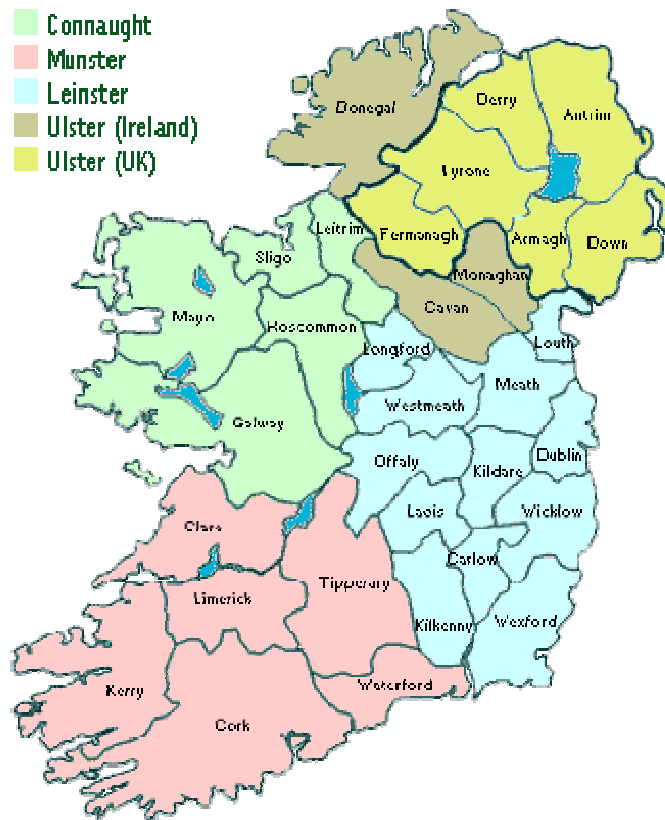


ENGL-46500: Seminar in Modern Irish Drama
Email: gleitman@ithaca.edu
Office Hours: M, 1-4; F, 1-3; T/Th 10-12; and by appointment

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Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama



COURSE GOALS:

In this advanced 400-level seminar, we will examine selected plays from the modern Irish repertoire, beginning with works staged at the fledgling Abbey Theatre in the early 20th century and concluding with works produced as recently as 2008. Ireland's drama has earned worldwide acclaim for its emotional texture, its political incisiveness and its stylistic variety. Yet even as the Irish drama has been embraced by an international audience, it remains (not surprisingly) preoccupied with issues that pertain directly to Ireland. In particular, our plays display a persistent interest in two topics: Irish history and Irish identity. Ireland's sometimes obsessive, always passionate absorption with its troubled past is well known. Further, the issue of what constitutes Irishness and, indeed, Ireland has been a vexed and controversial one on that island for hundreds of years. Hence, we will pay close attention to the status of the past (historical, mythical, personal) in Irish drama. We will also keep in mind the following as a guiding question: What is each author's implicit or explicit conception of Ireland or Irishness?

REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES:

1) **POLICIES:** This seminar is composed entirely of advanced students, and it is designed to be exclusively discussion-based. As a result, the seminar's success depends as much upon your investment as it does upon mine. We meet just once a week, and *I will take for granted that you will attend every class*, barring unforeseeable crises or illnesses. If you cannot avoid missing one session (and you explain why your absence was imperative), you will not be penalized. One-half of a grade will be deducted for any

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subsequent class that you miss. *I also take for granted that every seminar member will participate actively.* If you are not comfortable participating in class discussion, then this is not the course for you.

2) **INFORMAL RESPONSES:** Each week, in addition to reading one play, you will read one assigned critical article and you will submit an informal response to the play and the article. Your response should be 1-2 pp. in length, typed, and it should accomplish the following:

a) *Briefly* summarize the argument of the article, as you understand it. (This might just take a couple of sentences to accomplish, depending on the article.)

b) Put the article in conversation with the play in some fashion. Find an aspect of the article that you found convincing or unconvincing, illuminating or problematic, and discuss it in relationship to your own ideas about the play. Try to use the article as a springboard, but be sure to give yourself the opportunity to talk about what *you* found interesting about the play.

c) List at least *two* discussion questions pertaining to the play (and, if you wish, the article) that you would like to see us address during class.

You must email me your discussion questions NO LATER THAN 4 P.M. EACH TUESDAY! If you want to delay giving me the informal response until Wednesday, that's fine.

On the day that you are scheduled to give a presentation you do not have to submit an informal response or discussion questions, although obviously you must read the assigned critical article.

3) **PRESENTATION:** Each class session will begin with a student presentation. At the end of this syllabus are specific presentation topics from which you can choose (though you may also develop your own). All presentations should accomplish at least one (and maybe two) of the following tasks:

-- Many of our plays are historical. Do some research on the historical event that your play dramatizes and provide a historical backdrop. (Feel free to use Power Point or handouts!)

-- Discuss the play's reception in its own day and/or its relevance to its own historical moment.

-- Draw the class's attention to what you regard as significant themes or issues in the play.

You MUST touch base with me, either in person or by email, no later than the Monday preceding your scheduled presentation to discuss your plans!!! Do not allow your presentation to exceed about 10 minutes; feel free, as I said above, to use Power Point or other visual aids; and be sure to submit a write-up of the presentation on the day that it is due.

4) WRITTEN WORK:

A) Discussion questions and informal responses: due by 4 p.m. Tuesday and each Wednesday, respectively. Email your discussion questions (and, if you like, your informal responses) to gleitman@ithaca.edu, as an attachment and not in the body of the email, please.

B) Write-up of presentation: 1-3 pages, in essay (not outline) form, due on the day of your presentation.

C) Midterm essay addressing one play: 5-7 pages.

D) Prospectus for final essay: 1-2 pages.

E) Final essay addressing 2 plays (one may be, but does not have to be, an Irish play that we did *not* read together in this course): 12-15 pages. This essay should make reference to at least *two* secondary sources. You are welcome to use articles in the Course Pack, or other materials you have found on your own.

5) **GRADES:** 20% for midterm essay; 30% for final essay; 20% for presentation; 30% for class participation and informal responses.

TEXTS:

Course Booklet: to be purchased in the English department office.
 John Harrington, Modern and Contemporary Irish Drama, 2nd edition, Norton Critical.
 Sean O'Casey, The Plough and the Stars, Samuel French.
 Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, Grove.
 Brian Friel, Philadelphia, Here I Come!, Faber.
 Tom Murphy, A Whistle in the Dark, separate xerox, to be distributed.
 Anne Devlin, Ourselves Alone, Faber.
 Frank McGuinness, Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, in CP.
 Frank McGuinness, Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, Faber.
 Martin McDonagh, The Cripple of Inishmaan, Methuen.
 Conor McPherson, The Seafarer, TCG.

SCHEDULE:

- Sept** **2:** Introduction: a (very abbreviated!) history of Ireland. Read Lady Gregory, "Our Irish Theatre," MID 401-409. Ask yourself: What are Lady Gregory's implicit assumptions, as she maps out her plans for a national Irish theatre? Can you anticipate any problems that might crop up as a result of them?
- 9:** W. B. Yeats & Lady Gregory, Cathleen Ni Houlihan and J.M. Synge, Riders to the Sea (MID). No critical article this week. For your informal response, please address the following question: Both Yeats and Lady Gregory and Synge appear to be giving us a version of the Sean-bhean Bhocht, or poor old woman, a personification of Ireland that was traditional from at least the 18th century. What comparisons might be drawn between Yeats/Gregory's poor old woman and Synge's? How do they differ?
- 16:** J.M. Synge: Playboy of the Western World (MID); Crawford, "Synge's Playboy and the Eugenics of Language."
- 23:** O'Casey: The Plough and the Stars; Thompson, "The Naturalistic Image: O'Casey."
- 30:** O'Casey: Juno and the Paycock (MID); Thomson, "Opening the Eyes of the Audience."
- Oct** **7:** Beckett, Waiting for Godot; Worton, "Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text." (Just skim over the parts of this article that are on Endgame.)
- 14:** Friel, Philadelphia, Here I Come!; Kiberd, "Fathers and Sons: Irish-Style."
- 21:** Tom Murphy, A Whistle in the Dark, in CP; O'Toole, "The Wild Irish." **FIRST ESSAY DUE.**
- 28:** Friel, Translations. (MID); Connolly, "Dreaming History: Friel's Translations" and Heaney, "Review of Translations," in MID, pp. 552-554.
- Nov** **4:** Devlin, Ourselves Alone; Lojek, "Difference without Indifference": focus only on her discussion of Devlin, which comprises the second half of this article.
- 11** Frank McGuinness, Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, in CP; Harris, "Watch Yourself: Performance, Sexual Difference, and National Identity in the Plays of Frank McGuinness."
- 18:** Frank McGuinness, Someone Who'll Watch Over Me; Cullingford, "Gender, Sexuality and Englishness in Modern Irish Drama and Film."
- 25:** Thanksgiving break: No class.
- Dec** **2:** The Cripple of Inishmaan; 1998 and 2008 *NY Times* reviews (both by Ben Brantley).
- **** **PROSPECTUS DUE!**
- 9:** The Seafarer; O'Neill, "Review: The Seafarer and Rock 'n' Roll" (just read the part of the review that is on The Seafarer.)
- ** **SECOND ESSAY DUE THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17TH, BY 4 P.M.**

PRESENTATION TOPICS: These topics are meant to inspire and not to constrain you. If you have an alternative idea, don't hesitate to pursue it, but please come to discuss it with me first! Remember that a Power Point presentation or a handout might be useful if you are providing historical background.

1) **Playboy of the Western World:**

a) Today, the riots that surrounded Playboy's premiere seem to most people to be an essential part of its story. Tell your classmates the story of the riots and discuss the reasons (frivolous and serious) why the play might have prompted them. How might Playboy have offended early 20th-century Irish sensibilities?

b) Consider the figure of the Irish "hero" or "artist" as he is embodied by Christy Mahon, and his relationship to the Irish community which first reveres and then vilifies him. What is it in Christy that enralls the community, and what prompts their rejection of him?

c) Connected to the previous topic, it might interest you to examine some of the claims that critics have made about Christy and what he represents: he has been interpreted as a modern Christ figure, as an Oedipus, as a Cuchulain (an Irish mythological hero), and as a reflection of or commentary upon Charles Stewart Parnell (an Irish political leader who was first revered and then reviled). You might think through these analogies and ask whether any of them are helpful to our understanding of Christy's story.

2) **The Plough and the Stars:**

a) Plough is a history play. It dramatizes a real historical event and it makes reference to real historical personages. Yet O'Casey is a dramatist and not a historian, and his interest is less in recapturing the "facts" of the past than in interpreting and commenting upon them. How does O'Casey go about dramatizing history? What does he seem to want to say to his compatriots about the Easter Rising? If you pursue this topic, you should provide some background on the Easter Rising.

b) Like Playboy, Plough and the Stars prompted riots when it was first performed. Do a presentation in which you tell the story of those riots and consider why they occurred.

3) **Juno and the Paycock:**

a) Consider Juno in comparison or in contrast to Yeats/Gregory's Cathleen ni Houlihan and Synge's Maurya. What version of "Mother Ireland" are we granted this time? What is her relationship to the men in the play, and to the political and social attitudes that they embody? Is it surprising to learn that *this* play was well received, whereas Plough was not?

b) O'Casey is notorious for attacking many of the sacred cows in Irish culture – most notably, politics, nationalism, and religion. Consider how he does that, here. (Again, you might ask yourself: considering that he *does* attack those sacred cows, is it surprising that no riots ensued?)

4) **Waiting for Godot:**

a) Consider the various possible significances of the absent figure of Godot. Why is Didi and, to a lesser extent, why is Gogo so invested in awaiting him? Should we admire these men for their dogged faith, or should we condemn them as self-deluding fools?

b) Consider the form of Godot, which utterly bewildered and even angered audiences when the play first premiered at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, Florida, in 1956. You might describe the play's reception in your presentation, and proceed to consider why Beckett chose such a radical, destabilizing form for his play – one that became dubbed by critics as the Theatre of the Absurd. How does this form contribute to the play's meaning?

5) Philadelphia, Here I Come!

a) Philadelphia depicts an Ireland that is suffering from a cultural and economic malaise so dire that it propelled thousands of its citizens to depart for foreign shores. Though Gar sometimes expresses great excitement about his imminent departure, his profoundly conflicted emotions are evidenced by his split personality. Consider the forces that pull Gar both away from and towards Ireland. As Private Gar asks: "Why, boy? Why do you have to leave?" It might be useful to incorporate into this presentation topic some research: describe the economic (and, if you like, cultural) circumstances in Ireland in the 1960s and the reasons why so many young Irish men and women felt they had no choice but to leave.

b) Focus specifically upon the device of the split personality and consider how this device functions. Why is it dramatically effective (or: *is* it dramatically effective?) to have both a Public and a Private Gar upon the stage?

6) A Whistle in the Dark:

a) A Whistle takes place *after* emigration, in a world where the Sean-bhean Bhocht, or poor old woman (the Carney's Mama, in this case) has become completely invisible. With this in mind, consider the nature of tribal warfare and male bonding in A Whistle. What role (if any) do women have in the Carney world? And who constitutes "us" and "them" (frequently used pronouns, in the play) in this world?

b) In combination with the topic above or on its own, you might do some research on this time period in Ireland, considering both the factors that prompted families like the Carneys to emigrate and the lives that they forged for themselves in England once they left. Emigration was, the play suggests, no picnic!

7) Translations:

a) Translations takes place in 1833, at a moment when several events were taking place concurrently, all of which (Friel suggests) helped to bring about the demise of traditional Irish culture and the Irish language. The British installed a national school system that replaced the old hedge-schools that had existed in Ireland since the days of the Penal Laws. Simultaneously, the British Royal Engineers conducted the first Ordnance Survey of Ireland, which resulted in a detailed map of the territory and the Anglicization of many Irish place names. Finally, just 12 years following the events of the play, many of Ireland's rural areas (including the part of Donegal in which Translations takes place) were devastated by the Great Potato Famine. Your presentation could provide background on all of these events, while commenting upon Friel's dramatization of them: what do they signify, in the play?

b) Like Juno and Plough, Translations is a history play. Yet, in "Dreaming History," Connolly complains that Translations plays fast and loose with historical fact. Assuming that Connolly is correct about Friel's distortions of history (and he is, at least in part), can Friel be defended? Does the play exhibit a problematic nostalgia for a hopelessly idealized Ireland, as Connolly contends?

c) Translations premiered in Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1980. Friel's decision to have the play's premiere take place there—as opposed to Dublin or London, where most of his plays premiered—puzzled many at the time. Investigate why Friel chose Derry for his premiere, and consider how this play about Ireland in 1833 might have been politically and culturally relevant to Ireland in 1980.

8) Ourselves Alone:

a) Ourselves Alone takes place in the mid-1980s in Northern Ireland – a time of enormous political tension in Ireland, when the "Troubles" were raging. Provide some context for the class so that it can understand what was happening in Northern Ireland in this time period. It would be helpful if you provided information about the hunger strikes to which the play obliquely refers, about the status of the IRA in this time period, and about daily life in Belfast, where the action of the play is set.

b) Devlin's play applies a nationalist (and, in Devlin's view, patriarchal) slogan--Sinn Fein, which means "ourselves alone"--to female experience. Consider what this reapplication implies. What are women's role in, or women's relationship to, nationalist politics, according to Devlin? (If you use this topic, be sure you say a few words about what *Sinn Fein* signifies.)

9) Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme:

a) Frank McGuinness is an Irish Catholic. However, he is the first of our playwrights to focus on Protestant Irish experience. More specifically, the play dramatizes the experiences of eight Protestant Irishmen who enlist in the 36th (Ulster) Division during WWI; the men's experiences reach a climax when they fight (and, in most cases die) at the Battle of the Somme on July 1st, 1916. This battle happened to fall on the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne, which took place in 1690 and was an important Protestant Irish victory. As a result of this coincidence of dates and the fact that so many Ulstermen died at the Somme, that battle took on enormous significance in the collective Northern Irish consciousness. Your presentation could tell the story of why, describing the significance of the Battle of the Boyne, the events of the Battle of the Somme, and the experiences of Protestant Irishmen in the 36th Division.

b) Consider Pyper's trajectory in Observe the Sons. As a young man, he proclaims that his goal is to "take away" the other men's "peace." When we meet Pyper as an old man, however, he tells us that it is *he* who learned from the other men: "They taught me, by the very depth of their belief, to believe." What did they teach him to believe in, and is that transformation in Pyper—from destabilizing iconoclast to zealous believer—one that we applaud or lament?

10) Someone Who'll Watch Over Me:

a) Virtually every play that we have read this term has been located—usually literally, but almost always figuratively—at the center of Irish struggle and strife. Godot is an exception, but Beckett viewed himself more as a European modernist than as an Irish writer. A Whistle in the Dark takes place in England, but in an almost uniformly Irish community, and Observe takes place in France, but in a community so exclusively Irish that the men at times persuade themselves that they are still in Ulster. By contrast, Someone Who'll Watch Over Me takes place far from Ireland, in a Lebanese prison cell, and only one of its three characters is Irish. Yet Ireland's "troubles" remain one of the play's central issues. Consider some possible motivations, or some possible results, of displacing the Irish "problem" and locating it within the context of broader geopolitical struggles.

b) Probe the play's relationship to (or differences from) Beckett's Godot, a play from which McGuinness blatantly borrows here. An obvious example of that: The men do not move – though here, that is because they *cannot* move, as they are chained to a wall. Hence, they have to pass the time, often by playing games or having silly fights, while they are watched over by an invisible force that never appears and that they cannot fully fathom. Consider both the similarities and the differences, and what they tell us about how McGuinness is and is not an absurdist writer in the Beckettian tradition.

11) The Cripple of Inishmaan:

a) In many ways, this play seems to be looking back upon a tradition of Irish playwriting and ironically commenting upon it. Consider how. What does it mean to be Irish, in The Cripple? What echoes of other plays do you find here?

b) In a review in the NY Times of a recent revival of The Cripple, Ben Brantley wrote this: "Most of Mr. McDonagh's plays are ultimately about the importance of storytelling, as a source of salvation and, on occasion, destruction. His plays both satirize and glorify the Irish penchant for self-mythologizing and tall tales, for digging narrative wealth out of seemingly barren soil." Use this idea as a springboard for your presentation. What role does storytelling play in The Cripple? To what degree is it a source of "salvation" and of "destruction"? Within this play about storytelling, what role does the *Man of Aran* play?