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การล่องหนบ่งความหมาย-เด็กชายล่องหนในบทละคร
เรื่อง *Dancing at Lughnasa* โดย Brian Friel
The Descriptive Invisibility: the Invisible Boy
in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*

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บทคัดย่อ

ตัวละครเด็กชายล่องหนในบทละครเรื่อง *Dancing at Lughnasa* โดย Brian Friel นั้น ถือได้ว่าเป็นองค์ประกอบที่มีความโดดเด่นที่สุดองค์ประกอบหนึ่งของบทละครเรื่องนี้ และยังเป็นองค์ประกอบที่นำไปสู่การตีความอย่างหลากหลายด้วย และหนึ่งในวิธีการที่สามารถนำมาใช้ในการตีความตัวละครเด็กชายล่องหนนั้นก็คือการมองเด็กชายล่องหนผ่านทางบริบทของการเป็นลูกนอกสมรส ซึ่งเป็นแก่นหลักแก่นหนึ่งของบทละครเรื่องนี้ หากมองในบริบทแก่นเรื่องดังกล่าวนี้แล้ว เด็กชายล่องหนอาจสามารถตีความได้ว่าเป็นการแสดงออกถึงการไม่เป็นอันหนึ่งอันเดียวกันกับครอบครัวของตัวผู้บรรยายซึ่งเห็นได้จากหลายเหตุการณ์ในบทละคร จากวิธีการเล่าเรื่องจากความทรงจำของ Michael ซึ่งสอดแทรกไปด้วยความตระหนักรู้ถึงความไม่เข้ากันระหว่างสถานะลูกนอกสมรสของเขาและครอบครัวคาทอลิก รวมไปถึงความตั้งใจที่จะไม่ให้นำตัวละครเด็กชายหรือก็คือตัวเขาในวัยเด็กเข้าไปยุ่งเกี่ยวกับครอบครัว ทำให้เห็นได้ชัดว่า ตัวตนในวัยเด็กของเขาที่ล่องหน ไม่ปรากฏแก่สายตาผู้ชม นั่นคือ

สัญลักษณ์ที่สื่อความหมายถึงสถานะของการเป็นคนนอกครอบครัวของตัวเอง
ในบทละครเรื่อง *Dancing at Lughnasa* นี้ การล่องหนของตัวละครบนเวทีจึงไม่ใช่การ
จำกัดความรู้ความเข้าใจในตัวละครตัวนั้นของผู้ชม แต่อาจกล่าวได้ว่าเป็นวิธีในการนำเสนอ
ตัวละครที่มองไม่เห็นได้ด้วยตานี้อย่างชัดเจนและล้ำลึกมากกว่า

คำสำคัญ : ลูกนอกสมรส, คนนอก, การล่องหน

Abstract

The element of the invisible boy in Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* is notably recognized and thus, received several critical interpretations. One possible way to approach this invisibility is through the theme of illegitimacy which is one of the most prominent themes of the play. In the light of the theme, the invisible boy can be interpreted as the narrator’s expression of his lack of a sense of belonging to the family as supported by several textual evidences. From Michael’s narration of the story of his past which is infused with his traumatic awareness of the incompatibility between his illegitimacy and his Catholic family and his intention to disallow the boy from involving with the family, it becomes evident that his invisible younger self unseen by the audience might symbolize Michael’s recognition of himself as the family misfit. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the invisibility of the character on stage, thus, is not the limitation of the audience’s insight into the character, but it is the mean to give a more profound and vivid description of that absent character.

Keywords : illegitimacy, misfit, invisibility

The Descriptive Invisibility: the Invisible Boy in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*

The Irish playwright, Brian Friel is best known for his innovative exploration of the untrustworthy dimension of memory in his several plays. Many of Friel's plays such as *The Love of Case McGuire*, *Faith Healer*, and *The Freedom of the City* are labelled as a memory play with a framing narrative device that leads the audience to perceive a dramatic occurrence as a flashback similar to *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams's masterpiece, that retains a prominent position as a typical memory play. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is generally recognised as another of Friel's innovation with memory framework in which the narrator accepts the untrustworthiness of his memory and his imaginative interference in his own recollection of the past, "In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory" (Friel, 1990, p.71). Also, the play is said to be his most biographical play. From the account of Thomas Kilroy, Friel's fellow Irish playwright, the play is partially inspired by the fate of his two aunts who came to face their tragic end in London:

It was Thatcher's London. As we came down to the Embankment [...] the homeless were settling down for the night and Irish accents came out of the darkness. [Friel] turned and said to me that he had had two aunts who ended up like that. [...] [H]e told me the story of himself as a young man setting off for London to search for the two aunts who had left Donegal years before. What he found was destitution. I made the obvious, if cold remark that he would simply have to write play about them. (As cited in Lojek, 2006, p. 79)

In addition to the two aunts who becomes Agnes and Rose in the play, his dedication in the published version of the play: "In memory of those five brave Glanties women" (Friel, 1990) is another testimony to the biographical acknowledge of the play. Nonetheless, despite these real-life materials, there is no

other resemblance between Friel and his protagonist, Michael Evans who spent a life of an illegitimate child before running away from home. Therefore, the play should be read as “a drama that explores complex issues in the lives of invented characters” (Lojek, 2006, p.79) rather than an actual account about the author’s life.

Dancing at Lughnasa made its first debut at Dublin Abbey Theatre in 1990 and becomes Friel’s most commercially successful play. Its success can also be testified by its film adaptation in 1998 with the famous Academy Award winner, Meryl Steep, in the leading role. The story of *Dancing at Lughnasa* takes place in the recollection of Michael Evans. As the narrator of the play, Michael makes his debut on stage by “standing downstage left in a pool of light” (Friel, 1990, p.1) detached from other characters who act out their roles in his recollection. His first appearance on the stage clearly establishes Michael’s role as a narrator who has a full authority over the story. Michael retraces the story of his childhood in Ballybeg, a small and insignificant part of Country Donegal, Ireland with the Mundy family during the festival of Lughnasa, the kind of Irish harvest celebration, in 1936. The Mundys consists of five sisters, one brother, and one boy. Kate is the oldest sister who was the breadwinner and thus, the matriarch of the family. Maggie is the second sister who was responsible for the housework especially, cooking. The third sister is Agnes who also helped with the housework and earned a little money by knitting gloves. The forth sister is Rose who is described by Friel in “Characters and Set” as “simple”. She also helped her sister with the housework and earned some money from the knitting job like her elder sister. The youngest sister is Christina whose relationship with Gerry Evans transgressed the norm of the Catholic society and resulted in an undesirable birth of Michael. Jack is the oldest of the Mundy family members who was a former Catholic missionary at Ryanga, the small village in Uganda, Africa. Due to his spiritual degeneration: giving up Catholicism to adopt African paganism, Jack was sent back to home with

a confused mind and physical frailty. The last member of the family is Michael, the illegitimate son of Chris and Gerry Evans and also, the narrator of the play. During 1936 Lughnasa festival, the family started to show signs of a rift due to the approach of modernisation and the invasion of poverty. After the end of this Lughnasa time, the dissolution of the family was activated by the departure “for good” (Friel, 1990, p.60) of Agnes and Rose followed by the death of Uncle Jack and eventually completed by Michael’s leaving.

Although the story of the play is probably Michael’s, his younger self does not have a tangible presence on stage. The audience never knows what the boy Michael looked like and how his condition was at that time. Michael, the narrator, keeps his younger self invisible to the audience. What the audience see in the place where the boy is supposed to be is an empty space. Only the characters on stage have privilege to see the boy whose existence on stage is manifested solely through his conversations with them which are all made through the normal voice of the adult Michael, the narrator. The invisibility of Michael, the boy is first introduced into the play through the first scene of conversation between the boy and his Aunt Maggie.

The convention must now be established that the (imaginary) BOY MICHAEL is working at the kite materials lying on the ground. No dialogue with the BOY MICHAEL must ever be addressed directly to the adult MICHAEL, the narrator. Here, for example, MAGGIE has her back to the narrator. MICHAEL responds to MAGGIE in his ordinary narrator’s voice. MAGGIE enters the garden from the back of the house. (Friel, 1990, p.7).

Besides the spectacular dance scene of the Mundy sisters in the kitchen, this invisible boy is another element in the play that prompts the audience’s astonishment and various critical interpretations. Nesta Jones (2000) regards the invisible younger self of Michael as a device to create “a narrator figure that

stand outside the action” (173). According to Jones, “Michael is a storyteller drawing the audience in and yet distancing them from the memory. Michael is also remembering at a distance and he knows that his memory owes more to atmosphere than fact” (173). Helen Lojek (2006) views the invisible boy as Friel’s method to emphasize the male gaze (p. 80). Laurie Brands Gagne (2007) suggests that “Michael’s invisibility simply highlights the nature of memory to be subjective in a way that looking at photographs of an event is not. Awareness of self is what we have with memory (just as with everyday experience), but never the perception of self as object” (Three dances: the mystical vision of Brian Friel in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, para. 3). Hyungseob Lee sees the invisibility of Michael, the boy as one of “Brechtian devices” which Friel uses “to create an effect that Michael is alienated from the very memory he recites, that Michael becomes a stranger to his own past” (2013, p. 148).

The above critical stances seem to root firmly on ground of a realistic reading. The invisibility of the child might underline the narrator’s nostalgic gaze back to his past as of a distant observer of the family history. Nonetheless, in addition to the above critical stances, there is another possible way to interpret young Michael’s invisibility. Such way can be reach through the theme of illegitimacy which is one of the main themes besides the themes of modernisation, degeneration, and parochialism. Because Michael is an illegitimate son who was ostracised by the society and have been traumatized by his unfavourable status, it is convincing to believe that Michael might represent his younger self as the invisible child to characterize himself as never having truly belonged to the Mundys. Since the play is a family history set within the family space, the illegitimate boy Michael cannot exist in a tangible form because, as the adult Michael bitterly recognises, the society never regards him as a part of the family. This interpretation can be buttressed by his narration which is infused with his traumatic awareness of the incompatibility

between his status and his Catholic family as judged by the society of Ballybeg that eventually forced him to leave his family as well as the way Michael does not allow his invisible younger self from involving with the family in any way.

Michael Evans introduces himself as a son who was born “out of wedlock” (Friel, 1990, p.9) or from the unwed parents. His birth brought “the shame” (p. 9) to the family which belonged to the pious Catholic society of Ballybeg and even in the present, such shame still have a traumatizing effect on him as it seems to be the fundamental factor that eventually drove him from home. Michael is fully aware of the unfavourable position of himself seeing from the way he recaptures the disapproval towards his illegitimate status voiced by Kate, the matriarch of the family and “a very proper woman” (p.1) who attempted to maintain the pious Catholic reputation of the family. In a conversation between Jack and his sisters, Michael presents Kate’s disagreement towards Jack’s idea about the favourable status of a love-child at Ryanga, the pagan village in Uganda, Africa:

JACK: In Ryanga women are eager to have love-children. The more love-children you have, the more fortunate your household is thought to be.

Have you other love-children?

KATE: She certainly has not, Jack; and strange as it may seem to you, neither has Agnes nor Rose nor Maggie nor myself. No harm to Ryanga but you’re home in Donegal now and much as we cherish love-children here they are not exactly the norm. (p.41)

Michael also recaptures Kate’s disapproval of his parents’ relationship through her attack on Jack’s preference of the polygamous family: “It may be efficient and you may be in favour of it, Jack, but I don’t think it’s what Pope Pius XI considers to be the holy sacrament of matrimony” (p.63).

Because of his illegitimacy which was undesirable for his family and unacceptable for the society, Michael cannot have a peaceful life at Ballybeg

where poverty gradually approached. Considering from the fact that the home of the Mundys was located far away from the centre of the village, the family's possession of a radio clearly signifies the invasion of the modernization into the homely country life as Nesta Jones suggests, "Marconi is also a nod towards modernity and an important link with the outside world" (2000, p. 167). Together with the radio, the modern innovation that made the old country home "very posh" (Friel, 1990, p. 32) was the industrial revolution that replaced a cottage industry with factories and brought about poverty to people who cannot embrace this new mode of production. Agnes and Rose lost their gloves knitting jobs because as Michael recounts, "the Industrial Revolution had finally caught up with Ballybeg" (p. 59) and the gloves factory was established in Donegal where Ballybeg was a part. Despite the knitting agent's advice that they should apply for a job at the factory, Agnes and Rose chose to leave home. Michael believes that one of the reasons for their decision to leave was Agnes's recognition "that Rose wouldn't have got work there (the factory) [parenthesis added] anyway" (p. 59) for she did not have a normal level of intelligence. The two women had to leave so as to avoid being an economic burden to the family as Agnes's note read, "We are gone for good. This is best for all. Do not try to find us" (p. 60). Back to that time, the fate of his two aunts--especially Rose--could serve to foreshadow Michael's life. While his Aunt Rose was deprived of her career opportunity because of her mental defect, Michael would be deprived of any prospects of life in Ballybeg because of his illegitimacy. Even though there had been no industrialisation, Michael had not had much chance and choice to get a job because he was marginalised by the society. The coming of the modern industrial revolution represented by the arrival of Marconi and the glove factory which took away the old way of life and the agricultural mode of production would further reduce Michael's financial opportunity. His chance and choice for a job would be reduced almost to zero and

thus, he would be a living burden of the family. As implied by his account about the conclusion of the lives of those who remained in Ballybeg after Agnes's and Rose's departure and Uncle Jack's death, Michael does not mention about what he did to support the Mundys during almost ten years before his departure while his mother took a job in the gloves factory, Kate taught Austin Morgan's children, and Maggie did all the housework. Probably, during the hard time in Ballybeg, Michael could not find any decent job due to the prejudice against his unacceptable status so he had to leave home like his aunts. From his account about his family that starts to show foreboding signs of dissolution during the 1936 Lughnasa festival, Michael is found to be fully aware and traumatised by the fact that he was marked incompatible and unacceptable to the Catholic society and drove away from home and family because of his unfavourable illegitimacy.

Because of this traumatic awareness about his illegitimacy, Michael might choose to present himself as the invisible boy who almost never involves with the family in order to bitterly emphasize his status of the family misfit. Almost throughout the play, the invisible boy always stays outside making his kites, hiding behind the bush, or wandering outside the house. Whenever one of the Mundy sisters inquires after the boy Michael, the answer is always be he is making some kites *outside*. Also, the conversations between Michael and his aunts always take place in the garden. The boy never enters the house especially the kitchen which is considered to be the headquarters of the family where nearly all the actions in the play occur. Even when his mother calls for his hand: "Michael! Where are you? We need some turf brought in!" (Friel, 1990, p. 61), Michael does not answer her call nor does he come into the house.

The only time that the boy Michael made an intrusion into the family sphere is in the beginning of the second act. Nonetheless, his presence in the house is so short. As the second half of the play begins, the dialogue between Michael

and Maggie indicates that the boy was writing to Santa Claus asking for a bell for his bicycle that his father promised to give. His brief presence in the kitchen was ended by Maggie's suggestion, "Now away and write to Santa some other time. On a day like this you should be out running about the fields like a young calf" (Friel, 1990, p. 45). Maggie's advice might be her intention to protect her nephew from disappointment by suggesting other activities to distract him from his father's promise that would never be fulfilled but possibly, her suggestion might also symbolically imply Michael's status. Because the boy Michael is not a legitimate child who traditionally belongs to the family, he should not stay in the house and was free from all conventional obligations like a calf.

In addition to the fact that Michael is almost never allowed to enter the house, the possibility to interpret the invisibility of the boy Michael as the representation of his status as the family misfit is also supported by that the elements related to him are never allowed to involve with the family members. In the final scene of the first act when Jack picks up two sticks which are parts of Michael's kites and rub them together to make the sound in order to accompany a kind of pagan anthem, Kate "*gently takes the sticks from him*" and places it back on the ground saying, "We'll leave these back where we found them, Jack. They aren't ours. They belong to the child" (Friel, 1990, p. 42). Kate's action might be read at her attempt to prevent Jack from expressing his paganism within the vicinity of the Catholic house. However, in the same time, what Kate chooses to say to her brother—whether Michael witnessed the conversation by himself from some hidden place or imagines them up to fulfill his story—can be seen as an emphasis of Michael status as the family misfit. Michael and his sticks that can produce the pagan music belong to the other world outside the Catholic family. Michael and all elements related to him must stay outside untouched by the family members because he was not truly accepted as a part of the family.

Michael does not only choose to present his younger self as the invisible boy who is always outside the house and categorized as part of the world outside the family but he also disallows his younger self from attending the family activity. In the final scene of the play when the Mundys and also, Gerry are gathering in the garden for the afternoon tea and the ceremony of hat exchanging between Jack and Gerry; Michael is evidently not present in the scene seeing that Chris keeps calling after her son and complains about his absence: “Where’s that Michael fellow got to? Michael! He hears me rightly, you know. I’m sure he’s joking about out there somewhere, watching us. Michael!” (Friel, 1990, p.68) and finally, “Michael! He always vanished when there’s work to be done” (p. 70). In that time, Michael might be somewhere else and cannot hear his mother’s call. He might want to isolate himself as a boy who might prefer to be away from his parents or he might want to play hide and seek with his mother. We never know for sure. However, the very fact that the adult Michael, the narrator, chooses to emphasise his younger self’s absence from the family tea party during the best moment of that *Lughnasa* time might be another testimony to his conception of himself as the family misfit. The boy does not rightfully belong to the family so there is no rightful place for him in the family’s sphere.

The live-audience of *Dancing at Lughnasa* is probably astonished by the invisibility of the boy Michael. They might conceive it realistically as a camera trick-like narrative in which Michael, the narrator, must not see his own self in his memory similar to a photographer who cannot capture himself within his photo. Some of them might see it as the narrator’s attempt to withhold information and limit the audience’s knowledge about the boy Michael. However, with recourse to one of the recurring and prominent themes of the play: illegitimacy, the invisibility of the boy which seems to be an intention to conceal becomes the brilliant method to profoundly expose the boy’s character. Because he is illegitimate, he was

categorised as the family misfit and marginalised by the society. With such prejudice against his status, he had to leave his home in order to avoid bringing a financial burden to the family which was gradually invaded by poverty that resulted from the industrial revolution. As his recollection is about the family history during the 1936 Lughnasa festival, the family misfit who has never truly belonged to the family like him has to be invisible. There is no place for him in the family sphere. The way the adult Michael presents his younger self as the invisible boy, thus, can be read as an expressionist method rather than an impressionist method which tries to mimic the reality. His self-representation reflects his traumatic feeling and his conception of himself. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Brian Friel's virtuosity in composing the play becomes evident with his paradoxical use of invisibility to make the most obvious and profound portrayal of character.

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