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Incomplete Initiations in Brian Friel's Plays

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*Chu He***Incomplete initiations in Brian Friel's plays.**

From the 1960s to the 1990s, Ireland experienced drastic changes in its culture, economy, and politics, and as a result, a modernized, international nation emerged from a traditionally Catholic rural society. Such transitions were disorientating to the Irish people, who had a hard time coming to terms with their gains and losses. In this article, I will argue that Brian Friel's plays aptly capture the chaos modernization has created in Ireland and the ambivalent attitude the Irish people had towards it. In *Crystal and Fox* (1968) and *Molly Sweeney* (1994), like the nation, the characters manage to transcend their old selves through initiation rites. The deep dissatisfaction with their present lives impels the characters to seek alternatives. Whether they disband a dramatic troupe or they have an eye surgery, the characters symbolically go through a rite of passage, because they emerge from it completely altered: they have initiated themselves into a new life and identity. If Fox regresses into the past to retrieve the ideal that once existed, Molly progresses into a bright sight from a dark world of blindness. By remaking and reinventing themselves, both characters irrevocably change themselves: the self becomes the other. Their successful transformation, however, does not give what the characters ask for and better their situation; rather, it leaves them in a new dilemma, suffering more—they are stuck in an ambivalent limbo, dangling between two irreconcilable worlds and belonging to none. By representing such an impasse, Friel warns against the escape into the past or the rush into the future; rather, he seems to suggest that only through balancing tradition and modernity can Ireland move sensibly forward and have a tangible future.

The phrase "rites of passage" was used by Arnold van Gennep to define initiation ceremonies as: "rituals that mark the passage of the individual through various stages in the life cycle" (Myerhoff 115), and consist of three crucial phases—separation, transition, and aggregation. The ritual subject is detached from his previous social status, passes through a period and area of ambiguity, and finally claims a new position in society. Victor Turner expounds the state between the subject's departure from and re-admission to

society as liminal (Turner 24). By overturning the old social order, suspending the individual's old identity, and reestablishing a new status quo and identity, initiation rites are shown to be "sources of renewal, possibility, innovation, and creativity" (Myerhoff 117), which provide some solution to personal or social problems in times of crisis. From this we can see that traditional initiation rites are fundamentally social, that is, they are means to rearrange the relations between the individual and society at a time of change, and their ultimate purpose is to prepare the altered individual to rejoin society smoothly, and to re-orientate him in his new roles and positions. In Friel's plays, characters also experience initiation rites at a time of change. With the collapse of conservative nationalism and the inevitable modernization that has followed, characters need to transform themselves to cope with the new order. Such a change, however, alienates them from themselves: on the one hand, their otherness enables them to have a new vision and life, but on the other hand, it leaves them indefinitely in a liminal state between an unfit old world and a problematic new one. In this way, initiation rites are shown to be sites of irreconcilable contestations, and the characters' transformation from the self to the other also testifies to the rupture caused by drastic social changes. The incomplete initiation rites and the homeless condition of the characters, to some extent, reflect the unsettling, ambivalent result of modernization.

In many ways, Irish society went through a rite of passage from the 1960s to the 1990s. If Ireland had been an economically protectionist and culturally conservative country since its birth in the 1920s, the wind started to change in the 1960s. As de Valera's leadership came to an end, it became quite clear that his ideal of a Catholic, Gaelic, pastoral country had failed by all accounts. Economically, the myth of self-sufficiency doomed the nation and sent unemployment and emigration rates soaring high, for there were neither foreign investment nor strong state industries. Culturally, while the mandatory teaching of Gaelic in schools did not turn Ireland Irish, the constitutional recognition of the Catholic Church put Ireland in a moral straitjacket that further kept it from modernity. The new Free State's urgent need to define itself against Britain economically, culturally, and politically did not open up a bright future; rather, it blasted

Republican ideals and hopes with an authoritarian government and a morally monopolizing Church.

The collapse of de Valera's conservative nationalism forced Ireland to move in a new direction. Therefore,

The overall theme of the 1960s was an exposure to the wider world: through the UN, through international economic initiatives, through the vast expansion in television licences (and the reception of British stations in the east of Ireland), through the cosmopolitan lingua franca of student radicalism, and through the tourist boom. (Foster 1988, 581)

Such an unprecedented exposure to the outside world proved to be very productive: not only did the economy thrive: "[f]rom 1960 to 1969, 350 new foreign companies were established in Ireland; in 1966 the statistics showed the first increase in population since the Famine" (Foster 1988, 579); but Catholic hegemony was also challenged by widespread debates over issues such as contraception, health insurance, and education. By the 1990s, "Ireland's transformation was an established fact. Between 1987 and 2001 the annual growth rates of Gross National Product exceeded 7 per cent and sometimes touched double figures. Change had made itself felt in many areas—religious practice, sexual mores, cultural production" (Foster 2008, 7). Modernization brought the Irish people into a more prosperous, secular, and globalized world.

Friel's two plays respectively address the failure of de Valera's government and the impact of a sweeping modernization. *Crystal and Fox*, through Fox's discontent about his current life and desperate attempt to go back in time to relive his youthful hopes, reflects the disillusion of the Irish people towards de Valera's government and their nostalgia for their missed-out opportunities. *Molly Sweeney*, on the other hand, portrays the damages a hasty, forced transformation from a traditional, rural country to a modern, globalized nation can have on the Irish people through Molly's own traumatic experiences of gaining eyesight. In this way, Friel's two plays bring out a realistic yet troubled picture of the rapidly changing Irish society of the late 20th century when Irish people find themselves in a liminal space, between an irretrievable past of ideals and an uninhabitable present of

modernity, which deepens their identity crisis.

Written in 1968, *Crystal and Fox* depicts the disappointment Fox Melarkey feels towards his mundane, lustreless life, which has departed from his romantic ideals of thirty years earlier. In order to relive the moment of hope, youth, and aspiration, Fox embarks on a journey to the past by dismantling his current life, which, however, lands him in a vacuum between an unreachable past and a broken present. As Boltwood suggests, since “the Melarkeys’ union can be dated to the Republic’s creation,” Fox’s personal life actually reflects the nation’s evolution: his discontentment with his current life thus expresses not only “a contemporary disillusion with Ireland’s moribund politics and culture ... [but also] a latent romanticization of the revolutionary era.” His obsessive desire to return to the beginning of his married life is thus a desire to recapture “a past seminal moment” of his nation, when it was full of hopes and open opportunities in the 1920s (Boltwood 74). Republican ideals of a unified, egalitarian nation crashed against the reality of a partitioned, conservative, church-controlled state with soaring unemployment and emigration. Fox’s disillusion with the status quo thus fittingly reflects that of the Irish people. In this way, “Friel makes Fox the representative Irishman who has become alienated from a state that has abandoned the Irish people” (Boltwood 73). The longing for a second chance to start over, if secretly cherished by every Irishman, is materialized in Fox.

Fox’s initiation rite does not take place in a single action, but involves a whole process: it is through a gradual, willful disintegration of his troupe and family that Fox searches for a life of otherness. While Fox deliberately disbands his traveling troupe to start a new life, his family is also broken up accordingly: his son Gabriel is arrested for manslaughter, and his beloved wife Crystal is forced away, leaving Fox alone on the road, completely altered. Although very determined throughout his initiation rite, Fox is totally lost in his new world.

The decline of Fox’s show is clear from the very beginning: from a big, top-notch show troupe “eight—ten years ago” (Friel 1969, 35), it is reduced to a hodgepodge of shoddy programs run by six people only. As modern entertainments such as TV, radio,

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and movies draw the audience away from traditional performances, Fox has to move constantly and travel to the scenes of disasters, where sightseers are likely to gather. Not only does the traveling troupe deteriorate but Fox himself also changes. He cannot keep his mind on show business any more, which makes him no longer the charming, quick-witted entertainer who used to enthrall the audience with his wisecracks and humor. His son Gabriel's leaving may affect him badly, but it is not the real reason for his depression. Having spent a lifetime putting on hackneyed, mediocre shows and begging for applause, Fox feels disgusted at his repetitive, mundane life. Like the fox in their theme song "A-hunting we will go," Fox is caught in the box of his show business for such a long time that all his ideals and passions fade away. No wonder he is "desperate for something that ... that has nothing to do with all this" (Friel 1969, 68). With "a glimpse, an intuition" that "this can't be all there is to it—there has to be something better than this," Fox embarks on a quest for "the good thing you think you saw" (Friel 1969, 102-03). His initiation rite is thus undertaken to break the box and start a new life. Like Fox, the Irish people were also increasingly tired of the self-deceptive shows about a Gaelic, pastoral, self-sufficient Ireland put on by de Valera and Fianna Fáil, whose lip services to traditional cultures and pretensions about economical independence did not solve, but in fact exacerbated the country's problems of language, unemployment, and emigration to some extent. As time passed, more and more people came to realize the failure of de Valera's government in keeping its nationalist ideals and dealing with modern times. With a growing discontent with the status quo, the Irish people longed to get out of this stagnant, sociopolitical box and make a fresh start in life.

Fox's glimpse of a real life is actually a "vision of a simpler and more carefree existence [which] is summarized in his memories of the past" (Corbett 112). The belief that his bygone days are a better, higher life than the one he is currently leading and that he can recreate that past puts Fox on a reckless pursuit. To "regain his dream of childhood innocence" (Pine 108), Fox has to discard all that he possesses and loves—his troupe, his friends, and his family—and return to his original starting point. In this sense, Fox's initiation rite of self-remaking also involves self-destruction: he "expresses a death-wish in

order to experience a death-rebirth sequence, a death-departure from the onerous circus routine and a life-rebirth entry into a heaven with his wife" (Tallone 42). Clearly the Irish people share the same death-rebirth wish with Fox: they not only want to put an end to de Valera's Ireland and start all over again but also tend to romanticize the past when the Free State was young, ambitious, and full of possibilities and when the Republican ideals were still held high. Since a colonized country has to invent its destroyed history, culture, and identity, it is no wonder such a constant desire for self-invention is found in the vein of every Irishman. To start all over again is to be reborn and reinvented.

Fox's transformation begins with the dissolution of his troupe. By "skip[ping] the places that were good in the past" (Friel 1969, 137), deliberately driving his leading actor and actress away, and removing Pedro and his animal performance by poisoning his dog, Fox breaks his troupe into pieces, and successfully puts an end to his career. Likewise, Fox also disengages himself from his family, for he cannot be free until he does away with any obligatory relationship. Although it is Papa who unintentionally gives away the hiding place of his grandson and causes Gabriel's arrest, Fox is not upset at losing his son and does not attempt to rescue him. Rather, he is secretly relieved, for Papa has done what he intends to do in order to free himself from familial bonds. The lie he tells Crystal about his telling on his own son is actually an inner truth—Gabriel has to be removed before Fox can realize his dream life. That is why Fox's worry about his son's fate soon gives way to his anticipation of a new life. Selling all his props to the Dick Prospect troupe and left only with Crystal, the old accordion, and the old rickety wheel, "all we had thirty years ago" (Friel 1969, 123), Fox finally returns to his starting point and begins to envision a carefree, happy life with Crystal.

However, in spite of his warm enthusiasm and joyous excitement, Fox's dream of reenacting the past cannot be realized. As people who have long passed their prime, Crystal and Fox cannot regain the warm hope and open future they once had, for the young spirit is already lost in the lapse of time. In this sense, the past cannot be brought back to the present. Nor can Crystal be of one mind with Fox. Her determination to go to Manchester and hire a lawyer for Gabriel runs counter to Fox's desire to live a

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lighthearted, roaming life just like before. Unlike Fox who wants to relive the past, Crystal is anchored to the present: her practical concern to save Gabriel makes it impossible for Fox to indulge in the past.

Therefore, Crystal becomes the last tie Fox has to cut on the way to his ideal life. It is undeniable that their love is genuine and strong, for Fox loves Crystal as his best part, while Crystal also willingly abandons others for Fox, but this cannot give Fox the contentment he needs: "love alone isn't enough now...I got an inkling, my Crystal, and I had to hold on to that" (Friel 1969, 145). Refusing to sacrifice his new life, Fox has to sacrifice Crystal. By lying to her and saying that he tells on their son to get the 100 pounds reward from the English police, Fox shocks Crystal into leaving him. Unable to believe that Fox will betray his own son, Crystal disowns him: "I don't know you...Don't know you at all...Never knew...never" (Friel 1969, 144). In Crystal's eyes, Fox has become a total stranger, whom she can neither recognize nor understand. In this way, Fox ultimately turns himself into the other. What I find particularly interesting is the fact that, if the differences between Fox and Crystal speak to the disparity between a nostalgic, traditional Republic and a no-nonsense, pragmatic Northern Ireland, their final breakup also mirrors the national division between the North and the South. Love alone isn't enough to reunite them now, for their outlooks, concerns, and beliefs are too different to be reconciled, which clearly echoes the disparity not only between an industrialized, modern Northern Ireland and a traditional, rural Republic but also between the Protestants/Unionists and the Catholics/nationalists. Given Gabriel's association with Britain—he works there for years and is arrested by English detectives for robbery and manslaughter, Crystal's deep involvement with him seems to further suggest an insoluble relationship between Northern Ireland and Britain for better or for worse, while Fox's non-involvement seems to imply that the Republic has severed all its ties with the former colonizer. Those different attitudes towards Britain, modernization, unification, etc. testify to the increasing estrangement between the North and the South in recent years. As a result, the Republic drifts even further away from Northern Ireland than thirty years ago, and it is clear now that the old romantic ideal of a unified Ireland has literally phased out.

The completion of his transformation, thus, does not make Fox happy or free; rather, it backfires on him and leaves him in a desolate condition, for he loses his beloved wife—the central part of his dream—forever. Likewise, against the Free State's promises and ideals, the partition of Ireland is no longer a temporary or transitional matter but becomes permanent with no more illusion of a unified Ireland. Standing endlessly at “a crossroads in the open country” (Friel 1969, 124), Fox is unable to take any road—he is stuck between a foreclosed present and an un-returnable past. Turning his rickety wheel, Fox “recognizes not only the impossibility of regaining his dream but also the futility of any kind of action at all” (Pine 113), “because the whole thing's fixed” (Friel 1969, 146). What is done cannot be undone. In this way, “‘ironically, Fox...traps himself in an empty box’ in an attempt to escape from whatever is ‘fixed-fixed-fixed’” (qtd. in Tallone 57), and the play not only voices “a nostalgia for a home or time that can never be regained or revisited” but also shows the futility of attempts at “transcendence or transfiguration” (Pine 262). Fox's initiation rite thus leaves him suspended between two irreconcilable worlds, agonized and lost, with nobody to start anew with, and nowhere to go.

In many ways, Fox's liminal existence reflects the Irish situation in a broad sense. As Boltwood points out, “Fox's fortunes serve as a Frielian barometer for the Republic's health” (Boltwood 77). From his early married life to his breakup with Crystal, from having young hopes and open future to facing decayed life and striving to retrieve “the good thing you think you saw” (Friel 1969, 103), Fox, like every Irishman, experiences the promises of a newborn nation state, the intense disillusionment with contemporary Irish politics, and the nostalgia for the revolutionary era. However, Fox's failed initiation rite into the past clearly shows the irreversibility of history—Ireland has to deal with the same liminal situation between lost ideals and disappointing reality Fox finds himself in.

If Friel depicts the Irish people's unhappiness about the development in the Republic since the 1920s and their futile longing to recapture the nation's lost seminal beginning in *Crystal and Fox*, he also portrays the unsettling changes modernization brings to the Irish people, who, uprooted from their old ways of life, cannot find a home in their new yet strange world. Instead of offering adjustment as the default way out, Friel warns that such

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disorientation can be traumatic. Like the analogy between Fox and the state, the blind girl Molly gaining eyesight metaphorically represents Ireland's entrance to modernity, as light and darkness have traditionally been used as symbols for advancement and backwardness. While the successful eye operation opens a big, new world for Molly and enables her to see and do things as she could never before, this world also baffles, frustrates, and overwhelms her to the point that she finally gives up struggling and remains in a limbo state of unseeing. In order to make sense of the new world, Molly has to force herself out of her old, comfortable tactile world into the unfamiliar, menacing world of sight, and she has to erase everything she has learned since childhood to build from scratch a completely different learning system. Unable to go back and "see" the world with her hands, feet, body, etc. like before, or adapt to seeing the world with her eyes, Molly is stranded in a limbo of seeing and not seeing. To some extent, Molly's struggle and suffering shed light on the dilemma the Irish people face in the 1990s, for the transition from a traditional, rural society to a modern, cosmopolitan country is as disorientating as the transition from blindness to sight. If the old culture and lifestyles are forsaken in the process of modernization, the new, globalized world can also be confusing and unaccommodating.

If Fox tries to go back to the past to undo the failure of the present and regain lost hopes and possibilities in *Crystal and Fox*, Molly turns to modern science and technology for a better future in *Molly Sweeney*. However, they both fail in their opposite pursuits of happiness. Unlike Fox's voluntary initiation rite, Molly's is imposed on her. Urged by her husband Frank and persuaded by the doctor Mr. Rice, Molly undergoes eye surgery to recover her eyesight. Although the surgery itself is successful, the new sighted world is too much for Molly to handle, and she ends up in a borderland between seeing and not seeing, destroyed by her initiation rite. Written in 1994, the high time of Ireland's modernization, the play makes a precautionary call to the Irish people: like Molly, they could be overwhelmed by their drastically shifting social values, beliefs, and lifestyles, lose their grasp on reality, and end up in a homeless, interstitial state between tradition and modernity. Read in this light, the play seems to problematize the hasty modernization in

Ireland and warn us of its traumatic, deranging effects on people.

From the very beginning, Molly has shown herself as an independent blind woman, who is so contented in her dark world that change is neither necessary nor desirable to her. Being functionally blind for forty years, Molly enjoys a full life like everyone else in her tactile world—she works as a masseuse, likes swimming and dancing, and has her own home and friends. Living her life with ease and confidence, Molly never feels deprived at all. In fact, she has “more pleasure, more delight, from swimming than sighted people can ever get” (Friel 1994, 466), for the pure sensation from touch and feel alone, without distraction of sight, maximizes her pleasure. No wonder Mr. Rice is impressed by her first appearance, calm, confident, and independent, without self-pity or resignation. It is such a self-assured woman with her comfortable life that is forced to go through an initiation rite, and to change against her will.

Molly is made to have eye surgery because her husband Frank deems it necessary and beneficial to her. As an enthusiastic, restless experimenter, Frank is invariably attracted by exotic, alien things. Molly’s blindness thus “fascinated him” (Friel 1994, 480). Unable to accept Molly’s blindness as “an alternative mode of interaction with the world” (McMullan 145), Frank regards it as a defect that should be corrected into normality. Therefore, just as he imports African bees, blueback salmon, and Iranian goats into Ireland to increase productivity, Frank also initiates Molly into light, which he believes will bring a new, better life to her. However, like all his failed experiments, this new project for Molly is also doomed, for “his imagination of a transformed Molly [actually] distorts and denatures” her (O’Brien 94). Like Frank, Mr. Rice also uses Molly for his own purpose. Molly’s blindness provides him the chance of a lifetime to restore his reputation as a world-famous ophthalmologist. If he can miraculously restore eyesight to Molly, he will reestablish himself successfully in the medical field. Therefore, although he sees Molly’s unwillingness to have eye surgery and knows that she agrees only to please Frank, he still carries it out. In this way, both Frank and Mr. Rice impose their own fantasies, wishes, and dreams on Molly and use Molly as the means to “further their own agendas” (Corbett 129).

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It is easy to see the analogy between Molly and traditional Ireland. Although many old cultures and lifestyles are viewed as backward and outdated in modern times, they have their own way of functioning and make perfect sense to those who believe and practice them. In this sense, “[m]etaphorically Molly’s blindness represents the potential for any radically different way of seeing and construing things” (McGrath 277). That is why as a blind woman, Molly does not have a deprived but rather full and independent life like the others, and she is confident and capable in her own world of blindness. After all, traditional lifestyles are just another, different way of being in the world, no better and no worse than more modern ones. However, when everyone is busy building a brave, new, modern world like Frank does through all his experiments, nobody makes the effort to understand an alternative perspective or respect and give credit to such an existence; rather, anything that is different from the norms of progress and development has to be corrected. Therefore, Frank and Mr. Rice, “neither recognizing nor valuing [Molly’s] experience of the world,” “interpret her difference as disadvantage” (Harris 64) and arbitrarily assume that the eye surgery can only be beneficial to her. By performing eye surgery on Molly, they attempt to normalize her defective life. However, this forced change does not lead to improvement but to destruction. Through Molly’s tragedy, Friel actually calls into question Ireland’s abrupt transition from tradition to modernity and shows concern for all the displacements it caused.

To the blind, regained eyesight may not be a blessing but a curse, for it deprives them of everything they have possessed before. As a life of blindness can also be a wealth in itself, it is no longer true that “[Molly] has nothing to lose” (Friel 1994, 459). On the contrary, “that courageous woman had everything, everything to lose” (Friel 1994, 481), for her eye surgery not only shatters the old world in which Molly lived with assurance and pleasure but also imposes a completely strange, menacing world on her. Realizing on the eve of her surgery that she is “undergoing life-altering surgery for [others]” (Corbett 126) and “definitely about to lose something by regaining her sight” (McGrath 258), Molly questions Frank and Mr. Rice’s authority: “how can they know what they are taking away from me? How do they know what they are offering me?”. Her “dread of exile” and

irrevocable loss of her familiar world frightens and angers Molly into a “mad and wild and frenzied” dance (Friel 1994, 473), which not only vents out all her desperation and rage at her imminent surgery, but also demonstrates for the last time that “her mastery of her world is quite as complete as [others’]” (Corbett 127): she circles adroitly around the room at great speed without bumping into anyone or knocking over any object (Friel 1994, 473). In this way, Molly winds up her life of blindness with a flawless and defiant performance.

Initiated into a new world of sight through her eye surgery, Molly, however, remains in a state of agnosia: “seeing but not knowing, not recognizing” (Friel 1994, 464). Taught to know things through touch since her childhood, Molly has possessed a repertory of tactile engrams on which all her cognitions are based. Now her partial eyesight is restored, but what she sees is meaningless chaos, for “there was no necessary connection at all between the tactile world—the world of touch—and the world of sight ... any connection between the two could be established only by living, only by experience, only by learning the connection” (Friel 1994, 463). This difficult shift between two completely different worlds is also faced by the Irish people, who can be as disorientated in their modernized society as Molly in her sighted world. In order to understand what she sees, Molly has to learn everything anew by sight. Only when she builds up a repertory of visual engrams and connects them with her old tactile ones can Molly make any sense of her new world.

However, “the adjustment from blindness to sightedness [is] extremely traumatic,” because “to enter the world of vision the blind must renounce the unsighted world to which their neurological and psychological apparatus have adapted. As Oliver Sacks says, ‘one must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person’” (qtd. in McGrath 260-62). The Iranian goats Frank imports into Ireland fully illustrate the difficulty of such a transition. Although the goats have stayed on the island of Inis Beag for three and a half years, their internal clock stays Iranian and never adjusts to Irish time, for some imprint in the genes—their engram—remains immutable. As a result, the goats live in a perpetual jet-lag (Friel 1994, 461-62). Molly is in the same plight with the goats. Given her internally etched tactile engrams, she has a hard time establishing new visual engrams, and her

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sighted world still remains “a very foreign world ... And disquieting” (Friel 1994, 492). The same can be said of the Irish people, whose old habits, beliefs, and ways of doing things are also deeply rooted in their systems and cannot change easily even if their society has dramatically altered. Stressed by the ceaseless learning and testing at home and in hospital, and tired of coping with a strange and intimidating world, Molly loses her job, sense of security, and independent life. In this way, “the rite of passage undertaken by Molly” destroys “her entire identity and personality” (Pine 294).

Losing her old self also changes Molly into the other, an interstitial figure between the blind and the sighted. Overwhelmed by her taxing new life, Molly refuses to see any more and withdraws into the dark world, the only consolation and relief to her. However, Molly does not retreat “into the previous world but into a new world of denial, of blindsight” (Pine 296), in which she is totally unconscious of seeing anything at all. In other words, although Molly is able to see in the medical sense and behaves accordingly, she sees absolutely nothing in reality, for her vision cannot reach her consciousness and is thus utterly useless to her. Deprived of her comfortable, blind world and forced into a strange, sighted world, Molly is completely lost—she cannot return to her old home nor adapt to the new reality. She becomes an exile from both worlds, “trying to compose another life that was neither sighted nor unsighted” (Friel 1994, 501). Like the badgers Frank and his friend try to relocate before the flood, Molly becomes homeless, with her old home destroyed and a new one unlivable in. While seeing less and less of the external reality, Molly also develops more and more illusions, and she eventually ends up in the same mental hospital her mother had frequented. Her diminishing eyesight and growing delusion finally blur the line between the real and the false, and leave her dying “on a borderline between fantasy and reality” (Friel 1994, 500). In this way, Molly is initiated into an eternal liminal ambiguity between darkness and light, blindness and sight, and imagination and reality. The seemingly beneficial eye surgery thus ends in disaster.

Although the play is based on the medical case which Oliver Sacks recorded in his essay “To See and Not See” (McGrath 262), it is also closely related to Irish history. Richard Pine reads the play as an allegory of colonization—Molly’s world is invaded and

destroyed by the colonists (Pine 289). As a blind person, Molly is viewed as different from and inferior to the proper self, a sighted person, which makes her the other in Frank's and Mr. Rice's eyes. Like other colonial subjects, Molly has to be enlightened and reformed. By initiating Molly from darkness into light, Frank and Mr. Rice perform the colonist's mission of civilizing the barbarous and rectifying the other, whose devastating result speaks directly to the harm of colonization and Ireland's colonial liminality. If McGrath reads Molly's loss of her own world as Ireland's loss of its national identity in globalization (McGrath 280), I see Molly's transformation as a symbolic representation of Ireland's transition into modernity. The themes of reform and development are actually expressed by Frank and Mr. Rice, who explicitly "represent two distinct Irish strategies for confronting the influx of foreign influences" in modern Ireland. Frank, the experimentalist, enthusiastically imports the advanced foreign variants "to replace failing domestic examples," while Mr. Rice "endeavors to make [Irishness] an influential component of a more composite Western culture" by exporting his medical expertise worldwide (Boltwood 186-87). Moreover, Mr. Rice's longing to restore his eclipsed reputation also echoes the Irish people's wish to move out of their colonial shadow and sociopolitical depression, and to reestablish Ireland in the world. As the means to fulfill Frank's and Mr. Rice's desires, Molly's initiation from darkness to light reflects the Irish people's aspiration to a powerful, advanced modern Ireland. In this sense, Frank's discovery that Ethiopia is the new name for old Abyssinia actually hints at Ireland's own transformation—the Republic in the 1990s seems to have established a new identity, leaving behind a deprived and humiliating past and moving towards a promising future.

Such optimism is questioned in the play as modernization turns out to be problematic. Frank's impractical innovations all end in failure and Mr. Rice does not regain his international reputation as he expects. If "the flooding of Lough Anna" is going to obliterate the "home to the Lughnasa bonfires," "a site of considerable significance to autochthonic Irishness," Molly's initiation rite has already destroyed her old world. In this sense, "Molly and Lough Anna share a single fate; both become victims of the indifferent modernization and destructive improvement that erode the authentic and indigenous"

(Boltwood 187-88) yet provide no adequate replacement.

The categorical opposition between modernity and tradition puts people in an either-or dilemma: to move forward and make progress, they have to give up their traditions and sacrifice their old beliefs; but is it really true that tradition cannot live with modernity? Maybe it is time to think about ways to accommodate both tradition and modernity in order to cut out a livable future for people torn in-between and to prevent Molly's tragedy. In this way, Friel shows that the failure to reconcile tradition and modernity results in a disastrous modernization. Blind and hasty modernization will not transfigure Ireland miraculously but unmake it instead, causing its people to dangle in the same limbo state as Molly does, between a broken traditional home and an uninhabitable modern world. By staging a seemingly irresolvable dilemma between dark and light, Friel critiques the fixed mindset that views tradition and modernity as mutually exclusive, and advocates a more balanced development.

In many ways, Fox and Molly represent two different types of Irish people, as one looks back to the past while the other looks ahead to the future to solve their present problem. However, their initiation rites, that is, their self-remaking projects, fail all the same, no matter if they resort to tradition or modernity, as neither nostalgia nor modernization alone can bring any real solution to them. The characters' limbo existence is, thus, a metaphor of the plight of Ireland, stuck between two opposite worlds: one of fading republican ideals and traditional cultures and values, and the other of charging modernization and globalization. The quickly changing Irish society of the late 20th century upsets the old order and throws life into chaos: to come to terms with their heterogeneous holdings and to reinvent a new cosmopolitan identity, Irish people have to negotiate past and future, trying to find an answer to the unsolved problems faced by Fox and Molly and hopefully put an end to their unceasing struggle one day.

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