

Alcoholism in Conor McPherson's *The Weir* and *The Seafarer*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of alcoholism in Conor McPherson's *The Weir* and *The Seafarer*. In his works, McPherson reflects the destructive outcome of drinking. He uses this theme to arouse self-awareness. After the rapid economic change that took place in Ireland which was known as the Celtic Tiger. The Irish were living in a state of loss and disintegration that made them find refuge in alcohol. McPherson reflected this problem out of personal experience as well. In his *The Weir* and *The Seafarer*, McPherson reflected desperate characters who leaned on alcohol to escape reality. He wants to urge the Irish to wake up and try to prove their identity.

Keywords: alcohol, Celtic Tiger, identity.

Conor McPherson was born in Dublin in 1971 and he was brought up in a middle class Catholic family. During his years at the University College at Dublin, he was a member in the dramatic society. He established the Fly by Night Theatre Company where he produced many plays including *The Good Thief* (1994), the winner of Stewart Parker's Award, and *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995), which has won him the George Devine Award.¹

McPherson won the Olivier Award for Best Play in 1997 for his two plays, *St. Nicholas* (1997) and *The Weir* (1997), The Critics' Circle, the Evening Standard, the Meyer-Whitworth, and the George Devine are among the other prizes he won. Later on, his works were internationally popular. He produced screenplays, directed films, and he started to direct his plays up to this date.² His works were divided into two forms; the monologue and the ensemble forms.³ *The Weir* belongs to the first form and *The Seafarer* belongs to the second.

McPherson wants to show that Irish writers are aware of the destructive changes caused by the Celtic Tiger which detached Irish people and separated them from their cultural identity. He criticises alcoholism in Ireland to arouse social awareness. It is the reason for other social problems like marriage collapse and domestic violence. Colin Murphy's comment is: "Our society is alcoholic. Of course, people don't want to hear that because no alcoholic wants to hear it."⁴ McPherson's characters suffer due to alcoholism, like John, the

leading character in his *Dublin Carol*, Jim and Finbar in *The Weir*, the theatre critic in *St. Nicholas*, Sharky in *The seafarer*. Their actions reflect their sense of loss and failure. His desperate characters show their fear in a new world.

McPherson's depiction of the crisis of alcohol was for the purpose of social awareness. Colin Murphy comment is:

Drinking is a recurring motif in McPherson's plays; that's perhaps not surprising given the fact that he was an early alcoholic and by the time he turned 38 was 10years off the bottle. McPherson, though, proves to be not just brilliant chronicler of Irish drinking culture, but a fervent critic of it. He cites the footage of Brian Cowen in Offaly, following his elevation to Taoiseach*, "standing on the back of a truck with a pint in his hand" as symptomatic of our attitude to drink. "It's crazy when that is tolerated." Is that not simply Irish, I venture. "if that's Irish, then we've got to change what Ireland is, what Irish means. Our society is alcoholic. Of course, people don't want to hear that because no alcoholic wants to hear it. And I didn't want to hear that when I was drinking. It's addiction, it's sick and it's in our culture. That's a psychological problem there. In Ireland, the person standing at the bar drinking a Ballygowan is an alcoholic." McPherson's plays have always been deeply moral.⁵

McPherson was alcoholic and he almost died in 2001 because of heavy drinking. He elucidates more about the effect of alcohol in an interview:

I developed bad habits. Alcohol relieved my feelings of gloominess. I got to the point where I was using alcohol to stop feeling worse. I felt very insecure. I was one of those guys who stumbled around in the dark for a long time.⁶

He quit drinking.

..., until one February night in 2001 – the night Port Authority opened in the West End – he collapsed and was rushed to hospital. His pancreas had ruptured and he was unable to return home for more than two months. "my body gave way," he says simply, " and that was it." He's been sober ever since.⁷

McPherson describes his battle with alcoholism as a story of ghosts and by reflecting his personal experience; he tries to advise the audience not to lean on drinking to escape life troubles because ghosts will haunt them. McPherson mirrors that in his works.⁸ He refers to his personal suffering through the idea of drinking, which is one of the recurrent themes in the Irish folk stories. In his interview for "Theatre Talk", he explains, "what underlines the demon of alcoholism is the feeling of inadequacy, guilt and helplessness, feeling of doom, gloom, fear and paranoia".⁹

The play shows how old Ireland is different from the New Ireland. In an interview to *The Irish Times*, McPherson talks about the effects of the Celtic Tiger on Ireland saying:

I once heard an academic remark that the popularity of *The Weir* was due to its representation of old Ireland meeting New Ireland [sic]. The men who drink in the bar are the remnants of Old Ireland. They are comfortable with superstition. They are secure in their community and each knows his place in the pecking order. Then a woman from Dublin arrives and she is representative of the newer, changing, modern Ireland. Expected to fend for herself as an individual, she feels abandoned and has become dysfunctional. She's lonely and confused.¹⁰

The setting of the play is a small rural bar, which is "part of a house and the house is part of a farm" (*The Weir*, 7) near a dam named the weir. It is in the northwest of Ireland, in a fictional place that is similar to McPherson's hometown Leitrim. McPherson chooses the setting as he is inspired by his grandfather's lonely life in the countryside. He comments on the setting of the play saying:

[the play] was probably inspired by my visits to Leitrim to see my granddad. He lived on his own down a country road in a small house beside the Shannon. I remember him telling me once that it was very important to have the radio on because it gave him the illusion of company. We'd have a drink and sit by the fire. And he'd tell me stories. (*The Weir*, The Preface, 3)

The reference to the dam and the setting of the play is to find a symbol that connects the past and the present with the changing natural worlds. The playwright tries to stay away from British colonization. He makes the weir a barrier between Irish folklore and contemporary Irish world when the characters live in isolation.

The play is about five stories concerning lonely characters and the ghosts that haunt them. Most of the events happen in the past and the characters recall them as a *seanchai* in a storytelling mode. The characters are Jack, a garage owner in his fifties; Brendan, the owner of the bar; Jim, the local handyman; Finbar, a successful local businessman; and Valerie, a Dublin woman in her thirties who comes to rent a house in the area. The male characters gather up in the pub to drink, chat and gossip. They search for a haven away from the painful flux of the outside world. The men tease each other about drinking. They define drinking as "medicinal" (*The Weir*: 14). Their interchange of small talk reveals an attachment to this rural, wild, and unsheltered area. Brendan complains about his sisters' forcing him "to sell the top field" which is for him "a grand spot" (*The Weir*, 13). The friends gather in this pub for a drink and a chat, but that day is different as they will be accompanied by Valerie, the Dublin lady.

Jack gives Brendan the news and the new gossip, that Finbar has sold the house to a new resident who is a fine single girl from Dublin, and that Finbar is nearly leaving the wife just to have a chance with her.

When Valerie enters the pub, the men try to impress her by telling stories of fairies, "they find themselves telling her ghost stories, from regional lore and from their own experience."¹¹ The characters think that they are telling Valerie the history of their town while unconsciously they reveal their past. Finbar tries to stop the men from narrating those creepy stories, "Ah that's the end of them now. We've had enough of them old stories, they're only an old cod." (*The Weir*, 54) Valerie insists on telling her story, "No, see, something happened to me." (*The Weir*, 54) Their stories do not disturb her yet she is "encouraged to tell her story of the loss of her child."¹² By saying 'No' to Finbar. Valerie realizes that she should not waste her life away. Valerie ends the male dominating realm and the weakness of female figures. Patrick Lonergan states:

In Ireland, monologue is a form dominated by male writers; it frequently focuses on issues of male inadequacy, both sexual and social; and it tends to involve plotting that is resolved in outburst of male violence. Karen Fricker observes that 'the plays... don't embody women at all... women however hover over [the] plays as idealized symbols and possessors of both virtue and agency, in contrast to the ... the males who actually inhabit the plays' (2002,86). For Fricker, this represents a reinscription of the Revival's idealization of women.¹³

McPherson refers to the traditional Ireland in Valerie's story. He uses the image of the water where Niamh was drowned to resemble the weir to reflect the broken relationship between the past and the present. He presents Valerie as the mother Ireland and her dead daughter as the Irish. Susan Harris in her *Supernaturalism: Femininity and Form in Conor McPherson's Paranormal Plays* believes that McPherson uses the image of Niamh's phone call to stand for the umbilical cord.¹⁴ The Irish are like the baby who is suffocated by the umbilical cord. The image shows how colonization strangles Irish culture and identity. Sharing the males' experiences, Valerie succeeds to shatter the wall of isolation.

In *The Seafarer*, McPherson adopts one of the supernatural legendary stories of the Peninsula *Howth*. He explains that,

I first heard the story of the Hellfire Club as a young boy. This story concern an eighteenth century ruin in the Wicklow mountains where young landowning aristocrats would carouse and gamble. One stormy night, the Hellfire members were having a game of poker [sic] at their remote den when a stranger arrived at door asking shelter. The stranger was brought inside and invited to join the card-players.

In the legend, members of a club called the *Hell Fire* who belong to the upper class like politicians, landlords, and the sheriff play cards. The bet is on money, horses, properties and women. During one dark stormy winter night, a well-dressed man comes to the club and joins the card game. He shows an extraordinary talent. One of the men drops a card on the ground and kneels down to fetch it. He sees that the gentleman's feet are cleaved hooves, like the devil's. The man transforms himself into a ball of fire and disappears. Michael Scott in his *Irish folklore and fairy tales* mentions a folkloric tale called "The Card Player" which has the same plot of the Hell Fire club legend and it has closer traces in McPherson's *The Seafarer*. The characters are three farmers. The devil is a sophisticated figure from the upper class.¹⁵

McPherson takes the title of his play from an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem about an isolated lonely life of a sailor at sea during winter. The characters of this play are a group of lost souls in the sea of life. McPherson starts his play with an extract from this poem reflecting a sense of isolation:

He knows not
Who lives most easily on hand, how I
Have spent my winter on the ice-cold sea
Wretched and anxious, in the path of exile
Lacking dear friends, hung round by icicles
While hail flew past in showers...¹⁶

There is one church and few bars and shops in the center. It is winter, Christmas Eve. The house where the action takes place is built on a hill, in an isolated place called Howth. (*The Seafarer*, 3) The door of the house is on the top of the house, so when the characters descend the stairs to go to the living room, they seem to be heading down to hell. The first act is called "The Devil at Binn Eadair" which indicates the visit of the devil to the Harkin's house. (*The Seafarer*, 7)

McPherson refers to the idea of darkness in Richard's blindness and Ivan's loss of his spectacles. Drinking makes person blind. All the references to darkness prepare the audience for the existence of the devil in the house. "A lot of drink has been consumed; bottles, cans and empty plates are strewn around." (*The Seafarer*, 55) The characters are drunk but at different levels except for Sharky who remains 'sober'. "blind leading the blind"¹⁷

The Seafarer reflects Irish contemporary world, as Dominic Dromgoole explains,

The *Seafarer's* immediate image is a Dante-esque circle of hell, filled with a composite of examples of what the modern world would call losers. The blind, the drunk, the unfaithful, the drunk, the

cheating, the more drunk, the petty showoffs, the even more drunk, the terrified, and the so drunk it doesn't matter anymore.¹⁸

McPherson wrote *The Seafarer* when Ireland was facing troubles due to rapid economic progress, known as the Celtic Tiger. Ireland is seen as entering a Faustian contract. It is a study of the role of the devilish existence inside human psyche.

Conclusion:

In order to illustrate that Irish pub culture is specified with hospitality, good conversations and tall tales, McPherson has used the public bar as a source of melancholic assertion in *The Weir* and *The Seafarer*. The play represents Irish culture by underlining the fact that pubs are second homes for sad, solitary men especially in the countryside. The playwright wants the audience to feel the solitude of the Irish male deep-rooted in the spooky tales.

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الإدمان على الكحول في مسرحيات كونر مكفيرسون، السد والبحار

الاستاذ: صباح عطا الله ضيائي

حاصل على شهادة الدكتوراه في

الادب الانكليزي

المدرس: بسمة عبدالحسن علي

حاصل على شهادة الدكتوراه في

الادب الانكليزي

الخلاصة:

تبحث هذه الورقة في استخدام المسرحي كونور مكفيرسون لفكرة الإدمان على الكحول في اعماله السد ١٩٩٧ و البحار ٢٠٠٧. يستخدم الكاتب هذا الموضوع لإثارة الوعي الذاتي. بعد التغيير الاقتصادي السريع الذي حدث في أيرلندا المعروف باسم النمر السلتيكي. كان الايرلنديون يعيشون في حالة من الضياع والتفكك مما جعلهم يجدون الملجأ في الكحول للهروب من الواقع. يعكس الكاتب هذه المشكلة عن تجربة شخصية ، اذ كاد الكحول ان يودي بحياته. عرض الكاتب هذه المشكلة لرفع الوعي لدى الايرلنديين، للسعي وراء تحقيق هويتهم. الكلمة المفتاحية: الكحولو النمر السلتيكي، الهوية.