of Irish dance. Three kinds of dance are staged: a kitchen tap-dance, a wedding waltz and an exotic African dance. Approached through the lens of anthropological ritual, this essay interprets the dances as the central trope of the play, contending that they operate, respectively, as mechanisms of psychological regulation, emotional restoration, and communal catharsis—thereby reflecting Friel's appeal for acknowledging cross-ethnic commonalities and advancing multicultural integration within contemporary Irish society.

### 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dance predates the invention of writing; images of ancestral dancers are preserved even in Paleolithic cave sanctuaries. As dance originated in ritual practices, rituality constitutes one of its fundamental attributes.

In Western intellectual tradition, Aristotle was the first to establish a conceptual linkage between ritual and tragedy, positing that tragedy originated from the mimetic representation of Dionysian rites. These rites, in his view, were intended to effect a catharsis among the audience through the emotions of pity and fear (Aristotle, 1968, p. 3). This foundational "ritual hypothesis"

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continues to exert influence on contemporary theoretical discourse. A prominent figure in contemporary ritual studies, Victor Turner, has profoundly shaped the field through works such as *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), *The Ritual Process* (1969), *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974), and *The Anthropology of Performance* (1987). In these seminal contributions, he systematically investigates the structure, function, and performance of rituals. For Victor Turner, ritual is not merely a formalized set of actions. It is a transformative process that serves to resolve societal tensions and reinforce social bonds. His definition is deeply tied to his concepts of social structure and *communitas* (Turner, 1987, p. 158).

Building upon French folklorist Arnold van Gennep's foundational theory of "rites of passage," Turner elaborated the concept of liminality to describe the ambiguous and transitional phase within a ritual process, wherein participants occupy an interstitial state—betwixt and between established social categories. In 1909, Arnold van Gennep introduced the concept of "threshold" in his seminal work *Rites of Passage*. He posits that individuals undergo corresponding "rites of passage" at three distinct phases of the life cycle. The first is the rites of separation, or the pre-liminal stage, which entails detachment from a familiar state or identity. The second phase consists of the transition rites, also referred to as the liminal stage—an intermediate condition in which the individual is situated neither within the original nor the new social state. Finally, the rites of reintegration, or post-liminal stage, mark the return and reincorporation of the separated individual into society (Genepe, 1960, p. 10).

Victor Turner further extended Genepe's theory of "rites of passage" to the study of theatrical performance. Turner pointed out in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure* (1969) that all societies engage in rituals, the core of which lies in the liminal stage—an ambiguous phase during ritual transition that belongs neither fully to the preceding nor the subsequent state, occupying an intermediate and indeterminate position. Turner regards this liminal stage as a profoundly creative space, situated at the margins of society and manifesting in forms such as play and jest (Turner, 1969, p. 95). In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel presents three types of ritual dance, each exhibiting distinct liminal characteristics

### **3. ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1 The Kitchen Tap-Dance: the carnivalesque release of everyday life**

The five Mundy sisters dance a spontaneous reel in the kitchen to celebrate Lughnasa, the old Celtic harvest festival dedicated to the god Lugh, held on 1 August. The Lunasha Festival is an ancient Celtic harvest celebration dedicated to Lugh, the deity associated with the harvest. The festivities include rituals such as animal sacrifices, the gathering of bilberries, and the holding of dance competitions (Ohogain, 1990, p. 272). The Lunasha Festival represents a vestige of ancient Celtic cultural traditions. Over an extended historical period, it has resisted assimilation into British colonial culture and has not been fully integrated into Catholic practice. Instead, as a manifestation of pagan heritage, it has persisted on the periphery of mainstream cultural currents, enduring to the present day. Consequently, it faces opposition from conservative Catholic authorities, who regard it as a primitive, barbaric, and violent ritual perpetuated by pagan communities. During the sacrificial ritual, participants first kindle a bonfire beside a spring-fed well, dancing with abandon around the flames. Subsequently, a herd of cattle is driven through the fire to expel any malevolent spirits that may reside within them. The back hill serves as the designated site for the Lunasha Festival celebrations. In contrast to conventional urban spaces, this area lies beyond the jurisdiction of local authorities and religious oversight, constituting what Turner termed a "liminal space" on the periphery of society. Here, groups of young men and women are temporarily liberated from the constraints of everyday social norms. They engage in singing and dancing, indulge in feasting and revelry, and employ distinctive bodily movements and rhythmic expressions to create a ritual atmosphere. Through these performances, they communicate and interact within the community, thereby strengthening ethnic solidarity. By merging collective sentiments into shared songs and dances, they achieve the dual purpose of entertaining both deities and people.

Despite their keen anticipation for the festival dance held on the back hill, the sisters face staunch opposition from Kate, the eldest, who objects on the grounds that the pagan origins of the Lunasha Festival render it socially unacceptable. Kate holds a teaching position at a local Catholic school and, as the head of the household, she not only bears the responsibility of providing for the family but also acts as the moral supervisor. When she hears that her younger sisters are planning to go dancing on the back hill, she sternly admonishes them: "And they're savages! I know those people from the back hills! I've taught them! Savages – that's what they are! And what pagan practices they have are no concern of ours - none whatever! It's a sorry day to hear talk like that in a Christian home, a Catholic home! All I can say is that I'm shocked and disappointed to hear you repeating rubbish like that, Rose!" (Friel, 1999, p. 29). As the parish teacher appointed by the priest, Kate's socially sanctioned role compels her to uphold prevailing moral codes and regulate her sisters' conduct. The five sisters remain unmarried, their existence characterized by material deprivation, intellectual aridity, and emotional constraint. Despite their profound yearning for matrimony, they have consistently failed to secure husbands within the conventional marriageable age. At the age of 40, Kate developed affection for a shop owner, who ultimately entered into matrimony with one of her female students. Maggie, aged 38, experienced the departure of her admired individual, who emigrated to Australia several years prior. Agnes, 35, harbors clandestine sentiments

for her sister's romantic partner. Rose, 32, engages in discreet encounters with a married man. The most precarious circumstance pertains to the youngest sister, Chris, who, at 26, gave birth to a child out of wedlock, consequently rendering the family subjects of social ostracism and marginalization within their small town.

Indeed, the socially awkward position of the five sisters as unmarried women reflected a broader societal pattern in Ireland during that era. This can be directly attributed to the conservative economic policies enacted under Éamon de Valera, which were rooted in an ideology that championed spiritual wealth, frugality, and national self-sufficiency (Brown, 1985, p. 110). Notwithstanding the attainment of its intended outcomes between 1932 and 1936, this policy concomitantly precipitated a domestic economic recession, agricultural contraction, elevated unemployment, a substantial increase in emigration, and a decline in marriage rate. For the majority of young adults, the financial burdens associated with both solemnizing marriage and sustaining marital life proved prohibitive. Statistical analyses indicate that Ireland exhibited the lowest marriage rate among European nations during this period, with over half of marriage-eligible women aged 25 to 35 remaining unmarried (Meenan, 1935, p. 22). Catriona Clutterbuck attributes the plight of the five sisters to the interplay of three key factors: the Irish Catholic Church, capitalist industrialization, and the economic policies of the de Valera administration (Clutterbuck, 1999, p. 111).

The sisters' subversion of Kate's authority manifests through their tap-dancing in the kitchen—a carnivalesque performance that transposes the communal revelry of Lughnasa into the domestic sphere. This act functions as a covert resistance to the disciplinary norms imposed by the Catholic Church, challenging its hegemony over the bodies and practices of its followers. Tap dance is a traditional Irish folk dance where music acts as the catalyst. The moment the Irish folk song "The Mason's Apron" begins to play on the radio, the four sisters, busy in the kitchen, immediately drop what they are doing. Led by Maggie, they burst into a tap dance. She spreads her fingers which are covered with flour, pushes her hair back from her face, pulls her hands down her cheeks and patterns her face with an instant mask. At the same time, she "opens her mouth and emits a wild, raucous 'Yaaaab!' - and immediately begins to dance, arms, legs, hair, long bootlaces flying" (Friel, 1999, p. 36). Observing Maggie's state of ecstatic trance, the sisters sequentially partake in the collective movement. Kate perceives their unrestrained dancing with discernible unease and vigilance, yet shortly retreats to the garden where she involuntarily engages in a solitary tap performance, seemingly governed by self-restraint. Although her movements remain noiseless, they implicitly integrate into the communal fervor. From the perspective of seven-year-old Michael, these customarily affectionate and dignified women undergo a metamorphosis into a congregation of seemingly deranged, vociferating strangers. Their grotesque movements and near-hysterical cries serve to purge profound personal disillusionment, pain, and pent-up despair. Maggie's flour mask functions as a conduit for carnivalistic excess and catharsis. In the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin, the mask is a primordial ritual artifact that manifests the core principles of the grotesque (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 40).

The sisters' tap dance in the kitchen can be interpreted as a temporary escape from daily life and a carnivalesque release. This dance disrupts the tedious, monotonous, and mundane conventional order, enabling women burdened with heavy domestic labor to emancipate themselves from social disciplining. However, this joyous revelry remains transient. In the play, the abrupt cessation of the radio music pulls them back from their liminal celebration to reality, plunging them into profound embarrassment. Although tap dance serves as a cathartic medium through which they express repressed emotions and life's frustrations, they ultimately revert to their original state of existence. This process—transitioning from mundane daily routines into a festive, elevated condition of mental and physical liberation, and subsequently returning—exhibits distinctive features of a liminal ritual.

### 3.2 The Waltz: dancing at the crossroads and emotional healing

In stark contrast to the raucous, terrestrial clamor of the kitchen reel, the play's second dance sequence constitutes a poised and luminous wedding waltz, executed by the characters of Gerry and Chris. Guided by the strains of "Dancing in the Dark," their movement transitions into the garden, where they trace a slow, circular pattern of courtship. This choreography manifests the very grace and tenderness that the preceding reel had ostensibly expelled. Gerry vocalizes the lyric as he leads, a performative layer that, combined with the entranced murmurs of the onlookers—who affirm that they dance as if they are made for each other—serves to frame the dance as an idealized, almost mythic union. Gerry and Chris meet through their shared involvement in dance. However, Gerry's concealment of his pre-existing marital status results in a non-marital pregnancy, with Chris subsequently giving birth to Michael. Gerry is a Welsh commercial traveler who operates within a circuit of rural villages; however, his temperament aligns more closely with stereotypical Irish dispositions. He demonstrates a pronounced lack of business acumen and entrepreneurial aptitude. Consequently, his primary livelihood is derived from instructing dance classes in Dublin. Gerry exhibits a distinct preference for the unrestrained and informal lifestyle prevalent in Ireland over that of his native Wales. "My home is here," he insists—and he courts Chris whenever his rambling circuit brings him back to Donegal.

The waltz itself becomes the medium for his public proposal and apology, a performative act that finally provides Chris with the pledge she has long craved. Despite her enduring knowledge of his fundamentally feckless and irresponsible character, which had prompted her previous refusals, she acquiesces this time. The entire scene is framed through the perspective of their

illegitimate son. In the closing monologue of Act I, Michael refers to it as “the marriage dance.” Concealed behind a shrub, he observes a ceremony devoid of song, music, or words—only the solemn circling of the waltz. Round and round they move, exiting the garden, proceeding into the lane at the crossroads, and returning once more to the garden—slow, unhurried, and immaculate in its execution. Chris’s head is thrown back, eyes closed, mouth just open. Gerry holds her at a little distance so he can see her lifted face. The world is hushed; only the soft scuff of shoes on grass can be heard. Michael feels the scene’s sacramental intensity: They dance with eyes half-closed, because to open them would break the spell. They dance “as if language has surrendered to movement—as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary” (Friel, 1999, p. 108). Dance serves as a medium for expressing the inexpressible, transcending the limitations of verbal language. In this silent, ritualistic performance, a state of collective immersion is achieved, encompassing both Michael and the sisters. The dancers enter a phenomenological state of heightened focus, wherein their consciousness is occupied solely by the awareness of self and the act of dancing, rendering the external world absent from their perception.

Of particular note is the manner in which Gerry and Chris dance continuously from the garden to the intersection alley and back again. This movement, traversing both private and public spaces, represents a revival of the traditional Irish practice of crossroads dancing. The tradition of impromptu dancing at rural crossroads, a longstanding element of Irish folk culture, was formally prohibited by the conservative Irish government and the Catholic Church. This prohibition was enforced under the rationale that such public dancing was a threat to public morality. After Ireland declared itself an independent free state, breaking away from British colonial rule, the government sought to reconstruct a pure Irish national identity. To this end, efforts were made to officialize folk dances that symbolized Irishness, while all vulgar or indecent dance movements associated with sexuality were systematically eliminated. In 1929, the Irish Dancing Commission was established with the aim of providing robust educational support for the construction of Irish national identity. It mandated that dance instructors must be Gaelic speakers, emphasized that dance steps should prioritize a sense of movement over aesthetic appeal, and underscored the importance of bodily restraint rather than mere pleasure in dance movements. This institutional framework implied stringent supervision, restriction, and discipline over Irish women’s bodies, which, to some extent, was likely to provoke counter-reactions. Amid the economic stagnation of the 1930s, Irish society was profoundly impacted by a moral crisis, marked by a surge in out-of-wedlock pregnancies and abortions among women. Under the influence of the Catholic Church, Ireland enacted the Public Dance Halls Act in 1935, which restricted dancing exclusively to commercially licensed dance halls. This legislation directly disregarded the improvisational and folkloric nature of traditional Irish dance.

Functioning as a symbolic ritual, Gerry and Chris’s waltz operates not simply as an emotional climax but as a mechanism that integrates primal instinct within the legitimizing framework of social convention. This integration effectively mends the dysfunctional nature of their relationship. Where Chris’s response to Gerry’s previous departures is one of hysterical despondency—marked by nightly, muffled sobs that pervaded the domestic space—the performance of the dance facilitates a critical shift. Her anguish is transformed into a structurally sanctioned form of spousal concern, aligning her subjectivity with the normative role of a bride whose husband is at war. Night after night the household can hear her muffled sobs. Before the “marriage dance” every departure of Gerry’s set Chris “weeping, wailing, sliding into a depression that never seemed to lift.” After the dance the depression vanishes, she worries “like any bride,” that her bridegroom may be killed at the front. Ritual, as Peng Zhaorong observes, possesses a peculiar efficacy: it realizes wishes the everyday world withholds, cures illnesses, exorcises terrors, vents emotions (Peng, 2007, 152). The profound irony lies in the fact that Gerry is critically wounded in Spain—left paralyzed in both legs, never to stand or dance again. The Irish wanderer ends his days destitute in a Welsh village, immobilized long before his eventual death.

### **3.3 The African Dance: the allure of alien culture and communal healing**

The third dance in the play is performed by Father Jack, a returned migrant, whose African dance reflects his rejection of the Eurocentrism upheld by Western colonizers and demonstrates his openness, acceptance, and integration into foreign cultures through his interactions with African people. Jack is no “triumphant returnee”; he has been shipped home in disgrace for apostasy and is now “Ireland’s outcast.” His twenty-five-year immersion in Ugandan society results in a profound cultural recalibration, rendering him a subject of disciplinary recall by his mission superior on grounds of conduct unbecoming. Upon his return to Donegal, he encounters pervasive suspicion; his command of Irish has atrophied, and he finds himself an internal exile within his own home. He vocalizes a deep disaffection with the climate—both meteorological and social—lamenting the cold, the damp, and a chill neighbourliness, while yearning for the equatorial radiance. Following convalescence from malaria, he formally renounces his sacerdotal duties, formulates plans for a return to Uganda, and succumbs to a fatal heart attack before his departure.

Father Jack's profound identification with the customs of the indigenous tribes in Uganda and his fervent participation in their ritual dances generate considerable disquiet among the sisters. Initially departing his homeland on a missionary assignment to Africa, his designated role is to "civilize" the local population and redeem their souls. Paradoxically, however, he undergoes a process of cultural assimilation by the indigenous community. He forges alliances with them and ultimately discovers a profound sense of personal value and belonging within this foreign context. Consequently, he resides there with ease, having fully acclimatized to the indigenous lifestyle and cultural practices. He characterizes the indigenous people of Uganda as fundamentally distinct from ourselves—a remarkable nation, described as cheerful, amusing, and inclined to laughter, largely because they do not recognize a distinction between the religious and the secular. With regard to the polygamous marital practices observed among these local tribes, Father Jack demonstrates acceptance and endorsement. Correspondingly, he exhibits a lenient and reconciliatory stance toward his sister Chris's out-of-wedlock pregnancy, grounded in the indigenous African belief that a "child of love"—often referred to as an illegitimate child in other contexts—is regarded as an auspicious symbol. Within these communities, it is held that a greater number of such children brings increased fortune to the family. His proposal to facilitate a diasporic relocation for his sisters to Africa, where a polygamous marriage could easily be arranged, functions as a narrative device to resolve their socially precarious status as unmarried women in Ireland. This stance is inevitably construed as doctrinal heresy within the framework of conservative Irish Catholicism—a perception that exposes irreconcilable schisms arising from racial and cultural alterity. As observed by the American anthropologist Franz Boas, polygamy is regarded as a transgression in monogamous societies, whereas the refusal of multiple spouses is inconceivable in other social systems (Boas, 1999, p. 78).

Besides acknowledging African cultural practices, Father Jack believes that indigenous African dances possess miraculous healing powers, capable of freeing people from worldly troubles without the use of any words. In the play, Father Jack uses the frame of Michael's kite to beat out a rhythmic pattern while his body slightly bent, eyes cast downward, feet moving in rhythm, mumbling and humming, emitting mysterious, indecipherable, and indistinct sounds. For Father Jack, African dance serves not only as a ceremonial display but also as a means to evoke and commemorate Africa, his second home. In contrast to Irish tap dance, his movements are characterized by their peculiar, primal nature, constituting entirely spontaneous improvisations.

During the Festival of Lunasa, Father Jack adheres to local Ugandan custom in Africa by sacrificing his sister Rose's pet rooster as an animal offering, thereby symbolically extending greetings to the African harvest festival. Coinciding with the Irish harvest celebration, indigenous tribes in Africa also observe their harvest festivities in August each year, though their veneration is directed toward the earth goddess Obi. The entire ceremonial proceedings include animal sacrifice, adorning faces with colored powder, joyous singing and dancing, and the consumption of palm wine. For them, this is a profoundly sacred and solemn ritual: first, the indigenous people of Africa perform an animal sacrifice by the riverbank, slaying a rooster, a goat, or a calf. Then, they anoint the first harvested yams and cassavas with oil, passing them around in a large wooden bowl to all present, while expressing gratitude to the deities through ritual dance. Father Jack recalls the festive dance of that time: "And that part of the ceremony is a real spectacle. We light fires round the periphery of the circle; and we paint our faces with coloured powders; and we sing local songs; and we drink palm wine. And then we dance - and dance - and dance - children, men, women, most of them lepers, many of them with misshapen limbs, with missing limbs - dancing, believe it or not, for days on end! It is the most wonderful sight you have ever seen! (Laughs.) That palm wine! They dole it out in horns! You lose all sense of time!" (Friel, 1999, p. 74). In Father Jack's narrative, his account is devoid of criticism, condemnation, or a condescending tone. Despite the dance's grotesque aspects—the movement of disfigured bodies—which served to sanctify the afflicted and achieve communal healing, he maintains no sense of distance from the indigenous people. His perspective is that of a participant, as evidenced by his consistent use of "we" rather than "they" to express his genuine inner joy. Indeed, leprosy serves as a metaphor for moral decay in Western societies. The disease is highly contagious and often fatal, leading to the widespread isolation of affected individuals within their communities. As Susan Sontag has argued, illness frequently functions as a metaphorical device to signify social corruption and injustice (Sontag, 1978, p. 72). Beginning in the 16th century, Western colonizers sought to mythologize their global expansion as a project combining "the Bible and the rifle." Under the banner of a civilizing mission, they aimed to conquer lands they deemed savage and dispatched missionaries to orchestrate the spiritual subjugation of indigenous populations. However, Father Jack, a military chaplain dispatched to Africa by the British Empire, diverges radically from this objective. Instead of successfully propagating Western religious civilization, he becomes profoundly captivated and ultimately assimilated by the allure of the indigenous culture. He lives harmoniously with the local people and coexisted in a state of grace with lepers, collectively immersed in carnivalesque moments of communion.

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim posited that rituals play a vital role in generating and reinforcing social cohesion. When social groups assemble to perform rituals, their attention converges upon shared beliefs, common traditions, recollections of ancestors, and the collective consciousness embodied within these practices (Durkheim, 1995, p. 411). Coincidentally, during his fieldwork among the Ndembu people in Africa, anthropologist Victor Turner discovered that a highly structured form of community plays a crucial role in the performance of rituals within society. Only through such organized communal practices can the various rigid and aggressive behaviors arising from social conflicts be effectively mitigated (Turner, 2007, p. 51). Father Jack

believed that the indigenous tribes of Africa had formed precisely such highly effective communities, as "everyone helps and cares for others." This, to some extent, explains why he ultimately abandoned Catholicism in Africa—he had discovered a new spiritual faith there. During African ritual dances, Father Jack and the indigenous people entered a sacred ritual time and space, existing in a liminal intermediate state. In this state, the hierarchies, skin colors, identities, and statuses inherent in secular social structures dissolved. The boundaries of race and class between Father Jack and the indigenous people were erased, fostering a relationship of camaraderie and forming a temporary, liminal community.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

As Christopher Murray points out, Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* "transcends the details of actual experience and creates an alternative or parallel world through the power of art" (Murray, 1999, p. xiv). Indeed, what Murray referred to as "an alternative or parallel reality" is essentially a liminal space enacted through ritual dance. As Brian Friel mentions in an interview: "I think we need the pagan element in life; sometimes, through substitution, we release the dangerous, mutinous wildness that lies just beneath the surface. It is repression that breeds dramatic conflict" (Lahr, 1991, p.174).

Through three forms of ritual dance, the characters in the play employ bodily expression to achieve physical, psychological, and emotional release and healing. By engaging in festive dances that deviate from daily routine, they break free from the constraints of their social status and covertly resist the conservative Catholic Church's control over public spirituality and emotional repression. This artistic portrayal reflects Friel's meditation on contemporary Ireland's cross-commonalities and his appeal for multicultural integration.

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