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"Old Cod": The Power of Storytelling in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*

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“Old Cod”: The Power of Storytelling in Conor McPherson’s

The Weir

A Thesis by

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“Old Cod”: The Power of Storytelling in Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*

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ABSTRACT

“Old Cod”: The Power of Storytelling in Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*

by Sarah Nicole Johnson

This paper examines the representation of Irish storytelling in Conor McPherson’s 1997 play *The Weir*. Drawing on postcolonial theory as well as the historical context of Ireland during the play’s release, I argue that *The Weir* is uniquely positioned at the intersection of traditional and modern values. Further, I assert that fairy legend is a tool used by the play’s characters to both understand and escape a fluctuating cultural landscape, and ultimately, a way to articulate their own values. Using textual analysis, I examine the rhetorical choices of the play’s storytellers and compare it with established conventions of Irish fairy legend. More broadly, I argue for storytelling as a way of negotiating values during times of change.

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Introduction

When *The Weir* debuted in 1997, it was performed in the Royal Court Theater in London for an audience of just sixty people. The set design was intended to be minimal— a pub with a few bar taps, a handful of stools, and a comfortable armchair near a fireplace. The play begins with a conversation between two locals, Jack and the barkeep Brendan, about the relative merits of Harp lager and Guinness stout. The simplicity of the set, the actors’ colloquial speech, and the slow-burn pace of the narrative all lead us to believe the story might be humdrum. However, the pub transforms, over seventy-some odd pages, into a lively cultural space, illuminated by local paranormal tales. Conor McPherson has said that his play is often viewed as promoting a dichotomous view of Irish history, a kind of “Old Ireland – good, New Ireland – bad” mentality. Although McPherson himself is hesitant to endorse this interpretation of his work, it is true that the play creates space for this dialectical approach to Irish identity. The stories told in *The Weir* represent an oral art form historically associated with rural Irish communities, and moreover, a medium through which the characters can articulate their understanding of a shifting cultural landscape. *The Weir* is positioned at the intersection of traditional and modern values, and fairy legend offers a way for the characters to both understand and escape the times, ultimately forming their own worldview through the act of storytelling.

The Celtic Tiger

The Weir encapsulates the era of The Celtic Tiger, a period of unprecedented economic growth during which the national identity of Ireland was rapidly shifting. In the years following independence from British colonial rule, the newly formed Irish Free State was plagued by unemployment, poverty, and emigration, and at the same time, leaders of the country were trying to give voice to the Ireland they wanted to rebuild. In a 1943 speech, Eamon de Valera asserted, “the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be...a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry...whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age”. Contemporary cultural leaders echoed these pastoral images of hearth and homestead, which became symbols of national identity in a country that was establishing its sovereignty for the first time. Critically, *The Weir* was written during a period when these more traditional national signifiers were giving way to a globalized, forward-looking image of Ireland. An *Irish Times* article from 1996 explains, “Ireland is being lauded as an economic model for the rest of Europe. And with confidence high, the outlook appears bright...Ireland Inc has never had it so good” (Taylor). The Celtic Tiger brought unprecedented economic optimism, while in some ways disrupting the stereotype of Ireland as essentially poor, rural, and Catholic. At the same time, this burgeoning prosperity was tempered by concerns for the long-term impact of such drastic change. Saliently, Dr. Pat McKeon asks, “Can the Celtic Tiger care?” and later answers, “I think that first thing we've got to recognize is that we've gone through a major shift in attitude and values” (qtd. in Holmquist). *The Weir* is positioned in the middle of this discourse of values, representing one artist’s interpretation of a changing Ireland. The play explores this area of Irish national identity which

had not yet been fully charted at the time – the interstitial space between De Valera’s Ireland and the reign of the tiger economy which came to be. By engaging with this dichotomy, *The Weir* helps to construct the cultural phenomenon we now know as The Celtic Tiger.

Stories in a Changing World

The stories told in *The Weir* engage with a long tradition of orality in Irish culture, and they teach the characters to develop their own ways of understanding a changing world. Fairy legend originated in rural Irish communities where tales were told in both English and the Irish language. The tales were suppressed by the Catholic church, which considered them to be pagan, and also by the British colonial government, which codified the systematic erasure of the Irish language into law (Correll 2). At their core, Angela Bourke notes, “the fairy legends...constitute a marginal verbal art, subaltern discourse, the opposite of the dominant modes of speech and thought, the elaborated codes by which most privileged ideas are conveyed, especially in print”. The tales represent a subversive body of knowledge, one which originated from a rural culture that was historically labeled as primitive and illiterate by the ruling class. By privileging the spoken word over print, the tales communicate a sense of possibility, of improvisation, of freedom from the established literary tradition. Appropriately, the final form of *The Weir* is performed on stage, reinforcing the importance of orality in this text. Angela Bourke goes on to compare Irish fairy legends to string figures in Navajo culture, noting that both practices “are at once games, works of art, illustrated textbooks, metaphors, and mnemonics” (16). The tales themselves are multifaceted and serve many purposes, from the cognitive to the artistic. They become crucial at a point in time when cultural tides are shifting, and the tension between old ideas and new ideas is at the forefront of popular discourse. While it may be argued that *The Weir* is a kind of reassertion of rural values, it seems that the most important assertion is the power of storytelling as a cultural practice that has always helped people make sense of the

world. At a time when Ireland's national identity was in question, McPherson's characters resort to tales to decipher these changes.

Conor McPherson renders the pub as a rural, communitarian space where tales are deeply woven into the culture. The setting of the play and (some of) its main characters are strongly coded with a sense of rural identity. The publican owner, Brendan, has a connection to the surrounding land that is elucidated early in the text—"This bar is part of a house and the house is part of a farm" (McPherson 1). The exposition of the play establishes that the pub is part business and part domicile, situated on an agricultural property in County Leitrim. Because the boundary between the home, the place of business, and the land is muddled, the bar reads as being inextricably linked to the countryside. We observe Brendan "wears a sweater, heavy cord pants and a pair of slip-on shoes. He carries a bucket with peat briquettes. He goes to the fireplace, barely acknowledging Jack, just his voice" (McPherson 8). Brendan is shown for the first time as he tends to the fire. His casual clothes suggest the atmosphere of the pub, while the peat briquettes he carries are a reminder of the rural setting – the kindling itself is made from the bogland that surrounds the bar. Brendan regards Jack not as a customer so much as an acquaintance. Each of these details contributes to a specific rendering of an Irish pub as a place that is imbued with a sense of rural community. Some scholars have noted that Conor McPherson is one generation removed from rural Ireland (Greene 299). This detail is mentioned in the author's note of the play, as McPherson explains, "This play was probably inspired by my visits to Leitrim to see my grandad... We'd have a drink and sit at the fire. And he'd tell me stories". McPherson's nostalgia for the Irish countryside provides an occasion for the narrative. Through this inconspicuous phrase in the author's note, we are introduced to the emblems that he associates with rural Ireland – the drink, the fire, and the stories shared. *The Weir*, imbued

heavily with these pastoral symbols, appeals most explicitly to storytelling as a way that the characters assert themselves. While McPherson's characters share a common interest in the stories, their differences are also made apparent in the text.

The social divisions between the characters reflect the cultural milieu of Ireland in the late nineties, with Finbar and Valerie representing the encroaching tide of the Celtic Tiger and the other men signifying more traditional, rural values. Jack and Jim fit neatly into the atmosphere of the pub, proclaiming themselves as "the muggins, the single fellas" (McPherson 11). They represent the key demographic of the business—the old, unmarried constituency in the area. Like Brenden, their proximity to the countryside is apparent; they are the locals who dictate the conventions of the space. They claim the phrase "muggins" with a sense of pride that they have never abandoned their roots. On the other hand, Finbar has distanced himself from his rural upbringing, and he flouts the unspoken codes of the space. He brings Valerie, a woman from Dublin, and he is first shown wearing "a light cream coloured suit and an open collar" (McPherson 5). In marked contrast to the others' more modest attire, Finbar boasts an open-collared suit, which reads as gaudy, perhaps even offensive, in the context of the pub. His choice of clothing is a status symbol, a way of demarcating himself from the other, ostensibly less sophisticated patrons. Although he is already unpopular before he sets foot in the bar, Finbar doubles down by insulting the men in front of Valerie, jibing, "They're only jealous... because I went to town to seek my fortune. And they stayed out here on the bog picking their holes" (McPherson 13). In this moment, the general feeling of resentment towards Finbar feels more substantive. The men resent Finbar because of his arrogance, however, on a deeper level, they are insulted by the way he flaunts his social mobility. The stratification of the characters is made clear through Finbar's remark, with the "bog" representing a pejorative idea of rural Ireland as

perpetually stuck in the past, whereas the “town” is positioned as a place of opportunity and modernity. The fact that Finbar is a landlord who allegedly inherited wealth from his father certainly does not help his case with the men, and in fact, evokes a bitter history of rural Irish tenant farmers being exploited by English landlords. The antagonistic relationship between the characters illustrates what is at stake— can the Celtic Tiger coexist with rural values, or is it a zero-sum game? This binary provides a rich context for the way that the characters communicate. However, as the characters transition into telling tales, the social divisions among them temporarily soften.

In some ways, storytelling disrupts the hierarchical relationships between characters because it places emphasis on skill rather than social or material capital. Finbar is the first to ask about the fairy road, and after a bit of coaxing, Jack obliges the group with a tale. He sets the scene in chilling detail, claiming, “there was a wind like this one tonight, howling and whistling in off the sea. You hear it under the door and it’s like someone singing...It was this type of night now” (McPherson 31). Rather than simply reporting facts, Jack takes time to build the pathos of the story, including sensory details about the sound of the wind as it comes under the door. The immediate, tactile descriptions that he uses give the impression that the past is being pulled into the present moment. In this sense, storytelling expresses itself as an art form, and Jack is accorded a certain degree of reverence while he tells his tale. Angela Bourke notes, “rural Irish society accorded high status to its oral storytellers. More than simply an entertainer, the skilled storyteller was valued as outstandingly wise, thoughtful, and knowledgeable” (15). Through the tale, the narrator inhabits a kind of power that, in some ways, transcends the material. Finbar’s money and flashy clothing do not buy him respect in this setting. Rather, the tradition of storytelling dictates that the narrator be judged based on their artistic merits—how captivating

and imaginative they are in creating a tale. While the play references rural storytelling culture through the dynamics of its characters, there are also more concrete historical references to events that have impacted rural Irish communities.

The play's namesake is an allusion to the electrification of the Irish countryside, a project which exemplifies the potential cost of modernization. While the weir is only addressed briefly in the play, it looms large in the background of the narrative. Finbar explains 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" (McPherson 27). Finbar, acting as a kind of tour guide to the Dubliner, Valerie, explains the utility of the weir in the local area. Initially, he seems to falter in differentiating between the river and the dam, suggesting that the weir has evolved from an artificial intervention to an ingrained feature of the landscape. Andrew Hazucha points out the parallels between the weir referenced in the play and the damming of the lower Shannon River in the 1920s, dubbed the "Shannon Scheme" (68). Although this project was supposed to modernize rural Irish counties, it brought "the reality of environmental degradation all along the Shannon, as well as the human misery created in the wake of this significant habitat alteration" (Hazucha 72). By subtly referencing the Shannon Scheme, McPherson grounds the text in real historical events, highlighting a concrete example of the struggle between traditional and modern values. The connection to the Shannon Scheme may also have a personal tenor, as it is stated in the author's note that McPherson's grandfather "lived on his own down a country road in a small house beside the Shannon". Thus, it seems plausible that *The Weir* is not just an intellectual commentary on the transformation of the Irish countryside, but an emotional one as well. McPherson grapples with the legacy of the Shannon Scheme and other such projects in real time, evoking a subtle line of questioning which spans the entire narrative. Though this historical

context is not overtly stated anywhere in the play, the concept of land preservation is further dealt with through the stories.

The stories hold a particular rootedness in the land. Finbar tells Valerie, “the area’s steeped in old folklore”, and later declares, “You hear these around, up and down the country” (McPherson 19, 22). Finbar iterates the prevalence of tales in the countryside, emphasizing that stories are often heard rather than written about. As an outsider, Valerie is not equipped to understand how deeply the tales are enmeshed with the land, so the other characters are deliberate in their efforts to illuminate this connection. For example, Jack explains, “From the fort up in Brendan’s top field there, then the old well, and the abbey further down, and into the cove where the little pebbly beach is, there...legend would be that the fairies would come down that way to bathe, you see. And Maura Nealon’s house was built on what you’d call...that...road” (McPherson 33). In Jack’s rendering, there are very specific features of the land that are noted as the domain of the fairies. The land seems so integral to the stories, the connection so foundational, that it becomes difficult to compartmentalize the stories themselves from the places they are said to occur. According to Angela Bourke, Irish fairy legend is “Made up of short, vivid, easily memorable and interconnecting units” which “[float] like a web of story above the physical landscape, pegged down at point after point” (7). While the tales themselves often deal in abstractions, they are anchored at various points to the land. The telling of stories, then, becomes a way for the narrators to articulate their desired relationship to the land. In Irish legend, fairies are notorious for being fiercely territorial over the natural landscape.

The fairies in *The Weir* exhibit a strong land ethic, suggesting that the preservation of the local environment is an important consideration in rural storytelling communities. When the weir is constructed, Maura Nealon’s house is plagued by “a bit of knocking... And fierce load of dead

birds all in the hedge...” (McPherson 22). The ongoing haunting of Maura Nealon’s house coincides with the construction of the weir which, according to local knowledge, interferes with fairies who bathe in the river. The fairies are never physically described during the play, but they make their presence known through the phenomenon of knocking, and they are especially active during periods when the land is threatened. The dead birds are another cryptic message that indicates the fairies’ dissatisfaction with human intervention. Whereas the weir represents a societal shift towards industrialization and modernity, fairies embody the idea that progress does not come without consequences. In traditional Irish fairy tales, “there are many stories about house-builders who did not take...precaution and ended up losing much of their family, before either abandoning the house or knocking down the part that crossed the fairies’ route” (Young 5). These tales show a recurrent trope of local families infringing on the territory of fairies, oftentimes with devastating outcomes. While humans strive for order, comfort, and organization, fairies represent the relative chaos of the natural world. The prevalence of this trope in fairy legend suggests that respect for the land is a traditional cultural value, one which is perhaps at odds with the profit minded ethos of The Celtic Tiger. Some characters in *The Weir* align themselves more clearly with the land than others.

While Brendan is the only character in *The Weir* who does not tell a story, he identifies strongly with the land and respects the local legend concerning fairies. At the beginning of the play, Brendan expresses his hesitation towards selling the top field of the property, despite his sisters’ insistence. It is revealed later that the field is the site of a fairy fort, or as Brendan modestly terms it “a...ring of trees, you know” (McPherson 28). Although Brendan never quite articulates his attachment to the property, this sparse description sheds some light on his resistance to selling the field. His stoicism towards the topic might be interpreted in a number of

ways, however it is clear that the fairy forts are inscribed in the local consciousness to such a degree that they don't need to be discussed explicitly. This link between rural Irish communities and ringforts is substantiated through archaeological research, as Máirín Ní Cheallaigh notes, “Ringforts are the most ubiquitous field monuments of the Irish countryside” (369). Further, Ní Cheallaigh asserts that storytelling may function as “a way of claiming [forts] as communal, psychological, and in extreme cases, monetary resources” (138-139). On the other hand, “Silence...a form of passive resistance may also underpin the fact that, to date, statistically very few ringforts have been excavated by archaeologists” (Ní Cheallaigh 380). In Brendan’s character, we observe this paradox— there is a tension between wanting to express reverence for fairy legend, while also wishing to protect this knowledge by saying nothing. Despite not contributing his own tale, Brendan is the only character in the play who truly advocates for their seriousness. Later in the text, when the other men question Valerie’s claim that she heard her dead daughter through the phone, Brendan says bluntly, “She said she knew what it was” (McPherson 58). This statement is powerful in its simplicity. Brendan's clear opposition to selling his land along with his advocacy for the seriousness of the stories suggests that he is more secure in his ethical framework than some of the other characters. While the others engage in stories as a way of working through their conflicts, Brendan knows where he stands and so remains a quiet observer. The stories present a critical opportunity for the characters to consider their relationship to the world around them. At the same time, the stories also have a philosophical tilt that allows a sense of escape from the material world.

Stories as Escape

While stories in *The Weir* allow the characters to contemplate issues that concern the material plane, they can also offer a critical break from reality and a chance to commune with the other side. Looking at old pictures on the walls of the pub, Finbar asks, “What was the story with the fairy road? Where was it?” (McPherson 20). Superficially, it seems that Finbar wants to engage his peers in well-meaning conversation; however, his comment resonates with the other patrons in such a way that makes them pause and reflect. His query functions as an entry point to a philosophically riveting discussion, wherein the patrons are more open to talking about moral and existential questions. In past interviews, Conor McPherson has noted that this philosophical emphasis is a unique quality of Irish plays, explaining, “I think Irish Drama is vertical in that it’s a person standing on the earth, but the concern is going all the way up into the sky, and way down into the earth” (qtd. in Johnson). This verticality explains why the characters in *The Weir* are especially compelled to speak about the dead and incidents involving the so-called other side, even though they are rattled by the unsettling nature of the tales. For example, Finbar recalls the night the Walsh’s babysitter dies, saying, “I couldn’t get up to go to the bed. Because I thought there was something on the stairs. And I just sat there, looking at the empty fireplace” (McPherson 39). After this harrowing experience, Finbar decides to quit smoking and move to Carrick, where he eventually makes his fortune. The recurring image of the fireplace is repurposed here to communicate the deep contemplation that Finbar experiences as he makes contact with the dead. When Finbar retells the story, he is confronted again by his supernatural encounter, and he is forced to reckon with the abrupt shift it created in his life. In this way, stories expose the places where reality falters, demanding that narrators and spectators alike pay

attention to mysteries like death. Eammon Jordan has even interpreted *The Weir* as “enacting a wake ritual through ghost stories” (362). It is certainly true that the stories told in *The Weir* are not just intended to entertain; they can also serve as a contact point for the characters to contemplate a whole host of abstract concepts, especially death. The stories provide a medium through which the characters can show wonder, reverence, and disapproval for the members of the other side, and leave behind the physical world, if only temporarily. This divergence from the material world is important to the essence of the tales.

Fairy encounters in *The Weir* often occur during liminal stages in the natural world, places where traditional logic and reason are inapplicable. In setting the scene for the first tale, Jack explains, “there's no dark like a winter night in the country” (McPherson 31). In the tales, time is measured by the seasons and by the quality of the light. The exact time remains unspecified, perhaps because the fairy's chronology is ambiguous and ultimately undefined. The fairy's presence is felt during a period between sleep and wakefulness, in a dreamlike state where human faculties are often unreliable but less constrained. Irish fairies, as a literary and cultural phenomenon, are said to “inhabit what is effectively non-place. People encounter them on the boundaries: either in space—between townlands or on beaches between high and low tide; or in time—at dusk or at midnight, on Hallowe'en or May Eve” (Bourke 12). In other words, Irish fairies often inhabit chronological and spatial gaps within a narrative. They perch on the fringes of human experience, existing in a state of in betweenness where the laws of nature are most fragile. For example, Valerie's daughter is unperturbed during the day, but “at night” sees “people at the window... people in the attic...someone coming up the stairs” (McPherson 38). Fairies (and other supernatural forces) are rarely beheld during the day, instead visiting Valerie's family sometime between dusk and dawn. Here, the fairies occupy a metaphysically uncertain

terrain, toying with human consciousness and established ideas of reality. They act simultaneously as tormentors and instigators working to expand human awareness; alternatively, they may represent a subconscious desire among storytellers to know and see more of the human experience. In this way, fairies “thriftily use the gaps in the known environment for the elaboration of an imagined world where all those things that are in Heaven and Earth and yet not dreamt of in rational philosophy may be accommodated” (Bourke 12). While the fairies are inherently frightening to the characters of *The Weir*, they also present an opportunity to reject conventional wisdom and step into the unknown. Their lore grants the narrators a sense of escape from rational thought. Even so, the characters seem weary of plunging headfirst into the mysticism of fairy lore, considering the cultural stereotypes associated with this body of knowledge.

The Rhetoric of Fairy Legend

The constant play between belief and disbelief in the tales ultimately suggests that the characters are in a constant state of flux, while the rhetorical texture of the stories reflects an ongoing negotiation of values. Timothy Corrigan Correll asserts that "in communities where *síscéalta* or fairy stories were traditionally performed, the debate over truth and falsehood was often at the centre of discourses concerning the fairies" (2). Similarly, the play entertains the seemingly simple question of whether or not the characters actually believe the stories they are telling. The answer, it turns out, is much more complicated than a yes or no. Correll also observes, "Narrators may have wished to avoid the stigma of being labeled as 'superstitious' or 'simple'" (8). The characters in *The Weir* demonstrate a keen awareness of this stigma through the rhetorical choices that they make. Each story is punctuated by a series of trapdoors, ways of explaining or discrediting the supernatural encounters, which all amount to a persistent quest for how they really feel and what values they are willing to align themselves with.

The characters of *The Weir* are often careful to note the temporal distance between themselves and the stories they relate. Despite the strong presence of fairies in Irish literary and oral traditions, fairy belief is not universal across Irish culture. In fact, accounts often "[doubt] or even actively [oppose] such suggestions", referring to "beliefs generically as 'old pishogues,' or 'old superstitions'" (Correll 2). While there exists a certain degree of respect for such beliefs in Irish culture, the veracity of the tales is often disputed. The reasons for believing or disbelieving fairy tales often ties back to the desire to avoid the stereotypes that lambast oral culture and storytellers as primitive. This wish is covertly expressed in the play, as the characters continually refer to fairy lore as "old cod", "old stories" or "old shit" (McPherson 30). The desire to

communicate through stories remains an important part of the narrative; however, the characters often fall back on the idea that stories are fodder for amusement or ingrained ways of thinking rather than deeply held beliefs. Anthropologically speaking, older generations in Ireland are more apt to believe in fairies than younger generations (Bourke 10). Thus, it becomes a common practice to emphasize incidents which have “befallen community members of previous generations or *fad ó shin* (‘long ago’)” (Correll 5). In doing so, the storyteller emphasizes their own temporal distance from the subject and avoids the potential for being seen as overly superstitious or naïve. To test the waters, Finbar begins with the story of Maura Nealon, which takes place “back in about 1910 or 1911” (McPherson 21). After gauging the reactions of his audience, he transitions into memorate, or first-person experience which would be generally thought to be more credible (Correll 5). The manner of telling the story is a revealing and delicate act within itself. The characters of *The Weir* are careful in considering how they will divulge their knowledge about the supernatural, lest they are judged negatively by their peers. Each narrator walks a fine line between belief and disbelief which reflects how willing they are to subscribe to the older, more traditional, and ostensibly less credible body of knowledge.

Finbar and Valerie emphasize their clarity of mind to support the credibility of their stories. Finbar punctuates his firsthand account of the supernatural with claims that he is generally rational and unconvinced by local lore. In the midst of his story, he interjects by saying, “I obviously just thought, this was a load of bollocks...I thought it was all a bit mad” (McPherson 25). With this comment, Finbar emphasizes his general doubtfulness of supernatural events, painting himself as a reasonable and levelheaded narrator. He is careful to distinguish himself first and foremost as a non-believer who is aware of the inherent absurdity of ghost stories. In doing so, Finbar establishes a certain expectation with his audience that his word is

relatively trustworthy and untainted by the logic of “headbangers” (McPherson 24). This is a common trope in Irish fairy tales, wherein the narrator references their “general lack of superstition” to emphasize their rational skepticism and trustworthiness (Correll 6). By the end of the story, Finbar is at least marginally convinced of an otherworldly presence; however, his rhetorical tactics provide a comfortable distance from the assumption that he might be biased or mentally unfit. Similarly, Valerie frames her firsthand account by assuring her audience, “I’m a fairly straight...down the line...person. Working. I had a good job at DCU” (McPherson 37). In this excerpt, Valerie prefaces her story by describing herself as an average working-class person formerly employed at a University in Dublin. Her pauses are noteworthy, as it seems she is grappling with the right words to convince her audience of her good character. By associating herself with an institution of higher education, she distinguishes herself as forward thinking and intellectual. Subtly, she aligns herself with the tendency of Irish tales to emphasize “the moral integrity...or lucidity of individuals who had uncanny experiences...to convince their audiences of the veracity of stories” (Correll 5). Like Finbar, Valerie builds the ethos of her account to garner credibility amongst her peers. Her story is perhaps the most emotional and personally significant account of the whole play; still, she shows a rhetorical awareness of her audience that suggests she does not wish to be labeled as simple or unsophisticated. Another tactic used by the story’s narrators is the reliance on outside sources to support their tales.

The presence of religious figures in *The Weir* is used to further cultivate a sense of authorial credibility. Finbar qualifies his first-person account by mentioning, “a priest came and blessed the doors and the windows. And there was no more knocking then” (McPherson 22). To substantiate his claims, Finbar calls upon an outside source, a priest who visits the house to perform a kind of exorcism. The priest presumably has no vested interest in the existence of the

supernatural, and in fact might be averse to the notion of fairies and other folk lore. Tellingly, “An English/Irish version of The Christian Doctrine printed in 1862... condemned *lucht pisreóg*, which it glossed as 'enchanters' or individuals who possessed *fios sigheog* or 'knowledge of fairies'" (Correll 2). A religious figure, then, acts as a powerful rhetorical tool, because they are naturally skeptical and are not motivated to promote false beliefs about fairies. Jim also invokes the theme of religion by repeatedly referring to the church adjacent to the burial and the priest who commissions him to dig graves. The presence of religion here is more subtle but nevertheless serves to bolster Jim's credibility as a narrator, seeing that the event transpires in a holy place. While the priest himself is absent during the paranormal encounter, Jim's proximity to religious landmarks seems to work in his favor by establishing his association with a credible institution. Both Finbar and Jim cite “recognized sceptics of fairy beliefs, such as doctors, priests, and other representatives of education and modernity...to endorse supernatural interpretations of events” (Correll 6). They wish to be at least within the realm of believability, even if they are not to be outright believed. Their references to the Church underscores the desire to be seen as rational and not completely absorbed by the old-world charm of the stories. Above all, their objective is to position themselves in a favorable light, as narrators who can be trusted to depict a tale faithfully, while avoiding the burden of accepting the truth in their own stories.

External stimuli provide a viable excuse for unexplained phenomena, and the narrators of *The Weir* often employ this strategy to displace the burden of belief. One recurring explanation for the mysteries of fairy tales is the influence of alcohol. For example, after frightening Valerie with the story about Maura Nealon's house, Finbar backpedals by claiming, “She was an alcoholic...She used to have a bottle of whiskey put away before you knew where you were. Sure who wouldn't be hearing knocking after that?” (McPherson 41). Noting Valerie's apparent

discomfort, Finbar feels compelled to question the integrity of the original narrator, Maura Nealon. Contrary to his own first-person account, which emphasizes his temperance and sound mind, Finbar is eager to note Maura's relatively untrustworthy story as possibly being muddled by the effects of alcohol. The context of the story and the mention of external influences is part of the authorial choices of the characters. Alcohol and other intoxicants provide plausible alibis in fairy lore, as nonbelievers often "[call] the validity of supernatural belief into question by accounting for uncanny experiences as misperceptions induced by alcohol, imagination, practical jokers, or charlatans" (Correll 2). Finbar casts doubt onto the tale by highlighting Maura's propensity for alcohol, showing that he does not unequivocally accept the story as true. Similarly, Jim's account of the paranormal is tinged by the fact that he was both sick and possibly drunk when it happened. Jim admits, "I was dying with the flu...I was boiling", and later says, "I couldn't eat but I took a good belt of the bottle, like. Knocked me into some sort of shape" (McPherson 31). These conditions lead the other characters to guess that Jim's altered state caused him to hallucinate the ghost, with even Jim himself entertaining this idea. While the characters evidently take no issue in sharing stories over a pint, alcohol presents a problem, or perhaps an out, to the believability of tales.

The constant tension between belief and disbelief that characterizes the narrative suggests that Irish fairy legend is an intricate, non-monolithic system of knowledge which inspires change. Towards the end of the play, Jack remarks, "This has been a strange little evening for me...Something about your company. Inspiring, ha?" (McPherson 47). Jack, and indeed all the characters of *The Weir*, come away from the evening with a sense of being changed in some way. Over the course of the narrative, they consider an ocean of gripping questions through the guise of fairy tales, but they leave the experience with more questions still. They crave reason

while also expressing a desire to move beyond reason; they ask to be believed but reject the burden which that belief holds; they wish for comfort while also seeking the thrill of a good story. Above all, they are motivated to understand their place in Irish history at a time when different worlds were converging. Ultimately, the characters walk away from the pub with the "strange" sensation because they are still grappling with seemingly irreconcilable threads of knowledge. This tension is part of the inherent wonder of Irish tales, where "such dialogic utterances...show that individuals are sites of confluence for a multiplicity of divergent voices and attitudes towards supernatural beliefs" (Correll 14). The tales show that the characters are capable of nuance in their perspective. McPherson's characters are all touched in varying degrees by the complexity of fairy legends, and the end of the play projects a strong sense of possibility. Kevin Kerrane remarks, "The circularity in *The Weir*...seems to emphasize change, not stasis" (115). The play's beginning mirrors its ending in the way that the narrative opens with a slow fade in and closes with a slow fade out. While there is no clear answer as to where the characters fall in terms of values by the end of the play, McPherson does allow space in the story for his characters to come back to the surface, to gradually reintegrate themselves into their environment in light of the profound experience. Valerie's story, in particular, holds immense gravitas and potential for change, as she mentions her husband "was insisting I get some treatment, and then...everything would be okay. But you know, what can help that, if she's still out there? She still...she still needs me" (McPherson 57). Valerie's story brings an urgency to *The Weir*, a revelation that the stories can in fact, hold real weight. In this passage, she rejects the advice of her husband to seek a doctor, and instead turns to the possibility that her daughter still exists in some capacity. Although most of the men in the story doubt Valerie, and indeed at times she seems to doubt herself, she demonstrates the power of the stories to articulate a new outlook of

the world and ultimately spur change. The brilliance of the stories lies in the fact that they seem simple; they might be shared in a dimly lit pub over the span of one evening, but they possess a distinctly transformative power.

Conclusion

Although *The Weir* was written over twenty five years ago, the play remains an important work in the Irish literary and oral tradition, and its ongoing popularity suggests that it still resonates with a contemporary audience. *The Weir* argues for the efficacy of stories as a tool for both understanding and escaping times of uncertainty. Although the text is rooted in the friction between traditional and modern values in Ireland, the messaging can be more widely applied to any period of time when cultural values are in question. Still, the play is definitively Irish in the way that it explores the meaning of the spoken word; the characters delve deeply into the potential of Irish fairy legend to entertain, to communicate, and to form a working account of one's environment. Charles McNulty writes for *Los Angeles Times*, "Stories, as much for McPherson's wounded character[s] as for McPherson himself, seem to be a way of managing the existential quandary. They don't provide answers or happy endings but they bring people together to take in the pleasure and pain and passing wonder". As our lives become increasingly digital, as more and more of our attention is occupied by non-physical spaces, *The Weir's* argument for the power of stories and the community which they create is more relevant than ever. Irish fairy legend, then, might be viewed not as an artifact of a long-forgotten past, but as an adaptive technology for navigating the future.

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