

**“Talking of the Fairy Road”: Modulations of the Seanchaí in
Conor McPherson’s *The Weir***

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Abstract

Focusing on *The Weir* (1999), one of Irish playwright Conor McPherson’s masterpieces, this study attempts to elaborate the ways in which the Irish traditional seanchaí is mirrored in this play. A seanchaí is an Irish traditional storyteller, who has always been one of the most prevalent features of Irish folklore and which has recently been revived by Irish playwrights. In *The Weir*, McPherson incorporates the old seanchaí tradition and places it within modern human contexts. Except for one, each of the characters of the play is playing the role of a seanchaí, which is manipulated by McPherson not only to depict a popular Irish tradition but also to present human interior feelings of fear, trauma, and desolation. This paper testifies to the enduring importance of the role of Irish traditional seanchaí, which has adapted and survived over modernization. The analysis aims not just to understand the ways in which the play uses the seanchaís’ techniques but also explores the significance of the stories narrated by each of these seanchaís in the play. The Irish seanchaí tradition is known for its eloquence. Likewise, seanchaís in *The Weir* expressively narrate their stories to generate gorgeous, realistic, and sometimes tragic form of drama, which reflects an artfulness that renders this play distinct amongst other plays.

Key words: *Fairy Tales, Irish folklore, McPherson, Seanchaí tradition, The Weir.*

ملخص البحث:

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الأساليب المتعددة التي يستخدمها الكاتب المسرحي كونرماكبرسون لكي يبرز فكرة الراوي الأيرلندي التقليدي، في مسرحيته "السد" (١٩٩٩). وتعتبر شخصية الراوي الأيرلندي من أهم مظاهر الفن الشعبي القديم، والذي عاد ليثري المسرح الأيرلندي مرة أخرى في العصر الحديث. تتناول مسرحية "السد" شخصية الراوي الأيرلندي التقليدي، وتضعه في إطار إنساني حديث. وباستثناء شخصية واحدة، فإن جميع شخصيات المسرحية تلعب دور الراوي الأيرلندي، الذي يستخدمه ماكبرسون بطريقة فنية مميزة لتصوير مشاعر إنسانية عميقة من الخوف والمعاناة والوحدة. وبالإضافة إلى فهم الوسائل الفنية المتعددة التي يستخدمها الرواة في المسرحية، فإن الدراسة تهدف أيضا إلى تحليل المعاني الكامنة وراء قصص الرواة المختلفة. يعرف الراوي بطلائجه في الحديث، لذلك فإن الرواة في المسرحية يقصون رواياتهم بأسلوب مميز وصادق ولكن مأسوي في بعض الأحيان، مما يميز رواية السد عن مثيلاتها من الأعمال الأخرى.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

حكايات الجنيات، الفن الشعبي الأيرلندي، ماكبرسون، الراوي الأيرلندي التقليدي، "السد"

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The domestic seanchaís of today is the cell on which the living Irish culture is built, or the channel through which the past flows to inform the future. It may deal with deep things in the house of the scholar; in the cottage it is satisfied with legendary tales. (De Blácam, 1975, p.349)

Introduction

The principal concern of this study is to shed light on the treatment of the seanchaís, an Irish storyteller tradition, and “a tradition bearer”, in *The Weir* (1999), Conor McPherson’s famous play. *The Weir* was performed on the stage in 1997 and published in 1999. In many of his plays, Irish playwright McPherson creates storytellers who directly narrate their stories to the audience/spectators. Despite the fact that *The Weir* has received multiple criticism, yet McPherson’s outstanding implementation of the idea of the seanchaí in this play has not been thoroughly dealt with.

Remarkably, in *The Weir*, almost each character is a seanchaí who is telling one or more story to the other characters, using seanchaí techniques. Instead of presenting one seanchaí telling one or more story to the reader or the audience of the play, McPherson is presenting seanchaí characters who can talk to each other and are telling their stories in front of each other. Moreover, McPherson’s familiarity with ancient Irish storyteller tradition, in addition to his wide-ranging artfulness of storytelling enabled him to adopt what can be called a modern seanchaí in his play. These modern seanchaís incorporate traditional seanchaí styles with themes of modern life, such as “confession and... revelation of the past, of feelings such as guilt and loneliness, and in the end as a redemption” for themselves (Şimşek, 2016, p.83).

Therefore, the researcher’s main concern in this study is to examine how McPherson craftily portrays the seanchaí in *The Weir*; how he is effectively implementing the different seanchaí techniques with each seanchaí character; and how this playwright is able to integrate the old seanchaí tradition and places it within various modern human contexts. For a comprehensive analysis of the seanchaí in the play, this study refers

to more than one source, mainly James H. Delargy’s *The Gaelic Storyteller*, Henry Glassie’s *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* and Ray Cashman’s *Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border*.

Literature Review

The seanchaí has always been one of the most prevalent traditions in Irish folklore, which has always appreciated the art of storytelling. Regarded as an integral part of the artistry of storytelling, the seanchaí tradition has been dealt with in literary works by numerous well-known historians and critics, including Cashman, Ray’s *Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border: Characters and Community* (2008), Zimmermann, George D.’s *The Irish Storyteller* (2001), Bourke, Angela’s *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (2000), Glassie, H.’s *Passing The Time In Ballymenone*, Kiberd’s (1982), and Gose, E.’s *The World of The Irish Wonder Tale: An Introduction to the Study of Fairy Tales* (1985), Delargy, J. H. who wrote his short, yet impressive book, *The Gaelic Storyteller* (1945), and many others.

According to Irish tradition, a seanchaí or “a tradition bearer” was a skilled storyteller who used to move from one place to another narrating stories that fascinated his audience. Usually his audience gathered to listen to him, around a fire, at a pub or a home. Mahony, Christina Hunt describes the position of the seanchaí within Ireland storytelling tradition as “Conducted mostly in the Irish language by seanchaí (storytellers), who were usually male, the tradition evolved from its origin as entertainment at simple family or local gatherings or feast days. The seanchaí tradition was of necessity dramatic” (As cited in Ferguson, 2010, p. 107). A seanchaí was usually a knowledgeable man of the older generation whose role in a community as Glassie maintains, was to “preserve its wisdom, settle its disputes, create its entertainment, speak its culture. Without them, local people would have no way to discover themselves” (1982, p. 63) The seanchaí has “been assured a central place within the identity of ...Ireland – a country of tales, myths, and legends and thus Irish storytellers have become world-famous for their wit and inventiveness” (Dilek, 2013, P.62). In addition to narrating ancient Irish folklore and anecdotes of wisdom and enlightening memory, one of the main obligations of a seanchaí was to convey Irish history in different areas. () Although the word seanchaí is not frequently used at the present time, yet still the habit of gathering in a friendly folk enjoying listening to an anecdote from a storyteller perseveres. Even though the picture of the seanchaí has become different in modern Ireland, yet a seanchaí’s role as a culture-keeper and an entertainer still survives.

In *The Irish Wonder Tale*, Eliot Gose defines a seanchaí in his locale as “a conscious literary artist”, who takes “a deep pleasure in telling his tales” in “clear and vigorous language,” (1985, p. xix). The way a seanchaí narrated his anecdotes is often regarded as an art form because of its flexibility and the different devices he would manipulate to help recite his tales. A seanchaí must have the talent to interweave the parts of his story to captivate his audience’s attention. As Glassie (1982) argues, “Deciding what to say and how to say it, artists are guided by the intention to entertain, to amuse their listeners or carry them away. Stories are composed by gifted people who give their gift to others” (p.38). Therefore, a seanchaí must have his own traditional techniques to convince his audience with the details of his story. Once he is aware the perfect time to repeat words and phrases, when to give more description, when to be silent, and when to involve the audience, then, he is a professional seanchaí. For instance, to add suspense to his story, he would use “so” several times, whenever needed. He would also repeat “and” to assure the flow of the story as if to add sub ideas to each topic as the story unfolds. A seanchaí could utter his words slowly or quickly, to generate feelings of solemnity or isolating his sentences to display the power of each word and phrase (Glassie, 1982, p. 40). These add-ons are some of the devices that provide a seanchaí with “a creative liberty to twist his story and his words as he pleases,” thus making his tale so captivating. (McGlothlin, 2017, p. 35)

The notable assortment of Irish narratives used by most seanchaís owes to ancient Irish folklore tradition, known to be fertile with tales of the spirit world. Even though the traditional format for Irish storytelling is no longer having the same ability, still modern story tellers use traditional folklore in their narratives. As Irish culture had been broadly rich with different kinds of fairies, one of the most preferable themes for seanchaís had been fairy stories. Eamonn Jordan asserts that “Fantasy gives distance and also the possibility of processing fears and anxieties from a distance, within a relatively safe and transactional space” (2010, p. 185). However, the fairy tales and supernatural stories that have survived from the Irish traditional literature, were recreated by literary men to display past pains and sense of guilt people experience in modern time.

In his *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (1994), Anthony Roche relates twentieth century Irish drama to early presence of Irish seanchaí tradition, arguing that “a strong cultural reminder that Irish drama arguably had its origins as much in the communal art of seanchaí, the act of oral storytelling, as in a more formal written script performed on a proscenium stage in an urban centre” (p. 115).

During the last quarter of the twentieth century several Irish dramatists have presented that figure of Irish storyteller in their plays, thus retaining what is cherished as the origin of Irish tradition bearer tradition, the seanchaí. Among the most famous of these Irish dramatists are Brian Freil, Marina Carr, Frank O’Connor, Tom Murphy, Conor McPherson and many more. These Irish dramatists have reworked a modern traditional seanchaí, to prompt “a means for releasing repressed real emotions and recuperates the genuine possibility of a human community” (Llewellyn- Jones, 2002, p. 99). The new dramatic form of an Irish seanchaí allowed characters in modern plays to speak out their very intimate stories directly to the audience. Individuals could use anecdotes to reconsider their past, present, and future, “by taking stock of themselves through storytelling – and particularly through anecdotes – they define who they have been, who they are, and who they can be” (Cashman, 2008, p.255).

In his play, *The Weir*, Conor McPherson presents seanchaís whose stories incorporate themes and techniques that can be different from one another. Their stories take place in the recent or historical past, include real familiar figures, and are thought to be real by the seanchaís and most of his audience. Hence, this study sheds light on the modulations of the seanchaí in the play, the themes highlighted through their narrations and the seanchaís’ techniques employed by the playwright for each of them.

***The Weir*: production and perception**

Born in 1971, in Dublin, the famous dramatist, screenwriter, and stage director, Conor McPherson gained great fame at early age, after writing many remarkable dramatic works in relatively a short period of time. He achieved his fame when he was still twenty-one, as he began writing several of his first plays when he was still studying at UCD, in Dublin. McPherson has always been celebrated as one of the best contemporary Irish dramatists and many of his dramas have been staged worldwide. He was selected both by *The Daily Telegraph*, and New York Times as “the finest dramatist of his generation”. His literary triumphs include *The Weir* (1999), *Shinning City* (2004), *The Seafarer* (2006), *The Veil* (2011), and many more successful plays. In addition to his widespread success for notable plays, he gained several awards for distinguished literary works, especially for his prominent play *The Weir*, won Laurence Olivier Award (1999), as best play for the season. For the performance of the same play, McPherson, the most promising playwright received Evening Standard Award in 1997, and Critics Circle Award in 1998. *The Weir* was also praised by *The Daily Telegraph* as “A modern classic” and by *The Guardian* as “a contemporary classic”. These esteemed awards added

more fame for the playwright who was almost twenty-seven at that time. *The Weir* was first staged in 1997 and then published in 1999. It had been praised both critically and widely on the stage around the world, at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1997, and in Dublin, New York, Australia, and Slovenia.

Commenting on one of McPherson's plays, Ben Brantley, a critic, stated in *The New York Times*, "I found myself holding on to what these actors had to say as if I were a five-year-old at bedtime being introduced to *The Arabian Nights*" (2008, Para 4). *The Weir* is one of McPherson's plays that exquisitely approaches Irish folklore with an innovated theatrical technique. In *The Weir* McPherson's treatment of the seanchaí, his technique of storytelling and his choice of words for his seanchaís is captivating. He introduces a modernized seanchaí with multitalented, entertaining, and imaginative stories through which he brings old and new Irish traditions together to feature his main themes in the play. As Roche mediates: "McPherson's plays are a reminder that Irish drama arguably had its origins at least as much in the communal art of the oral storyteller performed in the home or in the pub." (As cited in Şimşek, 2016, P. 3).

McPherson makes it very clear that when he wrote his play, *The Weir*, the idea of an Irish seanchaí tradition was on his mind. In his note to the play, he wrote:

This 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 at the fire. And he'd tell me stories. (McPherson, 1999, p. 3)

McPherson's visits as a child to his grandfather at Leitrim, an area in Western Ireland had a profound effect on his storytelling structure, as it made him familiar with the old Irish storyteller tradition. In addition, his prominent sense of the artistry of narrative helped him craftily renovate the role of traditional seanchaís in his plays into modern ones. As Dabrigeon-Garcier, Fabienne maintains, McPherson is "aware that writing has transformed traditional oral storytelling structures and that, conversely, the written word has to be recharged with an oral narrative impulse" (2006, p.87).

The Seanchaí in *The Weir*

The Weir, McPherson's masterpiece has received several types of analysis by different researchers. However most of these studies had mainly focused on the ghostly narratives in the play and their relationship to Irish cultural identity before and after the Celtic Tiger. Therefore, the

main purpose in this paper is to investigate McPherson’s treatment of the Irish seanchaí tradition in the play. Although it is described by McPherson himself as “just people talking”, the play had powerfully impressed critics and audiences almost everywhere.

The Weir takes place in an Irish country pub known as The Weir in a rural part of Ireland, Northwest Leitrim or Sligo. Present day” (McPherson, 1999, p. 5), in the northwest part of Ireland. It takes place over the course of one evening, during which five characters share stories about themselves and others; some real, some built on local folklore or rumors. The main details of these stories have already happened in the near past. The play includes slight physical action. There are only narrators in the play, who tell their stories not to the audience but to each other. But “As in all forms of the oral tradition, seanchaís were foremost performers, and their performances were always ...inclusive of the audience” (Woods, 1995, P. 62). Therefore, each of the five characters plays both the roles of a seanchaí and of an audience. Instead of having only one seanchaí telling one or more stories in the play, McPherson is presenting creative seanchaís who are telling their stories in front of the others. He portrays a fascinating competition between the different seanchaís in the play, in which each of them is using the most effective tools in his story to impress the rest.

The Weir has only five characters, Jack, the eldest, a garage owner, in his fifties; Brendan, owner of the pub, in his thirties; Jim, who lives with his old mother, in his forties, Finbar, a successful businessman in late forties. He is the only married of them. There is also Valerie, a young woman, in her thirties, who just arrived from Dublin, and is the only woman in the play. She is a newcomer, who lately bought Finbar’s house in the same area. Finbar invites her to the pub “to introduce her to the natives” (McPherson, 1999, p. 10). Valerie’s arrival to the place catches the attention of the other male characters for being “a fine girl. Single. Down from Dublin and all this” (McPherson, 1999, p. 10). To impress her, throughout the evening, each of these characters, except for Brendan assumes the role of a seanchaí, narrating an unusual story from his past. Jack, the oldest one, and the first to play the seanchaí’s role, recounts a fairy story. The next seanchaí presented by McPherson is Finbar, who tells the second story in the play. The third seanchaí is Jim, who narrates a ghost story, he claims happened to him. The first three seanchaís tell fairy tales mixed with memories from their own experience in the past, or from other mysterious happenings of other local people. Then, to everyone’s surprise, Valerie, herself takes her turn and becomes the only female seanchaí in the folk. She is motivated by her fellow seanchaís to tell her own personal story of the tragedy of the death of her little

daughter. Jack the eldest seanchaí concludes the play with another story, but this time it is also a very personal one.

Out of their feeling of loneliness, these five characters in *The Weir* seek consolation in sharing their stories with each other. Still, McPherson's structure of the play brilliantly orchestrates his seanchaís' anecdotes to stimulate each other. These seanchaís begin narrating stories as a kind of entertainment, to attract the lady's attention. The narratives unfold simply enough as the male seanchaís, tell traditional supernatural stories, which are akin to an Irish seanchaí's tradition. Only after Valerie recalls her personal tragic story, that the role of a seanchaí gradually changes to become extremely humanistic. It transforms into a sort of refuge where these characters can get solace to alleviate their solitude, especially as Jack is also encouraged to narrate for the first time, his life's evocative tale, about his long-ago lost love. Cummings exquisitely observes about McPherson's artistry: "I have a story, therefore I am. This is the lifeblood and essence of McPherson's troubled heroes... The act of telling [a story] constitute a kind of redemption...which imbues their profane lives with a touch of the sublime" (2000, p. 303).

Jack: a traditional seanchaí

The character of Jack in *The Weir* is one of the sharpest representations of a traditional seanchaí. "Jack is the go-to source, in his community, for local histories and legends, and for advice and opinion" (Hill, 2013, P. 23). Jack spent all his life in this place, and the garage he owns was originally owned by his father a long time ago. He is acquainted with most of the close history of the area. Therefore, he is chosen by the playwright to play the role of both the first and the last seanchaís in the play. Jack's first narrative takes inspiration from the old seanchaí tradition, using the fairytale technique to accomplish his task as a seanchaí. The task attributed to him in the first story is to entertain Valerie, the newcomer and to introduce her to the new world, she is moving in. Jack says to Finbar and the rest of them, "The weakness, Yeah? Because talking of the fairy road. Didn't you have a little run in with the fairies or who was it, that time before you went?" (McPherson, 1999, p. 35)

According to Irish tradition, the first seanchaí should be the eldest in the folk. As Jack is the oldest in the room, he is in late "fifties" (McPherson, 1999, p. 5), he is nominated by the other fellows to narrate the first story. When Finbar asks Jack to tell them the story of the fairies, Brendan, for instance, in his thirties, responds, "Ah, Jack'd tell you all them stories" (McPherson, 1999, p. 29). Jim, who is around forty, also consents saying, "Ah, Jack'd tell you better than me" (McPherson, 1999, p. 29). Jack immediately confirms his seniority as the oldest man in the pub; he says,

“are you really interested? All the babies” (McPherson, 1999, p. 29). Jack’s “authority comes from his age. When he speaks, nobody interrupts—as Jack himself will when Finbar tells his story later. His word is law too,” like a typical traditional seanchaí (Hill, 2013, p. 28-29).

The fairy story Jack relates apparently took place around 1910 or 1911. The story centers around a local woman called Maura Nealon, who reportedly lived as a child in the house that Valerie bought. The details of this tale were narrated to Jack, as he says, by Maura herself, who passed away “nearly ninety” (McPherson, 1999, p. 30). One night Maura was sitting alone in the house with her mother Bridie. Suddenly, they heard a knocking at the door and windows, though no one was out there. Maura said “she was only young, but she knew there was something wrong”, although “her mother was very quiet” (McPherson, 1999, p. 31). It has been found out that Maura Nealon’s old house, Valerie’s house at the present time was built on what was known to be an old fairy road. The strange knocking on the doors and windows were constantly repeated almost every night, until “a priest came and blessed the doors and windows” (McPherson, 1999, p. 37). According to Llewellyn-Jones, Jack’s first story “centres on mysterious knocking at its the doors and windows by fairies whose road has been blocked – suggestive of opportunities he did not take up in the past” (2002, p. 98).

McPherson deliberately makes use of the seanchaí’s tools in the play, thus asserting the aptitude of the play’s traditional seanchaís, mainly Jack. A seanchaí’s techniques are apparent even before Jack begins telling his story. Starting from the very beginning of the play, McPherson was able to compel the audience to concentrate on his seanchaís’ stories by using simple settings; “*There is a fireplace, right. There is a stove built into it. Near this is a low table with some small stools and a bigger, more comfortable chair, nearest the fire*” (McPherson, 1999, p. 7). In addition to the simple setting, McPherson uses other theatrical techniques that familiarize the audience with a seanchaí’s tradition. He uses ‘the wind’, for instance to add suspense to the stories’ atmosphere, and to prepare the audience to anticipate the fairy world of the coming stories. At the beginning of his first story, Jack talks about the wind with Jim explaining that although it is ferocious, still it is warm; “JACK: That wind still up Jim? / JIM: Oh it is, yeah. Warm enough though” (McPherson, 1999, p.13). While the incidents of his story develop, when Maura with her mother hear that mysterious knocking on the doors and windows, it seems that he is deliberately recalling the wind for the second time, to add more suspense to his story.

And in those days, Valerie, as you know, there was no electricity out here. And there’s no dark like a winter night in the country.

And 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 signing. Singing in under the door at you. It was this type of night now. (McPherson, 1999, p. 31)

Jack's depth of expression is a characteristic of a traditional Irish storyteller that is described by James H. Delargy In *The Gaelic Storyteller*; he is powerful in his mastery of speech, and this was enough to engage even the most persistent listeners. (1945, p. 33-34)

One of seanchaís' tools that McPherson brings in the play is the use of "everyday speech patterns," as he makes clear, "I was technically obsessed with writing speech that wouldn't sound peculiar when it was spoken" (As cited in Llewellyn-Jones, 2002, p. 98). McPherson's seanchaís in *The Weir*, choose simple familiar words to tell their stories, sometimes speaking in "fragmented sentences, dramatic punctuation, interspersed jokes, and verbal markers like" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 109). Even, before Jack begins his tale, to confirm the authenticity of his story, he incessantly repeats to Valerie common words like, "these are only old stories.... It's only an old cod, like" (McPherson, 1999, p. 30). Then, he uses everyday speech, asking Brendan to help him with some details of the story, "Jaysus. An auldfella like me. Ten or more years between us and you wanting to give me a few digs. Business...killer instinct, is it?" (McPherson, 1999, p. 35) Finbar answers him using the same type of speech, "(Winks at Valerie): That's an eye for the gap. Exploit the weakness" (McPherson, 1999, p. 35).

The use of the interrogative is another seanchaí tool deployed by the playwright. To obtain more influence over his audience's imagination, Jack, the seanchaí uses interrogative expressions which help involving the audience in the story. For instance, when he asks Valerie, a common question like, "Am I setting the scene for you?" (McPherson, 1999, P. 31), or when he ends his sentences with "you know?" which is repeated several times in his story. Another example is when he says that Maura's mother, Bridie was "a well-known woman in the area ... you know?" (McPherson, 1999, P. 3). This interrogative style is a seanchaí's tool, one he usually employs to motivate his listeners to believe "that yes, they do know, and they would have felt the same in that situation" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 111).

In addition to the employment of a seanchaí techniques that helps Jack convince his listeners that his narration was really derived from Maura Nealon, Jack uses real names and actual details of the place. He recalls times when "there was no electricity" in the town (McPherson, 1999, p. 31), and that the road that reaches to Maura's house was called "the fairy road" (McPherson, 1999, p. 35). He also remembers that the story

happened between 1910-1911, the time the Weir was being built, and that Maura herself, passed away “nearly ninety” (McPherson, 1999, p. 30), and many more details. According to Delargy’s classification, Jack is the best example of a traditional seanchaí in the play, he is the historian or “the tradition bearer” of the place. (1945, p. 6).

3.2. Finbar the Seanchaí

Gradually McPherson increases the sincerity of the themes in his play, by introducing another story in which the seanchaí is involved in the events of the narration. Finbar, the second seanchaí narrates the second fairy story after Jack finishes his own. Finbar, was born and brought up in the same “rural part of Ireland”, but moved to Dublin when he was still a young man, where he managed to gain success in business. Finbar is an example of a modernized seanchaí, although his story contains traditional seanchaí elements, too. He recounts a story about his experience with Niamh Walsh, his neighbors’ young daughter, who allegedly summoned a spirit using the Ouija Board. The young girl insisted that she saw someone on the stairs, “Like no one else could see. But she could. And it was a, a woman, looking at her” (McPherson, 1999, p. 38). Niamh “was terrified” (McPherson, 1999, p. 38), so Niamh’s mother called Finbar to soothe the young girl, and then brought her a doctor. However, later, Niamh’s brother called to inform the family that the woman Niamh saw at the stairs is the same “one who lived next door who used to mind Niamh and the other sisters when they were young” (McPherson, 1999, p. 39). That woman “had been found dead at the bottom of the stair” a few years ago (McPherson, 1999, p. 39). After he went back home, Finbar was very much affected by what happened to Niamh. He found that “he couldn’t get around,” because he “thought there was something on the stairs” (McPherson, 1999, p. 39). Finbar believes that what happened to Niamh could be a coincidence; as he says, “And alright, whatever, coincidence” (McPherson, 1999, p. 39). Despite that, he is aware that it caused him a major change in his life, as after that accident, he took the decision to move from his hometown to Dublin.

Although the details of the story were a sort of scary, yet the comic tone of narration motivated his listeners to heartily laugh several times. Nevertheless, Finbar’s story which juxtaposes pain and fun defines his feeling of anguish at that time, he concludes, “Obviously, there was nothing there and everything, but that was the last fag I ever head” (McPherson, 1999, p. 40). When Valerie asks him, “And that was when you moved. Down to Carrick,” he answers, “Might be, alright. Didn’t want the loneliness may be, you know?” (McPherson, 1999, p. 40) Llewellyn-Jones maintains that *The Weir* “through drawing upon storytelling traditions somewhat in seannachie style, it explores the

psychological implications of loneliness” (2002, p. 98). Trying to escape from loneliness, and to seek spiritual peace, Finbar moves “into the lights” of Dublin (McPherson, 1999, p. 40). His soul was so troubled by Niamh’s accident that his entire life had been changed. Thus “reworking

Once more in *The Weir*, McPherson poses the theme of the fairy world, one of the main seanchaí tools which is ever-present in the second tale of the play. For example, in his story, Finbar establishes a connection between the fairy story, with the modern real world, through talking about the Ouija board used by Niamh and her friends. Moreover, Finbar, uses common seanchaí’s tricks to influence his listeners. For instance, while narrating his tale, to give the impression that his story is true, Finbar keeps referring to the main figures of the story as real ones; when he says for instance, “There was a big dog up there, Jack, that Willie McDermott had time.” (McPherson, 1999, p. 37), or “Dr. Joe in Carrick. This is Joe Dillon, Valerie, you’d see him in the town, he still have his surgery there.” (McPherson, 1999, p. 38) As soon as Finbar the seanchaí has become trustworthy, he began to involve the audience with questions, such as when he includes “do you remember?”, or “you know?” thus it would be easier for him as Ferguson suggests, “to inspire similarly fearful reactions in the audience, who are by this point captivated and on edge themselves” (2010, p. 109).

The gradual growth in the seriousness of the seanchaí’s task in the play, is also enlightened in the rhythm of his story. Unlike in the beginning of his story, which is alive with funny expressions, the story closes with unpolished broken sentences and perplexed-like answers to his listeners’ questions; “Might be. Might be, alright” (McPherson, 1999, p. 40). McPherson’s choice of hesitant responses of the second seanchaí to his audience, not only supports the genuineness of Finbar’s feelings, but also gradually heightens the seriousness of his story. Therefore, although the story had some laughs in the beginning, that laughter has changed into sympathy in the end of the story. The seanchaí’s audience only begin laughing again after Finbar makes a joke about himself, “You all think I’m a loolah now” (McPherson, 1999, p. 40). McPherson, However choses a more personal story for Jim, *The Weir*’s next seanchaí.

Jim’s Haunting Story

After Finbar ends his story, it is the turn of the third seanchaí to narrate another fairy story. Jim is in his forties and lives with his old mother. As soon as the name Declan Donnelly is mentioned by the other male characters, Jim, the next seanchaí recalls a personal experience that he claims took place twenty years ago. He narrates a ghost story that took place in a graveyard, a stereotypical setting for an old type of a traditional fairy tale. According to Ferguson (2010), in Irish tradition, “the seanchaí

would tell a transfixing story, often describing a supernatural encounter the storyteller himself experienced" (p. 109). One day Jim is asked by the local priest "to dig a grave in the yard" (McPherson, 1999, P. 45). He and Declan "were nearly finished" (McPherson, 1999, P. 46) with the digging. While he was waiting for Declan to come back with "a tarp to stretch over" (McPherson, 1999, P. 46), Jim saw a "fella, come out of the church, and he walked straight over" to him (McPherson, 1999, P. 46). "And he was looking around him a bit, like he didn't know the place" (McPherson, 1999, P. 47). Then the man informed Jim that he was digging the wrong grave and asked him to dig in different area, right beside the grave of little girl. The next day, to his surprise, Jim saw a picture of the man he "met in the graveyard" in the newspapers; he was the "man whose grave" they had dug. They found out that he "had a bit of reputation of for em... being a pervert" (McPherson, 1999, P. 47- 48).

Like with a truly traditional seanchaí, while Jim is narrating the story, no one interrupts him. Moreover, his narration is also characterized by necessary seanchaí tools. In addition to the recurrence of expressions like "and" and "you know" to demonstrate the authenticity of his story, Jim re-counts many simple details about himself. For example, he keeps repeating how far he was sick on that day, "I was dying with the flue and I had a terrible high temperature" (McPherson, 1999, p. 45), "I was dying with the flue... And I was boiling" (McPherson, 1999, p. 46). However, Jim's language becomes sharper as the story progresses, and his depth of narration turns his fairy tale into an intensely disturbing one. Although his tale is described as "old cod" by Finbar, yet it transforms into a serious scary one. Finbar immediately responds to the shocking unexpected conclusion saying, "Jaysus, Jim. That's a terrible story, to be telling" (McPherson, 1999, p. 48). Even Valerie leaves, feeling irritated, after hesitatingly wondering if Jim believes "it was a, an hallucination" (McPherson, 1999, p. 48). However, she returns with a decisive desire to take her turn as the next seanchaí.

A bereaved mother: Valerie the lady seanchaí.

McPherson astonishes his audience by choosing Valerie, the only female in *The Weir*, as the next seanchaí. Although as Delargy, states "Seanchaí ... is applied as a rule to a person, man or a woman who makes... family-sagas" (1945, p. 6), still it was not something common in Irish tradition to have white female seanchaís. Yet McPherson is breaking the rule by choosing Valerie to narrate the most powerfully significant story in the play. The main task of the first three seanchaís in the play was to entertain Valerie, but to their surprise it was Valerie, who was able to impress them more with a very personal heartbreaking story. Even though, Finbar suggests not to tell anymore stories that night,

Valerie insists on narrating her own personal experience. She contends saying “No, see, something happened to me. That just hearing you talk about tonight. It’s important to me. That I’m not ... bananas” (McPherson, 1999, p. 53). In the beginning of Valerie’s story the audience is moved from the world of fairy tales into real life, as Valerie recounts the instants of her present mournful life. She narrates a melancholic story of the death of her only child, Niamh, who passed away a few months ago, in an accident. The daughter, Niamh, (same name used in Finbar’s story) “was dying to learn how to swim” (McPherson, 1999, p. 54). On the day of the accident, Valerie was late at work, when she arrived at the swimming pool, Niamh “had hit her head in the pool ... and they’d been trying to resuscitate her” (McPherson, 1999, p. 55). Valerie explains, “And I didn’t believe it was happening. I thought it must have been someone else... Niamh was on a table. And an ambulance man was giving her the ... kiss of life” (McPherson, 1999, p. 55). But “she wasn’t breathing” (McPherson, 1999, p. 55). “I just thought I could go and lift her out of the coffin and that would be the end of all this” (McPherson, 1999, p. 56).

Valerie does not end her story with the death of her child. Unlike her husband who was able to overcome their calamity, she was unable to face the reality of her daughter’s death. She believed the dead little child still needed her. Valerie relates how she received a phone call from her dead daughter, asking her to save her from a haunted house, because she claimed “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” (McPherson, 1999, p. 57). Once more McPherson employs a traditional seanchaí technique, when he breaks “from the realistic and terrifying scene of death and mourning and brings the theme of fairies and the unknown back to the forefront of the play” (Spangler, 2018, p.5). Valerie recounts that during the phone call, “The line was very faint ... She wanted me to come and collect her. I mean, I wasn’t sure whether this was a dream or her leaving had been a dream” (McPherson, 1999, p. 56-57). Valerie’s “husband felt that” she “needed to face up to Niamh being gone” (McPherson, 1999, p. 57), and insisted she should have some psychotherapy. That is the reason why Valerie took the decision to move to that rural area, as she demanded to change the course of her entire life to find some new company who would help her defeat her sense of grief and isolation.

According to Harris (2014), “The affective power of Valerie’s story accounts in large part for the favorable reception of *The Weir*, which became one of the most successful Irish plays of the 1990s” (Para. 1). Her importance in the play increases, as she has been gradually elevated from

a mere listener to a seanchaí, and then a mourning mother who merits the other characters’ genuine compassion. Valerie, the seanchaí does not strive to attain her audience’s empathy. McPherson’s language and choice of words for her story, unfold smoothly and sincerely breaking her audience’s hearts. Her words express her extreme agony, when she says, “I was crying so much. I mean, I knew she wasn’t going to be there. I knew she was gone. But to think wherever she was ... that ... And there was nothing I could do about it” (McPherson, 1999, p. 57). Also, when Valerie spontaneously repeats her words; “She still ... she still needs me” (McPherson, 1999, p. 57), she effortlessly preserves her listeners’ credibility. However, though Valerie continues narrating her story for quite a prolonged time, repeating some details, she faces no disruptions, no intrusions, as her heartfelt mournful words captivate her listeners.

Although Valerie’s narrative also includes fairy references, yet her audience contemplates merely on her disaster, almost ignoring the eerie perspective of the story. McPherson brilliantly presents Valerie, as a seanchaí to feature an extremely humanistic tragedy. Her narrative is not for the purpose of time passing or for entertainment like the preceding three seanchaís’ stories. For Valerie, a seanchaí’s role would be to overcome her feeling of loneliness and anguish. The previous three seanchaís’ narrations have motivated her to uncover her hidden agony. A seanchaí technique has allowed Valerie to speak out her pains to those who would comprehend her melancholy. While her husband requests that she must face the truth of her daughter’s death, the new friends in the pub would not only listen to her story with compassion but also give her solace. McPherson’s seanchaí technique “gave a voice to the storyteller and cultivated experiences of others to tell their stories and create a beautiful, tragic, and realistic form of drama” (McGlothlin, 2017, p. 38-39).

Shades of the past: Jack’s personal history

McPherson concludes the play with Jack, who narrates another story, but this time it is a very personal one. Eamonn Jordan argues that “during the 1980s and early 1990s”, in Irish dramatic works, “deeply troubled characters, during moments of isolated reflection or through extended narratives delivered in front of other characters, were afforded opportunities to express what could not be accommodated through intercharacter exchanges of dialogue” (2010, p. 184). After he listens to Valerie’s story, Jack gets the courage to face his own self and recounts how he regrets some poor decisions that costed him wasting his only love, a long time ago. Alone with Brendan and Valerie he narrates his second tale with no eerie shadows, this time.

Jack introduces his story by informing Valerie that he constantly advises Brendan “not to end up like [him] ... a cantankerous old fucker” (McPherson, 1999, p. 63), who suffers from a boring desolate life. Then he describes his boring lonely life; he “never married” and has spent his entire life “down in the garage. And the fucking tin roof... like in the summer the heat has the place like an oven” (McPherson, 1999, p. 63). When he was young, he had “a girl... he was courting for three years—“1963-‘66” (McPherson, 1999, p. 64). She wanted him to move with her to Dublin, but he doesn’t know as he explains, “why it was a thing with me that I...an irrational fear, I suppose, that, kept me here” (McPherson, 1999, p. 64), so the girl moved alone and “was waiting for [him] to come” (McPherson, 1999, p. 64). Jack is aware he was “breaking the poor girl’s heart” (McPherson, 1999, p. 65) and regrets, “ah, you get older and look back on why you did things, you see that a lot of the time, there wasn’t a reason. You do a lot of things out of pure cussedness” (McPherson, 1999, p. 65). He laments his stubbornness that caused the girl to get married to another man.

Recollecting his memories when he went to the girl’s wedding, Jack describes with remorse, how he was like “only another guest at the wedding” (McPherson, 1999, p. 66), and mourns wasting his only opportunity of happiness; he resumes:

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. And you bear it ‘cause you’re showing everybody that you’re a great fella altogether. (McPherson, 1999, p. 66)

He goes far, confessing, “Ah, you get older and look back on why you did things, you see that a lot of the time, there wasn’t a reason” he admits (McPherson, 1999, p. 65).

Jack’s second tale generates another humanistic perspective of the play, which highlights McPherson’s characters’ urgent need for real company to defeat their sense of isolation and aimlessness. Like he did in his first fairy tale, Jack also used traditional *seanchaí* tools in this personal story, for example, the repetition of words, the use of interrogatives, and so on. He even concludes his story with the famous stereotypical words for depressed lovers; “there’s not one morning I don’t wake up with her name in the room” (McPherson, 1999, p. 67). His story is also vivid with details and replete with subtle advice. Therefore, without philosophizing his experience, both Brendan and Valerie are prompted to learn from him, not to waste their life, too. The serene, obsessing sense of remorse that Jack and Valerie have experienced in real life, left no space for eerie tales as a *seanchaí* device. As Brantley confirms, “you have strayed into territory that scrapes the soul. Suddenly the subject [of *The Weir*] isn’t

just things that go bump in the night, but the loss and loneliness that eventually haunt every life” (As cited in Wolfe, 2013, p. 189).

Conclusion

To sum up, this study has examined the different representation of the seanchaí, and its reconstruction in McPherson’s play, *The Weir*. The play proves how far Conor McPherson himself is a gifted seanchaí, in his ingenuity in merging traditional and modern seanchaís. Through a sequence of stories, McPherson’s characters in the play communicate with one another, mirroring how a modern seanchaí can function within traditional Irish culture. There is no action in *The Weir* except for the characters’ dialogues taking lead to the seanchaís’ narratives, which tendered all necessary action for the play. Each of McPherson’s seanchaís narrates one or more stories that prepare the way for the next story. The first three seanchaís’ stories are mainly fairy tales that resemble traditional narratives, with their remarkably employed traditional seanchaí techniques, integrated into different modern contexts. These first three seanchaís aimed at entertaining and impressing Valerie, a newcomer, and the only female in the play. Gradually the tone of the seanchaís converts to become more serious and humane in the last two stories, as Padraic Killeen argues, “the most haunting thing a character will experience is not a spook or a phantom but rather a poignant suspicion that their own life may have slipped away on them” (2016, para.13). The last two seanchaís narrate very personal stories, gaining dominance over their audience not with the power of fairy narratives, but with their intense feeling of loneliness, loss, remorse and need for compassion. As McGlothlin maintains, the stories of McPherson’s seanchaís transform into “a release of emotions coherently woven together in a way that is relatable to each member of the audience and seems even to manipulate the boundaries of reality, creating an intensely personal yet simultaneously universal experience” (2017, p. 30).

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