

Trans-/Trance-forming Everyday Living: A Study of Conor McPherson's *The Weir*

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Introduction

Conor McPherson's plays are often described as 'haunting' because of his frequent use of the motif of ghosts and the lingering beauty of his language. *The Weir*⁽¹⁾ encompasses both qualities: the characters tell grim ghost stories in unforgettable words. McPherson's lines appear casual and relaxed, and the audience is spontaneously lured into the unnerving realm of ghosts and fairies through his 'skill in holding his loose conversational plot together'⁽²⁾. However, closer scrutiny of the play reveals that its most haunting aspect does not involve the graphic ghost stories; instead, its poignancy stems from the long-standing fears and traumas that haunt the storytellers in the play. Such an examination also reveals that an apparently loose medley of spooky stories is, in fact, a dramatic effect of a well-calculated aesthetic construction. This paper will explore the close interrelationships between a variety of dismal stories and the tactful intertextuality of *The Weir*, which creates the space for the characters to confront their past traumas and transform themselves through their narrative trance.

Chapter 1: The elaborate links of diverse storytelling and the construction of mutual intimacy

Conor McPherson distinguished himself in his early twenties as a gifted writer of monologue dramas that frequently explored the personal fears, persistent regrets, and past psychological injuries of the dramatis personae. His first self-directed play, *Rum and Vodka*, was staged at University College Dublin (UCD) in 1992 when he was a student at UCD⁽³⁾. The play showcased a frustrated and alcoholic father who leads a dysfunctional professional and private life and increasingly resorts to intoxication to cope with the dismal circumstances of his daily life. The influence of James Joyce's short story 'Counterparts' in *Dubliners*⁽⁴⁾, is tangible but *Rum and Vodka* is profound and unique in its portrayal of the sense of urgency and the fidelity of its representation of dipsomania⁽⁵⁾. A Dublin wrongdoer with a heavy drinking prob-

lem remorsefully recollects his criminal life and clings to a hope of redemption in McPherson's second monologue play, *The Good Thief*⁽⁶⁾. McPherson's third play, *This Lime Tree Bower*, is also a monologue in which three male protagonists take turns to deliver their bitter memories⁽⁷⁾. The gradually overlapping monologues generate a sense of comradeship and offer them some psychological relief from their sordid and wretched lives. *St Nicholas*⁽⁸⁾, McPherson's fourth monologue play, spotlights a disappointed, middle-aged theatre critic. The protagonist desperately desires to alleviate his solitude by consorting with an actress and even attempting in vain to establish contact with supernatural beings. He finally finds some unexpected solace when he returns home. In all McPherson's early plays outlined above, the protagonists confess past traumatic experiences directly to the audience seeking relief, peace of mind and possible redemption.

The Weir is McPherson's fifth play and his first, full-length straight composition. It incorporates lively dialogue in a realistic setting but the core of the play comprises a familiar, albeit refined, assortment of dramatic monologues. The Royal Court Theatre (the venue of the original production of this work) commissioned McPherson to write a play that was not a monologue; he responded with a 'cheeky response to the call for him to write characters'⁽⁹⁾ by offering protagonists who converse less than alternately delivering monologues to each other. In the process, he subtly honed his typical monologue drama tactics to create a more complex piece.

The Weir encompasses five stories told by the customers of a pub and each of the narratives subtly interweaves with the others. Jack, a lonely garage-serviceman in his fifties, recounts the first and the last stories. Finbar, a rich local business owner and the only married man in the group, tells the second story. The third story is reported by Jim, Jack's assistant and a bachelor in his forties who lives with his ailing mother. Valerie, a woman in her thirties and a newcomer to the area relates the fourth narrative. The stories are all rooted in the past trauma and personal fears of the characters; thus, a sense of harmony emerges from the seemingly accidental narrative medley.

Jack's first story is about a house that is accidentally constructed on a fairy road and its destructive consequences. It precipitates a subtle chain reaction of dismal and mystic storytelling by 'setting the scene'⁽¹⁰⁾ for his drinking companions. Jack tells them that the house Valerie rents from Finbar originally belonged to Maura Nealon, a detail about which Finbar is unaware. Now deceased Maura Nealon was a regular who had supernatural encounters in her youth, 'back in about 1910 or 1911' (35). Maura would frequently recount a story about her mother,

Bridie, who was a practical joker but who became grave and tense when she and Maura heard insistent knocking first at the front door, then at the back door, and finally at the window one lonesome night. Maura experienced this uncanny event again in the 1950s when the weir was being constructed: 'there was a bit of knocking then, she said. And fierce load of dead birds in all the hedge' (37). Maura also maintained that these supposedly supernatural episodes occurred because 'the house had been built on what they call a fairy road'. (37)

McPherson introduces Jack as a tactful storyteller from the outset. Jack begins his narrative on a casual and conciliatory note, and then gradually pulls his drinking companions into the mystic subject of the paranormal: 'It's only an old cod, like.' 'Ah it's not scary' (35). He also persuasively and successfully makes his story appear harmless by assuring his companions that the protagonist in his story lived out her natural lifespan peacefully after her brushes with the preternatural.

Jack: But she was a grand, you know, spritely kind of a woman 'til the end. And had all her ... She was on the ball, like, you know? And she swore that this happened. When she was only a girl. (35)

Jack first dismantles the rational convictions of his companions and induces them to suspend their suspicion and disbelief, and immerse themselves in the emotions and atmosphere of the supernatural incidents. The genial sense of togetherness eventually elicited in Jack and his companions forms the basis of their communal sympathy.

Jack's storytelling tactics spark willing and increasing group participation and foster a sense of intimacy as the group begins to share ghostly tales. Interestingly, Jack's psychological disarmament of his companions can also apply to the theatre audience. McPherson allows Jack to entice the audience into a similar sense of camaraderie and participation in the on-stage storytelling. Although the protagonists direct their stories at their on-stage drinking companions and not at the audience, they gradually lull the audience into a willing suspension of disbelief, creating a sense of inseparability and participation between the on-stage and off-stage storytelling productions occurring within the theatre. Finbar tells the second story, which pertains to a Welsh family of newcomers to the area: 'they are only blow-ins (40)'. The members of this family unit experience inexplicable phenomena similar to the events encountered by the locals in Jack's story. Finbar recounts that a young Walsh girl named Niamh becomes afflicted by supernatural visions. Niamh's mother asks Finbar for help because the girl's father is away on

work. According to the mother, Niamh visited a friend's house, panicked, and then phoned her mother requesting her for a pick-up. Finbar goes to the friend's home in the neighbourhood to see Niamh in a state of acute hysteria, terror-struck by the ominous spectre of a woman on the staircase gazing at her: 'They said they were after getting a spirit or this, you know, and she was scared, saying it was after her' (41). A doctor is then called to administer a sedative dose to Niamh, and a priest is summoned to calm her down. At this juncture, Niamh's brother, who lives abroad, calls to inform the family of the tragic—and ominous—news that an old lady who used to babysit Niamh was found dead at the bottom of the stairs in her home.

Finbar cannot sleep after he returns home and spends the night in front of the fireplace, unable to turn around to look towards his own stairs: 'Because I thought there was something on the stairs' (43). Soon after this incident, Finbar sells his country property and moves into town. He cannot pinpoint what motivated him to move: perhaps he wanted to move upward 'into the lights' (44) or perhaps he wished to avoid 'the loneliness' (44). McPherson allows Finbar, the second storyteller, to render his narrative harmless in a manner similar to the way he makes Jack's story appear benign: 'it wasn't the fairies. It was the... Welsh young one having us all on. It was only a cod, sure.' (37); 'it's [the story is] not even a real one' (40). In so doing, McPherson intensifies the decommissioning of the rational mind-sets of the group at the bar as well as the theatre audience.

Jim's tale, the third in the string, consolidates the group's sense of fellowship even as it strengthens the dismal ambience of their long storytelling session. Jim's story describes his encounter with the supernatural in an incident that occurred in a graveyard when he was in his early twenties. A priest from a different parish came to Jim's village to find 'a couple of lads' (48) to dig a grave. Although Jim was suffering from a bad bout of flu and high fever, he took the job to earn a few pounds. Vitalized by a bottle of poteen, 'Having a little swig every half hour or so' (49), Jim and his friend dug the grave in the rain. After the deceased's casket was laid out in the church, Jim's friend went away for a while to fetch a tarpaulin to cover the grave for the next day's service. Suddenly, a man in a suit appeared from within the church and approached Jim, telling him that the spot they had dug was 'the wrong grave' for the intended service. The man in a suit seemed resentful when Jim dismissed his claims: 'And he looked at me, breathing hard through his nose. Like he was holding his temper. And he goes, "Come on, I'll show you." And he walks off' (50). The man then guided Jim to a nearby grave 'with a picture of a little girl on it' (50) and told him that the body of the deceased man should be buried there. Then the man went back into the church. Later, Jim discovered that the priest

had not been able to find local boys in his parish to do the job of gravedigging because the dead man was 'a pervert' (51), a paedophile who habitually abused little girls in the area. It follows that the spectre of the departed paedophile had visited his burial spot and wanted his body to be interred in the grave of a little girl to satisfy his wretched sexual desire even after his death. Jim's story is shocking and 'terrible' (50); nonetheless, it is congruent with the first and the second in its dark tone and its otherworldly theme. Jim reinforces the accord of the drinking companions by recounting such a story.

Valerie narrates the fourth story, breathing new life into the storytelling session of the pub regulars. Her narrative eventually creates a space that fosters reciprocal support and mutual encouragement. Valerie's talks about her own dead daughter, Niamh, who was tragically killed in a swimming pool accident. Her Niamh was constantly plagued by visual and auditory hallucinations that terrified her at night: 'she had a problem sleeping at night. She was afraid of the dark. She never wanted you to leave the room.' (57); 'But at night... there were people at the window, there were people in the attic, there was someone coming up the stairs. There were children knocking, in the wall. And there was always a man standing across the road who she'd see' (57). Valerie even entertained the thought of seeking professional help as Niamh's condition worsened. Niamh's nightly fears about mysterious presences in the dark sometimes persisted even in daylight; she was so terrified of being left alone that she was asked to phone her mother whenever she sensed danger: 'when she got up in the morning that Mummy and Daddy would have gone away and she'd be in the house on her own', and 'all the furniture and carpets and everything would be gone' (58); 'and that if she was worried at all during the day to ring me, and I'd come and get her, and there was nothing to worry about' (58). After her young daughter was killed in the swimming pool accident, Valerie arrived at the scene of the accident to see her daughter's body wrapped in a towel. After spending months in the depths of despair, Valerie received an unclear and apparently garbled phone call. She heard her dead daughter's voice: 'And she said... She wanted me to come and collect her.'; 'I just said, "Where are you?" And she said she thought she was at Nana's [Valerie's mother-in-law]. In the bedroom. But Nana wasn't there. And she was scared. There were children knocking in the walls and the man was standing across the road, and he was looking up and he was going to cross the road' (60). Valerie's story astonishes the members of the group, each of whom tries in vain to furnish reasonable explanations for what could have happened. Jack suggests that Valerie may have dreamed her daughter's phone call. Jim surmises that Valerie probably answered a wrong number, a call that was not meant for her. Finbar attributes the enigmatic phone call to

the workings of Valerie's brain, which was still coping with the loss of Niamh. That the three men who had already shared dark and dismal stories about paranormal phenomena endeavour to rationalise Valerie's story is almost comical. Brandan, the bar owner, validates Valerie's experiences and her story. The sense of unity that has advanced through the hours the characters have spent at the bar appears unharmed as Jim, who is leaving the pub with Finbar, takes Valerie's hand and expresses his deep sympathy: 'I'm very sorry about what's happened to you. And I'm sure your girl is quite safe and comfortable wherever she is, and I'm going to say a little prayer for her, but I'm sure she doesn't need it. She's a saint. She's a little innocent. And that fella I saw in the churchyard that time was only the rotten poitin and the fever I had. Finbar's right. You enjoy your peace and quiet here now. And we'll see you again. You're very nice. Goodnight now' (63). It is noteworthy that Valerie's story accentuates the psychological tension in the group of storytellers; at the same time, it ultimately bolsters their intimacy and mutual sympathy. The relative strangers have exchanged ghost stories and in the process, have also developed a profound compassion for each other.

The psychological process of the group's reception of Valerie's story epitomises the title of the play, *The Weir*. The weir is a symbol of the human endeavour to control the potentially uncontrollable forces of nature and to subordinate them to human rationality. Earlier in the play, Finbar goes up to the photograph of the weir on the pub wall and explains the local history to Valerie: 'The weir, the river, the weir em is to regulate the water for generating power for the area and for Carrick as well' (32). The weir is a massive safety device to domesticate river currents, but it is also the place where 'lots under the surface is coming out' and where a stream of water is being forcefully 'squeezed through'⁽¹¹⁾. The construction and maintenance of a weir involve constant risk of malfunction and possible disaster, just like the swimming pool accident that kills Valerie's daughter. Valerie's story demonstrates that human efforts to establish absolute control over water denote an inflated illusion. The manner in which the group eventually receives Valerie's story reveals the ways in which the characters accept the ambiguousness of their existence, which belongs simultaneously to their mundane diurnal world and to the inexplicable and unmanageable world that thrives beyond common human perception.

Valerie's tactful and disarming storytelling style accords her drinking companions with an ongoing mutual intimacy and positive inclination to deal with past fears and traumatic experiences. Jack is thus induced to deliver his second contribution to the storytelling, the final tale of the night. Jack's second story articulates his deep remorse for past misdeeds. His poignant regret for his degrading and heartless conduct toward a girl is palpable: 'breaking the poor

girl's heart [...] out of pure cussedness' (67). The manner of his storytelling hints at the fact that he regards the crushing loneliness of everyday work in his garage, which is scorching hot in the summer, as an earthly purgatory he must endure as perpetual penance for his transgressions. In the mid-1960s, Jack courted a girl for years but abandoned her when she moved to Dublin because he felt 'an irrational fear' (67) that detained him in his hometown, just like the fairies in his first story remained attached to their own spaces. Even after he had abandoned her, he 'had the gall to feel resentful when she wrote and said she was getting married to a fella' (67). On the day of her wedding, Jack caught the eyes of the girl as she walked down the aisle and 'gave her the cheesiest little grin', (68) showing off his sexual freedom and better future. His dishonest intentions to hurt her backfired. His loneliness began to wound him and torture his soul when she glanced at him and treated him merely as another guest at the wedding. He could finally fully apprehend his barren forthcoming years: 'and the future was all ahead of me. Years and years of it. I could feel it coming. All those things you've got to face on your own. All by yourself.' (68; original emphasis). He left halfway through the ceremony and moped around the streets of Dublin. He took refuge in a dark and secluded counter of a pub located in the midst of 'a little labyrinth of streets' (68). An observant and benevolent barman quickly noticed Jack's isolation and distress and made sandwiches for him. The hearty meal rejuvenated Jack, who returned to the wedding reception with a fresh heart to celebrate the bride and groom: 'I took this sandwich up and I could hardly swallow it, because of the lump in my throat. But I ate it all down because someone I didn't know had done this for me. Such a small thing. But a huge thing in my condition. It fortified me, like no meal I ever had in my life' (69). Jack cannot totally shake off his feelings of loneliness or his remorse: 'there's not one morning I don't wake up with her name in the room' (69). Nevertheless, the intimate harmony, created by the storytelling session seems long-lasting, at least for Jack, Valerie, and Brendan.

Each of the five stories could not have been very effective by itself and would simply remain a spooky ghost story or gloomy reminiscence. However, McPherson inserts subtle links between the stories, facilitating the construction of a space in which mutual psychological support becomes possible through their sharing. Jack's first story about fairy roads lowers the psychological shields of the characters (and the audience) and opens them to the idea of a realm beyond human knowledge that also defies human rationality. His effective storytelling skills foster the psychological participation of the group (and the audience) in a tale of the supernatural and gradually increases the idea of human bonding. Finbar, a practical businessman, tells an ominous tale that serves to facilitate a state of willing suspension of disbelief in

both the other characters and the audience. Jim's cautionary tale of the apparition of the dead paedophile consolidates the growing sense of unity in the casual acquaintances and induces them to imagine an afterlife where human will and desire are perpetuated. Valerie is also a profoundly skilful storyteller and her personal narrative about her daughter's death generates heartfelt sympathy in the members of the group and creates a hopeful ambience of the opportunity and possibility of psychological assistance. Her story also induces Jack to share the final story about his own past trauma, which cements the foundations of mutual intimacy and positive interdependence among the characters.

McPherson's response to the demand for a non-monologue play was regarded as evasive because *The Weir* showcases sequential monologues by its characters. However, the nuanced interactions between the stories recounted within the play are mesmerising and the play is greater than the simple sum of five stories. Just like most of the dramatis personae in McPherson's monologue plays, the protagonists of *The Weir* are hard drinkers and are under the considerable influence of alcohol. Yet, the elaborate links and interchanges between the five narratives cushion against mutual disbelief and gradually produce a narrative trance in the protagonists, inducing them to abandon their rational attitudes, become empathetic listeners, and share a profound sense of togetherness created by the entire exercise.

Chapter 2: A playgirl of the Western world

Valerie's storytelling is so brilliantly constructed and so effectively delivered that a scholar named Eamonn Jordan suspects that the story of her daughter's death is possibly fabricated⁽¹²⁾. Jordan detects the influence of movies on McPherson's writing and claims that the screenplay for *I Went Down*⁽¹³⁾, owes much to Martin Brest's 1998 movie, *Midnight Run*. Jordan also believes that *The Weir* (1997) is indebted to Bryan Singer's 1995 movie, *The Usual Suspects*⁽¹⁴⁾. Intriguingly, in a private conversation with Jordan, McPherson accepted the first charge but denied the second. Nevertheless, Jordan's observation seems quite persuasive. The protagonist of *The Usual Suspects* extemporaneously formulates a story as he is interrogated by a police officer. Jordan indicates that Valerie's daughter's name, Niamh, also appears in Finbar's story, which precedes Valerie's. References to startling knocks are also part of Finbar's story and Jack's introductory tale. Thus, Jordan underscores that *The Weir* is 'a wake for Valerie's dead daughter and other lost things'. However, Jordan's comments remain open-ended and do not conclusively pronounce whether Valerie's lamentation is genuine or whether it is an effective performance. Kevin Kerrane attributes this narratorial unreliability to an element of the 'tradi-

tion of reflexive narration' in *The Weir*, claiming that like the tales within tales in *The Book of 1001 Nights*, the audience can enjoy the thrilling fears of the story through Valerie's tale while simultaneously entertaining doubts about the presence of supernatural beings⁽¹⁵⁾.

The locale of *The Weir* is, however, 'a rural part of Ireland' (12) where the protagonists harbour reasonable doubts about fairies and their ill effects on local inhabitants but where they nonetheless simultaneously embrace an inveterate belief in the existence of fairies. Such complex perspectives can be compared to Declan Kiberd's allusion to the Galway woman who was asked by an American anthropologist whether she really believed in the 'little people'. Reportedly, she replied with terse sophistication: 'I do not, sir - but they're there anyway'⁽¹⁶⁾. Valerie carefully notes the psychological inclinations of the pub regulars and adopts their common framework of storytelling. She then packages and presents her past trauma in a tale with supernatural overtones. Thus, Valerie's story is true from her viewpoint, and it is partly fabricated from the standpoint of the audience.

In terms of her storytelling technique, Valerie can be considered a female version of Christy Mahon in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*⁽¹⁷⁾. In Synge's *Playboy*, Christy Mahon is a young wanderer who appears at a local pub in County Mayo. He tells the local pub regulars that he killed his father, and his fascinating story makes him an instantaneous hero among them. However, the villagers lose their admiration for Christy and begin to persecute him when Old Mahon, Christy's father, arrives at the village with a serious head injury. Christy, a good listener and acute observer, commands 'an unexpected gift for mimicry'⁽¹⁸⁾. He notices that the villagers have a keen sense of direction:

JIMMY. Did you marry three wives maybe? I'm told there's a sprinkling have done that among the holy Luthers of the preaching North.

CHRISTY [shyly]. I never married with one, let alone with a couple or three.

PHILLY. Maybe he went fighting for the Boers, the like of the man beyond, was judged to be hanged, quartered, and drawn. Were you off east, young fellow, fighting bloody wars for Kruger and the freedom of the Boers?

CHRISTY. I never left my own parish till Tuesday was a week.⁽¹⁹⁾

While Christy offers quick responses to the questions posed by the villagers who frequent the pub, he also quickly learns their manner of storytelling. Then Christy starts to tell stories about his own deeds with frequent reference to the points of the compass:

SUSAN. That's a grand story.

HONOR. He tells it lovely.

CHRISTY [flattered and confident, waving bone]. He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet. [He raises the chicken bone to his Adam's apple.]

GIRLS [together]. Well, you're a marvel! Oh, God bless you! You're the lad surely!⁽²⁰⁾

Likewise, *The Weir's* Valerie is attentive, is an astute observer, and is ingenious at adapting to circumstances. She allows Finbar to give her a tour of the area: 'Oh, well I was getting the history of the place and everything today' (31). She is then introduced to the local pub where she scrutinises the photographs on the wall with great interest:

VALERIE (*going to the photographs*). Oh right. That's all around here, is it? (31)

In this manner, Valerie gleans insights into the backgrounds of the local inhabitants as well as into the history of the area, including the construction of the weir. Every time one of the other protagonists shares a story, she responds quickly and learns that the locals do not dispute the existence of the supernatural. Immediately after Jack's story about the house constructed on the 'fairy road', she summarises his account as if trying to retain it in her memory: 'And they [fairies] wanted to come through' (37). As Finbar talks about the apparition, Valerie notes a similarity between the protagonist of his story and herself:

FINBAR. Ah they were only blow-ins, he was a guard.

VALERIE. Blow-ins like me? (40)

Finbar inadvertently displays his tendency toward malapropism, recounting the inscrutable event experienced by the troubled little girl: 'a phone call from the young one, Niamh, and she was after doing the Luigi board' (41). Valerie, the attentive listener, corrects him: 'Ouija board' (41), confirming her deep interest in his story.

Valerie asks a leading question when Jim relates his story about the dead pervert's ghost: 'Do

you think it was a [sic], an hallucination Jim?' (51). Her iteration elicits a negative answer, which is precisely what she desires. Through skillful questioning, Valerie persuades Jim to endorse the facticity of his chimerical story: 'I was flying like, but it was a right fluke him showing me where he wanted to be buried and me knowing nothing about him like' (51). The audience is probably more satisfied than surprised by Valerie's sympathetic nod and her 'Mm. (*Nods.*)' (51).

Another tell-tale sign of Valerie being an elaborate and tactful storyteller is the well-timed break she takes after Jack, Finbar, and Jim share their stories. Valerie leaves her seat to visit the toilet before she begins her tale: 'I'm fine. Just, actually, is the ladies out this way?' (52). She is the only person in the group who has enough time to prepare her story. When she came back from the break, she evinces interest in the pub building and converses with Brendan, the pub owner. She makes no secret of her information gathering: 'I was having a good nosy around' (56). She thus allows the other characters and the theatre audience to glimpse her personality and her methods of fashioning a suitable yarn. In fact, many elements that Valerie notes as an attentive listener of the three preceding stories (fairy road, ghosts, momentous phone calls) are incorporated into her own story as vital narrative units. Also, as already mentioned, her storytelling intensifies the sense of togetherness and mutual sympathy felt by the protagonists. Like Christy Mahon in *Playboy*, Valerie must build reliable relationships to cope with her past trauma and her loneliness; unlike Christy, she wins over congenial companions among the locals by the end of the play.

Chapter 3: Storytelling gatherings as a secular equivalent of the church

The influence of Joyce's short story on McPherson's *Rum and Vodka* is tangible; the impact of *Ulysses* on *The Weir* is also quite clear. The rich intertextuality between the two works is obvious. Leopold Bloom's haunting fear of being alive in *Ulysses* is echoed in the dead Niamh's expressions of fear of solitary confinement in a bedroom via her mysterious phone call to Valerie. As he attends the funeral procession of his acquaintance, Bloom aggravates his taphephobia and tries to allay his fears by devising fanciful rescue plans: 'a telephone in the coffin and some kind of a canvas airhole'⁽²¹⁾. Bloom develops his fancy further to communication between the dead and the living. He considers the voice of the dead the most important element of such communication:

Well, the voice, yes: gramophone. Have a gramophone in every grave or keep it in the house. After dinner on a Sunday. Put on poor old greatgrandfather Kraahraark! Hellohellohello

amawfullyglad kraark awfullygladaseeragain hellohello amarawf kophsth. (144)

The indistinct voice of the dead on the gramophone here sounds like someone at the other end of a long-distance telephone call or perhaps a crossed line because Bloom is still under the influence of his own fancy about the telephone in the coffin, and perhaps because the gramophone he imagines is a mystic communication device between this world and the afterlife. Valerie, in *The Weir*, claims she received a phone call from her dead daughter Niamh. Although the voice wafting to her on the phone from the land of the dead is obscure, Valerie is able to understand that her daughter is confined in a bedroom and that she is afraid of being alone. This outcome is precisely what Bloom wants to avoid.

Another—and perhaps more important—evidence of intertextuality between *The Weir* and *Ulysses* is the idea of a secular equivalent of the church and holy communion looming out of sordid everyday life. In the sixteenth episode of *Ulysses* (the ‘Eumaeus’ episode), Stephen Dedalus, a troubled young wanderer, captures Bloom’s attention and attracts his genuine sympathy. Bloom rescues Stephen, who has been knocked down by a thug on the street and takes him to a nearby cabman’s shelter. Bloom then orders a cup of coffee and a small loaf of bread at the shelter to comfort Stephen, following which they share their stories with each other: ‘— Now touching a cup of coffee, Mr Bloom ventured to plausibly suggest to break the ice’ (716) / ‘a rather antediluvian specimen of a bun’ (717). Stephen is highly introverted and feels guilty about having treated his mother coldly on her deathbed, but gradually opens his mind to Bloom’s loving kindness. Bloom is socially marginalised as the son of a Hungarian Jew and feels guilty about the premature death of his baby boy. He relieves his long-standing solitude in Stephen’s trustworthy company. The two men cultivate a spirit of mutual assistance and sympathy through honest conversation. In the process of their seeking of spiritual salvation, the cup of coffee, the bread, and their conversation can metaphorically be considered consecrated wine, holy wafer, and the act of confession. Declan Kiberd suggests that ‘the consecration of the Roman Catholic Mass’ is implicit in the scene. Kiberd indicates the fact that ‘nothing in this chapter of disguises is as it seems’ and underscores ‘the wariness of the phrasing’ which is congruent with the phrasing of Catholic consecration⁽²²⁾. Bloom and Stephen initiate a conversation with each other at a public space in the eating house. Subsequently, Bloom invites Stephen to his home and the two men continue their conversation in the more intimate space of the kitchen after midnight. Although they are laymen and not ecclesiastics, they practically redeem themselves from their guilt and social alienation through mutual support and understanding. It

may safely be asserted that in the context of the spiritual salvation, a secluded space serves as a confession booth and that the two men are simultaneously confessor and confessant for each other. When their conversation ends, their parting greetings are indirectly reported in the seventeenth episode (the 'Ithaca' episode) in the solemn style of catechism: 'the union of their tangent, the disunion of their (respectively) centrifugal and centripetal hands' (826). Nonetheless, their mutual sympathy and intimacy are suitably highlighted. Their meeting is celebrated through the accompanying sounds of 'the bells in the church of Saint George' (826) as if it was a secular version of an auricular confession officially guaranteed by the church.

A similar phraseological awareness may be observed in *The Weir* when the psychologically devastated Jack encounters a compassionate barman and eats all the sandwiches he kindly makes. Immediately after the meal, Jack feels refreshed and fortified: as if he has never before in his life had a meal. It seems quite evident that McPherson uses the sandwiches as a metaphor for the holy wafer, just as Joyce alluded to it through the bread loaf in *Ulysses*. Kerrane has claimed that the kind barman's conduct towards Jack seems 'a sacramental act'⁽²³⁾ in the context of Jack's account. Further, the narrative aspects of the stories told in *The Weir* are closely related, evincing collaborative interchanges between the narratives and the narrators. The subtle description of the sandwiches in Jack's story cannot be separated from the religious implication of the wine Valerie drinks. Valerie causes some bewilderment among the group members when she orders a glass of wine: 'Do you have... em, a glass of white wine?' (25). The implication of the minor disruption concerns the pub regulars' unfamiliarity with the 'big city drink'⁽²⁴⁾. More importantly, it signifies the brand-new phase Valerie has ushered into their association. She unfolds a space in which each of the characters can squarely face past trauma and mitigate long-standing fears and regrets through the act of sharing his story. The experience of the drinking company in *The Weir* may seem simply 'therapeutic'⁽²⁵⁾, as Barbara R. Cohn has suggested. There are indeed therapeutic elements in their gathering such as emotional warmth, restraint and tolerance to individual differences. However, *The Weir's* intertextuality with *Ulysses* strengthens its religious resonances. These sacred echoes grant the tonality of penitential confession and accord the hope of potential redemption to the storytelling.

Conclusion

When Conor McPherson, an expert on monologues, wrote *The Weir* and allowed each of the dramatis personae narrate a story to the other characters, he anticipated a poor reception from the audience. The style of an ordinary play offered him dim prospects because 'it was just

people talking, so it shouldn't have worked — it should have been boring⁽²⁶⁾. However, the elaborate linking of the five stories sequentially told by the characters resonated with the audience and the play's collective effect was greater than the sum of its parts. The rich intertextuality of the play with Synge's and Joyce's writings also testifies to *The Weir's* highly complex aesthetic construct. The sophisticated interaction of each story to the other aptly prevents the development of mutual disbelief in the protagonists; rather, it induces a narrative trance in the drinking companions, which eventually persuades them to renounce their rational attitudes and share a deep-seated sense of unity and sympathy. Immersed in intimacy and togetherness, the storytellers can successfully create a psychological space in which they can become both confessors and confessants for each other, and where they can negotiate their own past traumas and fears, eventually transforming themselves in the process. *The Weir* is a remarkable example of contemporary Irish drama: it posits the on-stage psychological space as a secular equivalent of the church.

Notes

- (1) *The Weir* was first staged at The Royal Court Theatre (Theatre Upstairs with the capacity of 85) in 1997, which toured to and made its Irish Premiere performance at The Gate Theatre, Dublin.
- (2) Mary Leland. "The Weir review: McPherson's language gets lost in the flow", *The Irish Times*. Jun 29, 2016. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/the-weir-review-mcpherson-s-language-gets-lost-in-the-flow-1.2704034>
- (3) *Rum and Vodka* was first staged at University College Dublin on the 27th of November in 1992. Conor McPherson was a student there, majoring in philosophy, and served as a director for his first play. Later in 1994, the play was staged by his theatre company, Fly by Night Theatre Company, at the City Arts Centre, Dublin, on the 30th of August in 1994 with a different cast and a different director.
- (4) In Joyce's "Counterparts", a middle-aged Irish man devastates his career and his family life by his incorrigible drink problem. Joyce's influence on McPherson is evident. An episode of adolescent boys, who play truant from school, in *This Lime Tree Bower* is almost an adaptation of Joyce's "An Encounter" in *Dubliners*. A religious implication in the description of a glass of wine and a piece of sandwiches in McPherson's *The Weir* seems an echo from overtones in description of a cup of coffee and stale bun in "Eumaeus" episode of *Ulysses* as I discuss in this paper.
- (5) Convincing powers in the portraits of alcoholic Irish males in Conor McPherson's plays are unmistakably rooted in long years of his own experience of alcoholism, which resulted in the "intensive care with a ruptured pancreas" in his later twenties. For this, see in an interview article in *The Stage* on the 8th of January 2020. "Conor McPherson: Troubled men, ghosts, drinkers sounds [sic] a lot like real life to me". <https://www.thestage.co.uk/big-interviews/conor-mcpherson>
- (6) *The Good Thief* was first staged in City Arts Centre, Dublin in 1994 with Conor McPherson as the director. The title of the play (which was first staged under the title of *The Light of Jesus*) and the protagonist's hope for redemption are possible reminder of Vladimir's storytelling of "a thief being saved" and "The

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- Saviour" in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. See *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition, Volume III: Dramatic Works*, ed. Paul Auster. New York: Grove Press, 2006, pp.6-7.
- (7) *This Lime Tree Bower* was first staged in Crypt Arts Centre in 1995 with the playwright also as the director.
 - (8) *St Nicholas* was first staged in the Bush Theatre, London, in 1997 with the playwright as the director.
 - (9) Scott T. Cummings. "Homo Fabulator: The Narrative Imperative in Conor McPherson's Plays," in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed by Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000, p.308.
 - (10) *Conor McPherson. Plays Two: The Weir, Dublin Carol, Port Authority, Come on Over*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2004, p.36. Henceforth all the citations of *The Weir* is from this volume, and the corresponding page numbers are incorporated within parentheses in the text.
 - (11) Conor McPherson's interview on New York Times by Mel Gussow: 'From Dublin to Broadway, Spinning Tales of Irish Wool.' See New York Times, April 1, 1999, Section E, Page 1. See also the following website: <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/01/theater/from-dublin-to-broadway-spinning-tales-of-irish-wool.html>
 - (12) Eamonn Jordan. "Pastoral Exhibits: Narrating Authenticities in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*". *Irish University Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Autumn -Winter, 2004), pp. 351-368.
 - (13) The film was first released in Ireland in October 1997.
 - (14) The film was first screened at Sundance Film Festival in January 1995 and released in Ireland in December 1995.
 - (15) Kevin Kerrane. "The Structural Elegance of Conor McPherson's *The Weir*", *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, Vol. 10, No. 4. Winter, 2006, pp. 105-121.
 - (16) Declan Kiberd. *Inventing Ireland*, p.2.
 - (17) The play was first staged at the Abbey Theatre in January 1907. It is well known that the first production caused a violent riot among the audience. See Declan Kiberd. *Inventing Ireland*, pp.166-88.
 - (18) Declan Kiberd. *Inventing Ireland*, p.179.
 - (19) *J. M. Synge: Collected Works, iv: Plays: Book 2*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 1982, p.71.
 - (20) *ibid.* p.103.
 - (21) James Joyce. *Ulysses*, annotated student's edition, ed. Declan Kiberd. London: Penguin, 1992, p.141. Henceforth all the citations of *Ulysses* are from this volume, and the corresponding page numbers are incorporated within parentheses in the text.
 - (22) For this, see *Ulysses*, annotated student's edition, p. 1154.
 - (23) Kevin Kerrane. *op. cit.*, p.116.
 - (24) Barbara R. Cohn. "Group Dynamics in the Weir: A Review and Essay". *Group*, Vol. 26, No. 4, December 2002, p. 310.
 - (25) *ibid.*, p.317.
 - (26) Aleks Sierz, "Fighting his Corner," *The Stage*, February 28, 2002, p.11.

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