

Spring 2014

## Eye for the Gap: Frenzy, Liberty, and the Nietzschean Chorus in Conor McPherson's *The Weir* and *Shining City*

Frances Krieg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd>



Part of the Celtic Studies Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, Modern Literature Commons, Performance Studies Commons, Philosophy Commons, Playwriting Commons, and the Reading and Language Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Krieg, Frances, "Eye for the Gap: Frenzy, Liberty, and the Nietzschean Chorus in Conor McPherson's *The Weir* and *Shining City*" (2014). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1071. <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1071>

This thesis (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies, Jack N. Averitt College of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

EYE FOR THE GAP: FRENZY, LIBERTY, AND THE NIETZSCHEAN CHORUS IN CONOR MCPHERSON'S *THE WEIR* AND *SHINING CITY*

by

FRANCES KRIEG

(Under the Direction of Dustin Anderson)

ABSTRACT

This study situates *The Weir* and *Shining City* by Conor McPherson as embodying elements of Dionysian aesthetics as elucidated by Friedrich Nietzsche. Working through the lenses of Samuel Beckett's linguistic philosophy and the premium of theater as established by Nietzsche, Artaud, and Brecht, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how McPherson pierces the boundaries of language in drama by establishing his audience as chorus. Background information on Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and McPherson's own comments on the plays are included with the research on the plays themselves. This work articulates the chorus itself but also the choral, musical quality of McPherson's work and its resulting empowerment for the spectator.

INDEX WORDS: Conor McPherson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Chorus, narrative, audience participation, Apollonian, Dionysus, language, drama, dialogue

EYE FOR THE GAP: FRENZY, LIBERTY, AND THE NIETZSCHEAN CHORUS IN CONOR MCPHERSON'S *THE WEIR* AND *SHINING CITY*

by

FRANCES KRIEG

B.A Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2006.

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

© 2014

FRANCES KRIEG

All Rights Reserved

EYE FOR THE GAP: FRENZY, LIBERTY, AND THE NIETZSCHEAN CHORUS IN CONOR MCPHERSON'S *THE WEIR* AND *SHINING CITY*

by

FRANCES KRIEG

Major Professor: Dustin Anderson

Committee: Joe Pellegrino

Howard Keeley

Electronic Version Approved

Spring 2014

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to say that without Dr. Dustin Anderson's faith in this project it never would have happened. Also Dr. David Dudley for his encouragement, and Dr. Keeley and Dr. Pellegrino, who have graciously agreed to be my readers. Thank You.

Frannie Krieg

March 13, 2014

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my children: Gail, Spencer, and Dimitri. I would also like to express my gratitude to my parents and cousin. Thank you for your patience, help, and laughter the last year. I love you very much.

Irish playwright Conor McPherson, whose 2013 work *The Night Alive* is currently being staged on Broadway, has in a relatively short time become an important part of the contemporary theater scene. In McPherson's attitude towards language and his achievement of unity between spectator and audience, he answers to Friedrich Nietzsche and Samuel Beckett, placing him in a reinvented Modernist tradition. His early plays, including *Rum and Vodka* and *St. Nicolas*, were angst-ridden yet truly mimetic monologues that received favorable critical reception, but it was not until 1997's *The Weir* that he broke through the stigma of an up-and-coming writer to become who Ben Brantley calls "the theater's most promising proponents of the great Irish storytelling tradition" (1).

McPherson's work is a collision of the prosaic and profound. For every cursory utterance in his scripts there is a portal to the intangible yet imperative subject of true communication. The intangibility lies at the heart of his drama. Art that is meant to touch the deepest parts of the human psyche, as Nietzsche articulates in *The Birth of Tragedy*, liberates the audience from the comfortable complacency that Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht sought to unhinge. Between friends, lovers, and enemies in McPherson's canon are echoes of love, hate, joy, and alienation. The reverberations of these universal facets forge a community with the audience that challenges the spectator to take an active role in the creative process, freeing the individual through the collective truths of the universal. This unification lies at the praxis of the Nietzschean aesthetic and the Brechtian determination that theater has a responsibility to the

spectator beyond entertainment for its own sake.<sup>1</sup> Anything that promotes a spectator as subservient to the work, hypnotizing them into passivity, is detrimental to society in ways that are not bound by the stage, and that carry over into other areas of life.

These universal facets of interaction are diffused to McPherson's audience through their very participation in his works. Dynamic interaction frees the audience, not in the sense of arbitrary interpretation, but instead points to an empowerment of the spectator through the feeling of unity. Baz Kershaw discusses the need for audience participation in his study of applause, noting that the theater is in currently in crisis mode. As he stipulates, the theater "has become increasingly irrelevant to communities...anyone wishing to reconnect performance...and community needs to understand how and why the audience has become disempowered" (4). This study's focus is to investigate how McPherson offers a solution to this disempowerment, and how he has established himself into dramatic tradition through his narrative technique.

Gerald Wood argues in *Conor McPherson: Imagining Mischief* that McPherson eschews traditional forms, or if he uses them it is for another purpose, such as irony, and does not embrace them "innocently or reflexively... [McPherson] is able to write with or without theatrical precedent. Creative mischief is always an option" (Wood 29). Wood is right to categorize McPherson's style as mischievous, however, I contend that he does look to precedent, that of the ancient chorus as deified by Friedrich Nietzsche, catapulting it into

---

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht's *The Modern Theater is the Epic Theater* called for audience freedom through the spectator's alienation from the actors with the idea that Western theater coddles the audience by making them so identify with the story that their reality is superseded. Because a play is ultimately a fabrication, to dwell in the make-believe promotes passivity.

modern times by its evolution from a select few voices to the truly democratic space of the audience itself. McPherson's use of the chorus is a way to overcome the limitations of language. In his work, he follows Nietzsche's admiration of how, in ancient theater, "Audience and chorus were never fundamentally set over against each other...all was one grand chorus...each spectator could imagine himself, in the fullness of seeing, as a chorist" (54). The ability to transcend the script and embrace the 'fullness of seeing' overcomes limitations in language that are themselves part of a continuing discourse. Nietzsche and Samuel Beckett, particularly, inform this conversation and provide insight into McPherson's project. Following theatrical precedent is not the apex of McPherson's aim; however, his manumission of the art echoes certain traditions, albeit ones that sought to legitimize audience response as integral to a work's success and relevancy.

This critique understands 'chorus' to be the drive of the story. The ancient chorus was a literal choir that propelled the story forward. In the absence of this, the success of the narrative of a play depends on the forward motion provided by plot, exposition, and structure. McPherson's chorus is the immediate, frenzied, and instinctual reactions on the part of the spectator that are pivotal in fulfillment of a tragic effect. The author's choral aesthetic discussed presently is two-fold. It can be seen in *The Weir's* structure and its premium on the female narrative. On a literal level, the spectator of *Shining City* must vocalize what its ellipses and pauses are expressing in order for the action to proceed.

McPherson's chosen vernacular is the one of the streets, the actions commonplace, the settings familiar, and the stories told in that vernacular are a "shimmering weave of the mundane and the ineffable" (Brantley 1). McPherson manages to portray the raw realities of

anguished lives within the confines of deceptively simple dialogue, set directions, and setting. In 2006's *Shining City* the majority of the action on the stage takes place in a therapist's office. The stories that are the impetus for the drama are told as recollections of the characters. As in *The Weir*, which takes place in a country pub, *Shining City* uses the story within a story motif to further what I propose is at the heart of McPherson's vision; an attempt to bridge the gap between storyteller and spectator. Both works, which will be the focus of this study, demonstrate not only a carrying on of tradition, as Brantley notes above, but an appropriation of tradition that dares to incorporate the fourth wall as an integral part of the dramatic process.

Having characters tell their stories is, on the surface, a way to bring past actions to bear on what is being acted out on stage. However, McPherson uses this technique as a stage in itself, a platform to have his characters interact both with the audience and with their own demons, the latter usually manifest in stories that involve ghosts. Pamela Renner notes how McPherson uses the supernatural as a way to communicate the guilt his characters feel over past actions. In his character's tendency towards "obsessive storytelling", they get a reprieve from self-condemnation through the audience. This reciprocal nature of the art/spectator relationship is created through using the stories of haunting in terms of the "energies of transgression" (Renner 35). In this way McPherson's scripts pierce the tableau that Brecht saw as maintaining theater as binding force rather than regurgitative platform. Correspondent to this is the understanding that the other worldly aspects of plot are secondary to McPherson's textural exposition of character.

Matt Wolf underscores the apparition at the end of *Shining City* as specifically a "coup de theater" (2). His position is that Mari's appearance is what will resonate with audiences more

than the play as a whole, but the final scene's shock value is less a parlor trick and more a culmination of audience interlude. The juxtaposition of internal anguish with external forces of the supernatural connects with audiences in a way that speaks to the trust McPherson places in his audience. The supernatural elements in the plays can be literal, as in the ghost of Mari, John's dead wife in *Shining City*, or, as in *The Weir*, the ghosts of regret at paths not taken, exemplified in Jack's story of a love lost and a life only half lived. The characters suffering in these plays are brought to bear in dialogic form, enabling a productive discourse between play and spectator. In his other works this is also apparent, whether vocalized in the monologue of *St. Nicholas*, or in the rough banter of *Port Authority*, tragedy is not alleviated but given validation and resonance in the audience.

This resonance is achieved with some deviation in style in each of his works, but his body of pieces suggests that McPherson is re-imagining Modernism for the post-modern age. The Modernist's effort to embrace myth and shun language comes full circle with post-moderns love of play and embrace of traditional form in unexpected ways. Language in the Modernist ethos is part of a futile endeavor to categorize every action and emotion in static borders. Myth gives a larger room in which to explore, as Eliot did, the fragmented marriage between act and description. Language depends upon a system in which the parameters are explained and drilled into us from the cradle, and therefore infuses itself into our psyche. Because of this, its value is not usually questioned outside of critical circles. Conor McPherson is the heir-apparent to the mistrust of language manifested in drama, for to lean on a faulty system to facilitate communication is comfortably complacent. Samuel Beckett, one of McPherson's fore fathers, spoke in *Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce* of trusting language as an exercise in futility, or the

equivalent to “the contemplation of a carefully folded ham sandwich” (1). Language is vital and can be beautiful in its own right, but its value does not exist in a vacuum. Its limitations are highlighted when it’s left to stand on its own, and its power is magnified when given the space to expand and contract. McPherson circumvents the limitations of language by assuaging the audience (or reader’s) natural desire to identify with the character by inviting the spectator to be a participant.<sup>2</sup> In order for his plays to reach us on a substantive level, we must surrender to his offer of participation.

McPherson depends, paradoxically, on the very weakness of the spoken word to speak to the spectator. The storytelling so prevalent in his works are ironically less something to listen to and more something to act upon. The audience is given agency by way of McPherson’s tendency to invite the audiences’ own stories to the stage. Brad Kent sees a commonality between the stories and the audience emotions that transcends a stupor-inducing manipulation on the part of the playwright. Utilizing Terry Eagleton’s understanding of the sentimental, Kent says that the audience is overcome by the “floodwaters” of the character’s narratives in *The Weir*. With the people in the pub, he argues, the audience “realiz[es] that just like the characters of the play, they too are haunted by loss and guilt” (Kent 37). Kent couches the audience’s role in terms of identification with the stories and the breaking down of binary between modernity and nostalgia. This breaking down speaks to the effect of unity desired by

---

<sup>2</sup> While the present study seeks to explore two works by McPherson’s as performance pieces first, the effect of invitation inherent in the stage productions are also present on an individual basis, as when the works are read as Closet-Drama.

both Artaud and Nietzsche, as McPherson uses narratives that are not simply digestible imagery, but a discourse between spectator and stage.

In *Shining City*, the conversations are punctuated with hesitant pauses framed so that the audience must project its own response to the playwright's call. The emotional scaffolding of *The Weir*, in which the audience must absorb each story in real time with the bar patrons, demonstrates McPherson's knack for using the Aristotelian unities of time and place in a transgressive way, a way of writing that invites participation rather than mirroring, placing a purchase on the unspoken. McPherson underscores the value of language in what it does not define, rather than what it articulates. This creates a communication between his audience and the characters that is comprised of the paradoxical situation that involves depending upon something that heretofore has eluded duty. In an early scene, Finbar and Jack's exchanging of seemingly harmless jibes at each other quickly opens the narrative back into the realm of storytelling. Between each story in the play are sparse colloquy that provide insight into past evenings at the bar and the personal history of the group. The terse language is substantive due not to words but inference:

Jack: 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?

Finbar: (Winks at Valerie): That's an eye for the gap. Exploit the weakness.

Jack: 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?

Finbar: Ah, now...Jaysus. (35)

In this brief encounter, the audience can understand two pivotal facets of the men's relationship without being told. First, Jack resents Finbar. Second, Finbar uses his higher socio-economic stature to swagger but is ultimately cowed by Jack within literally one line: "Ah...now Jaysus".

Beyond observing one's reflection in the experiences of McPherson's characters, the reciprocity exhibited in his canon fosters works of art that follow in the Nietzschean wake of the Dionysian aesthetic. The ebb and flow of human emotion and actions embodied by the chaos that ensued during the festivals celebrating Dionysus was and is emblematic of how tragedy is best achieved, according to Nietzsche's 1872 *Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche's theories on drama illuminate how McPherson demonstrates his affinity for the audience's role. The playwright thus uses the myth of Dionysus and Aristotelian tradition only as they are felicitous to his broader purpose. His recent comments on *The Night Alive* speak to this vision, to how a play can be as much about the characters on stage as well as off, and of the completeness that can be achieved in recognizing in this art form the big picture that transcends bifurcation. This picture, he notes during an interview with John Patrick Shanley soon after *The Night Alive* premiered, is "such a beautiful picture of human existence. What's really interesting is the darkness that surrounds the picture. I'm always trying to bring that darkness onto the stage." (1). McPherson's goal here is accomplished by presenting his stories in brief exchanges that do bring darkness forth, a darkness that the audience bring with them by default. The wall between audience and art is broken through McPherson's inventive take on philosophy and traditional dramatic form.

While the influence of Nietzsche's duality of the Apollonian/Dionysian aesthetic is apparent in McPherson's work, the legacy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century playwright and *philosophe* Antonin Artaud is seen in his writing as well. Although *Shining City* and *The Weir* are not prime examples of the shock and explicit terror that Artaud conceived as being essential to arouse spectators from what he saw as a stupor, their respective resonance with the audience exemplifies the "spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten" (Artaud 434). In *The Theater and its Double*, he sought to liberate the stage from what he observed as a stagnant existence whose only function is to enforce "an ineffectual torpor, in which all our faculties seem to be foundering" (435). Artaud argues that a new language must be present in the theater, a communication that is not replication or repetition, but a branch of symbols and signs that are demonstrative of "possibilities for extension beyond words" (438). McPherson's characters' expositions are brought to bear through stories told to others, and in turn to the audience. This tendency is not a matter of logistics, but lends to the system of audience response that forces an individual spectator out of the safe haven of observation and into the realm of chorus. The importance of the chorus, then, has transcended from necessity to the goal of a successful work: it is the impetus, the energy, and the call to which the audience answers. In this way, musicality foregrounds dialogue in the plays.

Looking back to Nietzsche, Artaud suggests that the way to free theater is to overcome "the obsession with the defined word which says everything ends in the withering of words" (441). The aesthetics of both philosophies suggest that music is the best way to get to the meat of things, to overcome the limitations of words and set the bar high for the communication between spectator and artist. As Nietzsche articulates "...music endows the tragic myth with a

convincing metaphysical significance, which the unsupported word and image could never achieve, and ...assures the spectator of supreme delight" (BOT 126).

McPherson's metaphysical apparatus primarily take the form of ghosts, which are used both as symbol of and portal to the unspeakable and unnamable. As the afterlife is our perennial unknown, it is a neutral and universal base in the playwright's alchemy of narrative. Exemplified, for example, by John's recollection of his last argument with his wife and Jack's last tale, the addition of the more pungent and accessible themes of temporal loss and regret to the existence of ghosts circumvents usual pedestrian descriptions of the uncanny. Celia Wren alludes to this when she points out that while the tales of *The Weir* are "twenty-four carat unnerving" they are simultaneously rife with certain cliché, including the "classically spooky elements like strange knockings, a Ouija board, a cemetery, etc." (2). However authentic the ghost stories are, the use of such classic symbols of the afterlife suggests that this element is not an end in itself. McPherson does not fall into the horror genre, but uses the ghost story as a deliberate tribute to the metaphysical element of drama that is brought about during performance, something outside both the stage and seats.

In *Shining City* and *The Weir*, the words that relate the supernatural tales are supported by the audience, resulting in an upending of the weakness inherent in both language and image when they are left on their own. When the ghost stories of *The Weir* are singled out, or if John's fateful text messages are understood strictly hermeneutically, the result is mundane. The receiver of performance or text must give something of himself or herself to the work, and in

this comes the freedom that both Nietzsche and Artaud wished for tragedy. This freedom comes through the power of music.

McPherson's appreciation for the metaphysical aspects of music can be traced as part of his linguistic approach. In his work, notes of fear, ambivalence, and regret are always played in the major key. In a recent interview at University College Dublin, McPherson acknowledged that he never wanted to be a playwright, but like a plethora of young boys, he wanted to be in a band. A Beatles film fest decided once and for all that he wanted to learn guitar, and from then on music was a central passion of his. He relates jokingly how his parents suggested college as a way to have free time for practicing with his band, and he obliged, studying English, Psychology, and getting his MA in Philosophy. These disciplines place a common premium on narrative, and exposed McPherson to the myriad way one can express thought. The autobiographical anecdotes McPherson shares in this interview would be taken at best save for how he relates to the interviewer his preference for notes over lyrics, for music over language: "I was never really one for lyrics, as a writer...I was never into Bob Dylan, because to me it was all about endless verses, but I was always much more into the music, ironically". Music forces its listener to feel whatever it's trying to express, and the mind and its attendant, language, cannot get in the way. McPherson is essentially arguing that while Dylan's verses are amazing, *It's All Over Now, Baby Blue* is just as moving without the words. Equally ironic to his self-revelation is how the musicality of his own work, and the choral energy so prevalent in *Shining City* and *The Weir*, lies in the gaps of language, and achieves, essentially, music without lyrics. His comments echo what Artaud determines to be, in the end, the most important part of a performance: its lyricism. The difference between lyrics and lyricism is that the latter is a bridge for meaning

whereas lyrics are its foundation. When a reader and text or when a spectator and audience function as one, the decorative façade of superfluous language and condescending melodrama is shorn. What is left is a pure emotion and transcendent dialogue that establishes drama as a virile art, whose progeny is a communion between the world and the stage.

Conor McPherson regularly articulates his attitude towards language, and how words cannot be relied upon to bear the sole burden of human communication. In *Shining City* the words are scaffolding, to borrow Harold Pinter's phrase, around which meaning can be built. In a 2006 interview with *The Guardian*, McPherson underscores the constant vacillation between meaning and intent with his comments on the nature of language itself, or more specifically, its failure. He suggests that language both saves and dooms us. We depend on it for so much, and our assumptions about our successes on a daily basis cause grief and confusion because our "thoughts are always trailing around after our appetites, justifying them with language; it's tragic and hilarious" (Costa 1). In *Shining City*, the language between characters fails. In *The Weir*, language between the bar patrons is limited to asking about the next round and general conversation. The dialogue in that play is between characters and audience. The failure of language becomes a tangible character in itself, and the audience that character's voice. This character's exposition takes place in the nodding of understanding to Neasa's anguish, the reciprocation to John's ambivalence to his marriage, and the sorrow shared with Valerie in her grief.

An interpretation of the spectator as voice in McPherson's work is informed a good deal by Beckett. Samuel Beckett's appropriation of language as a necessary evil is relevant to our understanding of *Shining City* and *The Weir*. McPherson takes on Beckett's tradition of

embracing the dual nature of language in both its most impotent and tyrannical forms. In her 1980 study of Beckett's philosophy, Linda Ben Zvi elucidates that Beckett recognized that human communication is shackled by the very forms that language is supposed to clarify and make meaningful.<sup>3</sup> However slight the chance, language is then the only chance that connections can be made through utterances. Beckett's characters "stand at the beginning with the word; and try as they may, they can never climb the ladder to linguistic freedom" (187). Ideally, this ladder transcends the boundaries of logos. Yet while attempting to define the unspeakable essence of thoughts and emotions we discover that while broken we climb on anyway. Ben-Zvi discusses Beckett's novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, particularly the character of author Belacqua Shuah as articulating most succinctly Beckett's own attitude toward language. Belacqua's stance, thinly veiling that of Beckett's, is that "The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement, between the...seasons of words, the miracle, the memory, of an unspeakable trajectory" (Beckett 186). Beckett's line of reasoning here looks ahead to McPherson's dialogue. It is in the interval of silence that the loudest sound is heard, and in this absence lies the audience's overturning of language. This overturning is an active and evolving argument to the menace of words for their own sake. Language becomes the servant to the whims, the inner being of those that use it for anything other than day to day survival. To rely on it in a creative process as the Alpha-Omega of presentation, as a painter would his brush and canvas, is to do both artist and spectator a huge disservice.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ben Zvi's 1980 study was emblematic of Beckett criticism in the years soon before McPherson began university. Anthony Uhlmann is currently at the forefront of Beckett scholarship; see his book *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (2007).

Nietzsche articulates this disservice in *Birth of Tragedy* within the framework of Greek tragedy as in Attic drama “their heroes seem to us always more superficial in their speeches than in their action: the myth, we might say, never finds an adequate objective correlative in the spoken word” (103). While the earlier passage suggests that Beckett did see hope in the interval, Nietzsche sought to explain just what it can be in that interval that made words, that rickety ladder, worth attempting. For him, the chorus is what fulfills the emptiness. Music embodies for Nietzsche what for Beckett, according to Asphasia Velissariou’s study of language in *Waiting for Godot*, was the “physical experience of words as a natural and random flow [that] obliterates the audiences’...awareness that speech on stage [is] part of a carefully structured text” (1). The structure of a work and the words that facilitate it are necessary. It is not random, yet it achieves the effect of audience freedom through the very structure that ostensibly a “natural and random flow” would hinder. When McPherson decides to place Valerie’s tale as the penultimate story, as discussed later, he is demonstrating that he is aware of how using the structure is not an absence of Nietzsche’s “orgiastic abandon” but instead an affirmation of its accomplishment. Beckett incorporates this binary pull between structure and freedom further in *Texts for Nothing* when he acknowledges, grudgingly, the word’s potential for great power: “That’s right wordshit, bury me avalanche, and let there be no more talk of any creature...with words, with misery, misery. Which no sooner said Ah says I, punctually, if only I could say” (137). Conor McPherson’s works are reflective of Nietzschean abandon and Beckett’s “avalanche”. He heralds a shift to an interactive paradigm in drama that posits a triumvirate of creator, created, and observer.

The audience intervenes in the play's conversations as a chorus would in ancient drama, exercising its duty as nursemaid to the wild babe of language. The language of *Shining City*, in particular, invites the audience to intervene. Such intervention underscores the fact that instinct rather than speech becomes the primal path between performer/character and audience. The nebulous quality of meaning gleaned from the relatively low reserves of language is something inherent in the struggle between intent and result, from utterance to cognition. McPherson was alluding to this when in the same interview he called human beings "animals". As we like to think of spoken language as an infallible instrument, and one that can be played correctly at will, our tendency is to dismiss instinct as an inferior element. The evolution of meaning garnished from the exchanges between characters in *Shining City*, and the stories of *The Weir* are empowered by the responsibility that the audience undertakes.

Clare Wallace points to this when she suggests that in McPherson's body of work, the lack of linear action and chain of causality contribute to "the destabilization of any comfortable moral outcomes" (3). Wallace discusses McPherson's narrative style as sitting within a Brechtian construct, in that through the limited stage direction and his tendency towards monologue, he upsets traditional notions of theater and "complicates the relationship between spectator and character" (3). This complication is precisely what forms the narrative and gives the plays their power. Rather than differentiating between observed and observer, McPherson compels the audience to be involved to such a degree that without them, the work is incomplete. In this sense, *Shining City* and *The Weir* are self-reflexive in their portrayals of tragedy, and yet not diminutive of its substance. Within this dichotomy lies the true tragedy, for when the observer plays the part of the chorus, he or she is bearing not only the burden of

Valerie's haunted mother or John's guilt-obsessed husband of *The Weir* and *Shining City*, respectively, they are actively rectifying the unutterable intervals with themselves.

The problems and fears that haunt the interactions of all the characters in these works are largely due to their perpetual inability to transform thing into word. Ian's anger towards himself is projected onto Neasa, and he uses her past infidelity to justify his current malaise within their relationship. The spectator is made aware of how his misery is largely brought on by his own fear, yet to Neasa Ian is vague and defensive to the point of cruelty. The audience is able to fill this void, and the experience of observer is erased, placing the audience's responsibility as no less than as a chorus, answering the unspoken. These collective answers correspond to the Dionysian quality with which Nietzsche sought to crumble the Socratic rationalism he saw as corrosive to human expression. By exercising its right as chorus, the audience becomes the "music [that] offers us a universal mirror of the world will: every particular incident refracted in that mirror is enlarged into the image of a permanent truth" (105). The "world will", as manifested in art, is the progeny of a catholic aesthetic vision and the courage to demonstrate that vision in any text. Suffering and confusion, as well as joy, lie on the spectrum of the human condition and is not limited by language. The audience's murmur becomes louder as a vision in that mirror than the acts themselves, whether Ian's accusations or John's meandering confessions. Without our silently vocalizing what the characters say in *Shining City*, the effect would be not tragedy, but melodrama. The latter's aim is to manipulate the emotions, to invoke a pre-determined reaction. Its result is achieved through self-contained artifice, rather than a dynamic mimetic. *The Weir's* presentation as a bar- cum- theater invites the observer to pull up a chair and draw a pint. The importance of these works lie not in their dialogue but in their

determined hesitance to take over the conversation. Rather than presenting action as one might do a crime scene, McPherson's forensics underscore the neglect that language guiltily perpetrates against communication.

A cursory glance at the tension between the Dionysian and Apollonian aesthetic would suggest a false binary relationship. The philosopher himself took care to point out that it is the combination of each element that presents art that represents humanity's folly with justice. As the Dionysian refers to the chaotic, frenzied, and primitive energies, the Apollonian encompasses serene, reasonable, and contemplative aspects. It may be easy to classify one work or another as falling distinctly into a category, but to assign a label to one while denying the other leaves a static and puerile aftertaste. Conor McPherson's works operate within a schema that supposes and prefers a constant tension between those two forces and depends on the audience to enable that tension.

*Shining City* and *The Weir* operate mainly in the Dionysian preference for joy and agony, desire and frenzy, and above all the Spirit of Music, yet that preference is qualified by dues paid to Apollo. By legislating the audience as an equal and active force in his own creativity, McPherson challenges complacency on the part of artists and audience. Complacent observation in our current hyper-steaming meta data lives is detrimental to art and its purpose. The very structure of contemporary communication feigns the communion that presumably it is meant to forward. John's reluctance to erase Vivien's text messages is emblematic of how the medium has usurped the message. By virtue of its abundance, this structure of representation of life and art is reductive and demeaning. Beckett's prophetic title of *Texts for Nothing* is appropriate not just in the word 'texts' but in its overall charge of verbiage in service to itself,

uttered or written within a stratification of device over essence. The celebration of speed and quantity is in service to power, namely to the potential for categorizing a given population and the resulting benefits to the electable and the marketable. The complacency inherent to living a life for display (representation over substance) is an acquiescence to power that inhibits individualism, and pigeonholes art to product. In its systematic undermining of passivity, McPherson's vision presents a parallel to Nietzsche's overarching purpose, to fight against the current of stagnancy. In part, Nietzsche's privileging of music was directed by what he was observing in Germany at the time he wrote *Birth of Tragedy*. He saw contemporary art as falling into a Socratic rabbit-hole, and sought to change direction of a trajectory that he felt would irrevocably damage German culture.

Nietzsche has become, in the eyes of century that followed, a cult figure, situated chronologically between nineteenth-century Romantics and the Modernist period. His philosophy could never be called singular in nature; indeed, it is his work's potential for eternal interpretation that has proved to be its strongest appeal. Everyone, it seems, wants a piece of him. Much of Nietzsche has been packaged in quotations and post-modern theory, as both Mark Pizzato and James Porter have elucidated in recent reflections on *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Genealogy of Morals*. Central to Nietzschean aesthetics is a faith in the observer as arbiter of the value of what it is that is observed. In this way the spectator is the catalyst for transcendence through a work of art. In the Dionysian chorus is freedom for expression and the aid necessary for that expression. The choral energy of a work is manifest in its allusion to the primacy of the observer, and in the assumption that the spectator liberates the form (play, painting) from the confinement of representation only. The benefit of this liberation is felt

beyond the 'arts' and shifts power away from a tower to terra firma. As Nietzsche saw centers of political and religious power as responsible for a complacent populace, so he elucidated the need in *The Birth of Tragedy* to reject creative stagnancy.

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, he proposed that morality is a primrose path for followers of all religions, especially Christianity, to whose name Nietzsche has become anathema. His fervor on this front suggests an overly reactionary element, for morality was obviously of foremost importance to him. The rhetoric against Christianity was mostly directed towards its organizational basis as bastion of money and power, a temple that has lost its sheen and became irrelevant, archaic, and therefore dangerous. He pondered that the attitudes of Christian teaching were in effect constructed from cultural norms rather than fundamental truths; and his idea that "it is indecent to be a Christian today" (qtd. Ratner 71) so inflamed American religious leaders of all denominations that it achieved exactly what he wanted, a breaking down of the sacred cows of religious power by tilting the axis from Mt. Olympus to Gethsemane, a transition from the masses adhering to put upon directives to the tortuous pangs of doubt that he saw as necessary to break into the modern age prepared and with eyes open. His works enabled pulpit and pew to instigate a new vocabulary for talking about the way of the universe, for whether he was reviled or adored, he engaged his audience with the daring to talk about what had up until then been considered only the province of priests and professors. By challenging the bedrock upon which Christian theology and institutional bravado were built, the culture of belief was arguably given new vigor by the tumult he caused in its magma (Ratner 72). The aspect of his philosophy that involves upsetting the status quo in

geopolitical and religious power correlates with the aesthetic premises under which McPherson is operating.

Before Nietzsche wrote away Christian teachings and brought his professedly Atheist views into the intellectual mainstream, he focused on the aesthetic side of human expression. For him, art had a fundamental role in society: a duty to unify. He spoke of its most serious task as a duty “to deliver the eye from the horror of night, to redeem us by virtue of the healing balm of illusion” (118). He established early his preoccupation with how power operates and manipulates this balm, but before the emphasis was placed upon religious power, his seminal *The Birth of Tragedy* took to task the way that art implants itself on the human psyche, and to what ends. This work was his first, and although he later disavowed some of its tenets as examples of “every conceivable thought of adolescence...terribly diffuse and full of unpalatable ferment” it stands as an invaluable resource for trying to encapsulate just what art is, and if it is great art, then what makes it so (5). His later efforts categorically questioned the foundations of modern thought, and in hindsight he sees the same force of antagonism as a beautiful and mischievous imp that unhinges humanity from the hunched dusty version of itself, a self bound by the rational world, something that its very existence depends on its anachronism:

“...my vital instincts turned against ethics and focused on a radical counter-doctrine, slanted aesthetically, to oppose the Christian libel on life. But it still wanted a name. Being a philologist, that is to say a man of words, I christened it rather arbitrarily-for who can tell the real name of the Antichrist? With the name of a Greek god, Dionysos” (BOT 11).

In Nietzsche's equivalency between the anti-Christ and Dionysus is an argument for the need to oppose established, comfortable, and culturally engrained stagnation in drama, something that Artaud furthered and McPherson is currently writing against.

James Porter argues in *The Invention of Dionysos* that a common and misplaced consensus is that Nietzsche's early preoccupation with aesthetic had more to do with his idolization of Wagner than with genuine philosophical inquiry. Rather than the product of a glorified school-boy crush, Porter sees *The Birth of Tragedy* as the first in a succession of texts that presented a unified stance on not only aesthetics but morality and meta-physics as well. Porter's suggestion that Nietzsche was a "sly mythographer" demonstrates how the philosopher was a perpetrator of the very same myths he so fervently sought to tear down (Porter 131). With this assertion in mind, this thesis understands Dionysian tendencies to be two-sided, rather than a strict point of reference for opposing the Apollonian and Socratic worldviews.

The naming of a force that cannot be named, an entity that exists outside of the self and art is at the heart of Nietzsche's creative philosophy. A troubled man haunted by what James Miller called the philosophers personal daemon, Nietzsche understood the contemporary expression of human experience in art as fulfilling a personal quest, or rather the constant striving to find value in the quest itself. He witnessed in his time artistic endeavor in service to power instead to the individual. Nietzsche was enamored of Emerson's secular humanism, as his overflow of marginalia in *Nature* attests. For Nietzsche, the chorus was the purest expression of pain. As such, it was the tragedy in itself, or as he called it, the thing-in-itself that

“...remains the highest expression of nature, and, like nature, utters in its enthusiasm oracular words of wisdom. Being compassionate as well as wise, it proclaims a truth that issues from the heart of the world” (57).”

Nietzsche’s influence is felt just as his defining work on art, *The Birth of Tragedy*, proposes that tragedy is best achieved. That is, his scope reaches from the inside of almost every discipline, yet without the practitioners of that discipline realizing it. Much as music, he wrote, was what diffused tragedy in its purest form to the audience, so do his ideas and even persona infiltrate into religion, philosophy, psychology, and even marketing. Pop and academic culture alike is under his shadow, whether overtly or covertly. His influence is not that of an oracle at Delphi, but rather a street urchin who imperceptibly finds his way into every mansion and hovel, insinuating a knowing presence regarding every misdeed, fable, and occupant in town. Nietzsche, I contend, is the black oil of philosophy, cluttering the eyeballs of everyone from *philosophes* to focus groups to Hollywood. Artistic expression has thus internalized his views rather than come to showcase them consciously. Nietzsche is not easily worn on one’s shirtsleeves.

In this adaptive sense is the way that *The Weir* and *Shining City* Conor McPherson has created a chorus of a willing audience, if not one that is even aware that it is fulfilling a primal aesthetic role. Nietzsche disposes of the idea of a singular hero dispensing wisdom into a receptacle of an audience, as a professor would lecture to students. His accounting of the moral hierarchy that he saw as being the *raison de etre* of most drama is torn asunder when the choral energy is felt and allowed to flourish. His preference of the Dionysian over Apollonian

sensibility dictates that in order to move forward and fulfill the true meaning of *drama* (Greek for to act, to do), everything in tragedy must become something else. A worthwhile tragedy is one that is always alive and moving. Paradoxically, this involves the death of the subject, or a total surrender of the self to tragedy to allow a “strange union of the visible and non-visible... [A] sacrifice of appearances” (Denny 3). To rely on a single primal oracle to tell our story is tantamount to death, and in the chorus the something that cannot be named is brought to fruition. The chaos occurring between and within characters as opposed to a static, unilaterally based character or event that hold power over our emotions and guarantees a response- this is sad, so you must CRY- is how we get back to a natural, flowing state that heralds the tragedy in our lives, on the page or the stage. McPherson’s shaping of the stories of *The Weir* emboldens the audience towards the liberating final tale of Jack, whose accessible story of regret is made more personal by the placing of Valerie’s visceral story first. The chorus, then, is both the catalyst for the audience’s emotional reaction and participation in a drama and its weir, steering the action to an inevitable conclusion.

Nietzsche’s view of true tragedy as something that cannot be held and boxed in, something that is rationalized in the Socratic style of “complacent acquiescence” (BOT 120), is embedded in the chorus. In this way, all attempts to label and dictate steer away from what is truly tragic, and therefore steer away from what is human. Categorizing horror, beauty, and loss is a means to tame their beautiful and tempestuous presence in our lives. To format the uncontrollable forces of life and nature, as a weir does by changing water to electric power, requires a hubris in the state of man that the Dionysian aesthetic understands to be false. The Apollonian aesthetic relies on the form, the representation, and as such relies on language alone to bring

forth tragedy. This dependency is the most fertile ground for complacency. Language lies. People lie, too, but a tragic lie, an untruth that injures, is usually one that is not done of malice but out of the human obsession for understanding. Nietzsche presents man in the Apollonian sense as a hunched, dusty version of his true self, whether pouring over parchment or the modern equivalent of pining over Pinterest, struggling to define the actions of the universe. Tragedy in its purest form stands against our rational selves and speaks to the animal within us, that goat-man or woman whose song makes us roll down the window and cruise. It does not attempt to define, because in definition we tame, and as Adam categorized the animals in Genesis so have all his children fought to categorize each event and each other. Music, and the spirit thereof, is 'the only pure and purifying flame, towards which and away from which all things move... All that is now called culture, education, civilization, will one day have to appear before the incorruptible judge, Dionysos.'" (Nietzsche 120).

Nietzsche's theories on tragedy are a way to engage with drama particularly because they are enshrouded in mythical origins, proving a paradoxically democratic opportunity. I say "paradoxically" because rhapsodizing on how and if a play works has been regulated to the dustbin of academia, of which this study can fairly said to be apart. Eliot, the high priest of modernism, used the chorus overtly in his *Murder in the Cathedral* and thereby in that instance cast it well within the realms of his often untouchably allusive corpus. Eliot's chorus is an obvious take on those of Antiquity, but for McPherson the non-theatricality of the chorus functions as its greatest asset. Linda Leavell suggests that Nietzsche had a profound influence on the ritualistic nature of Eliot's drama. Her study highlights how his appropriation of the chorus was a way to pioneer a pattern of involvement for the spectator. Eliot's chorus was a literal

choir, differing logistically from McPherson's. As Eliot's version was contained within the work, McPherson's is heard through palatable interactivity. However, both playwrights prize unity as not the result, but the goal, of art. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot endeavored to impose ancient myth upon a fragmented post-war society in order to support cultural unification (113). This strategy places Eliot's use of chorus in line with both Nietzsche and McPherson, suggesting that despite changing form, the power of the chorus is timeless. Leavell's assertion of Eliot's artistic purpose overshadows the criticism that many of his works are inaccessible. Correspondingly, I would add that like McPherson, Eliot exploited obscurity for a higher goal. As both playwrights demonstrate affinity with language and myth, respectively, they also acknowledge their fallibility.

McPherson's comments in *The Guardian* about our thoughts being secondary to our appetites are informed by a denial of the tyranny of so called wisdom. Nietzsche ultimately posits the tragic chorus as superior to the action of the play itself because, in essence, it came *first*. It is with the chorus that the audience is "able to perceive with utter...clarity the motions of the will, the struggle of motives, and the mounting current of passions" (Nietzsche 131) Our continually changing reactions to the ellipses in *Shining City* and the unspoken truths of *The Weir* form a silent and Dionysian dynamic of call and response, of ebb and flow of choral energy that stands as a prime example of the Nietzschean privileging of the chorus as source of tragedy and "purifying flame". We the audience walk into the theater with subjective selves, but also in a Jungian sense, collective way of reacting to situations. McPherson exercises the Dionysian sensibility in his prowess with dialogue and more importantly with what he leaves out. The audience does not have to have lost a wife, as John does in *Shining City*, nor have suffered the

same heartache that Valerie recounts in *The Weir*, to unite with tragedy. The characters' pain and confusion are unavoidable states of being human. The audience does not need the characters to tell every nuance and unutterable emotion that will propel the story forward. The audience assumes this job instead through the sparse dialogue. Just as for Nietzsche the chorus came first, so do our individual/collective states bleed into the play itself, and McPherson steps aside and allows that, if not consciously welcomes it to make the drama whole. Before we pick up the script or sit in the dark theater, we have the capability to empathize with and take pleasure in the characters. The propensity for community and compassion exists outside of art, while they may be in various stages of dormancy at a given time. Therefore true tragedy does not dictate a community, but fosters its emancipation.

Some critics have noted the dialogue in McPherson's world as embodying a negative worldview of the speakers and representing limitations in the character's psyches. In his 2005 study *Ireland of Two Minds: Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson*, Nicholas Grene suggests that McPherson's dialogue, while true to colloquial speech, is "a convincingly broken demotic, [with] the pauses and silences, the non-signifying noises of ah's and mm's and 'yeahs' as important as the actual dialogue" (8). Kevin Wallace sees the conversations in *Shining City* as demonstrative of the impotence in the emotional lives of the male characters, and classifies them as "hobbled by redundant, formulaic phrasing" (Wallace 2103). I posit that their loss in communication is our gain for appreciation of the play and the achievement of tragedy within the Nietzschean tragic framework. McPherson's awareness of and reverence for the limitations of language that he demonstrates through his dialogue and set directions expect us to fill in his Pinteresque ellipses not only in speech but within the plot. *The Weir's* Valerie's back story

surrounding her breakdown before her move to the country is only hinted at until she tells her tale. *Shining City's* Mari only exists in the voice of John until the audience finally "sees" her. An interesting anthropological experiment could involve watching the audience watch the play. Reading faces, listening to sighs, and monitoring uncomfortable leg crossings would give insight into how the physical manifestation of our reactions pursue the action, just as our thoughts "trail our appetites" (Costa 1).

Both *The Weir* and *Shining City* are plays that observe the classical unity of place. The setting remains the same throughout both dramas, that of Ian's office and the country pub, respectively. The present-day action, during which the audience observes the characters, borders on the banal. It is in the conversations and recollections that the climax is reached and the tragedy achieved. The further into each play the audience goes, the more intense the action becomes, albeit the action as recalled by the characters. *The Weir's* narratives, however, exemplify their choral quality in how they are arranged as well. The five stories build upon each other, as Ben Brantley and others have noted, but they also enable one another. Kerrane posits that this gives the play its "structural elegance", acknowledging that the intensity of Valerie's story is made all the more so by the three that precede it (111). The buildup of narrative intensity reflects and contributes to its choral quality, as all stories and characters form a harmonious tone of shared pain and anguish, and the most poignant situation that of the female character. As a reverse Bacchanalia, her frenzy is one of grief rather than revelry, and her fellow non-revelers are embodied in the audience, walking and singing with her to the frenzied temple of Dionysian tragedy. *The Weir's* chorus, led by Valerie and her tale of woe, lead back to the "heart of the world" (BOT 57), which is synonymous with the heart of tragedy.

While McPherson guides the ebb and flow of tragic forces as a weir does water, we are reminded of the Apollonian tension primarily in *The Weir*. The narratives of loss are timeless tales whose forms stand as an Apollonian model that becomes prey to the forces of Dionysus. The audience receives a narrative construct that mimics reality and then in that reality lies the Dionysian element of the chorus. These elements are in the vein of what Nietzsche explained as the Apollonian “dream-state, in which the daylight world is veiled and a new world-clearer, more comprehensible...and at the same time more shadowy” has come into view (58). This world is the realm of the image, the representation of a very specific place and time. It is a singular idea that one thing--a face, object, person-- is complete in and of itself, that its essence is confined to its representation and its subjective meaning limited to a gaze. As an archeologist would gain specific knowledge from a particular artifact, this realm assumes equality between the substance of art and its discovery; it is looking at Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* as simply a picture of a lady with long hair.

Representation in an Apollonian context is underscored initially in the image, which takes precedence in *The Weir's* stage directions. The scene of the bar is set very specifically: the movement to the fireplace for Jack's story is significant to the ending. Most telling is the detailed description of the wall: “on the wall, back, are some old black and white photographs; a ruined abbey; people posing near a newly constructed ESB weir; a town in a cove with mountains around it” (McPherson 7). These literal images, pictures, determine two prevalent metaphors in the work: the weir and the abbey.

The ruined abbey speaks to patron's crumbling stories, stories that in their respective ways point to something sacred that has been violated. For hapless Jim, the dual expectations of

prosperity and marriage are all but snuffed out due to his own shiftlessness and the fact that he is taking care of his sick mother. Finbar demonstrates that even material success and its cousin, brash swagger, cannot get a purchase on his own insecurities. In Brendan, who never tells a tale himself but whose personal situation is related in the very beginning and in the interim between stories, the sacred duality of tradition and the land serve only to enrich his sisters. As he tells Jack "I know they're looking at it. All they see is new cars for the hubbies, you know?" (9). Valerie's abbey is the most heart-wrenching to see crumble, as hers is the one that houses parental love, loss, and of course her own sanity. Unlike Valerie, the men's pain is disproportionately due to their lack of action, and their paralysis at taking it. Karen Fricker looks at this as part of their failure to assume certain cultural expectations of material wealth and familial obligations. In her view, they are "trapped by their own self-awareness, too weak to be good in their lives but smart enough to know how bad they are" (89). It is Jack's crumbling institution of the self, manifest in a life cobbled together from the fragments of a reckless decision in his youth that offers the most communion with the audience: "Breaking the poor girl's heart. Ah, you get older and look back on why you did things, you see a lot of the time, there wasn't a reason. You do a lot of things out of pure cussedness" (65).

The weir itself, as title and symbol, operates as metaphor for something that manipulates a force larger and more potent than itself, much as the characters are wrestling with the immense loneliness made palpable with their stories. Wood notes that the weir is "reflect[ing] an undercurrent of self-revaluation and hidden motives" (47). The weir is a man-made contraption meant to contain something that was not created to be contained. It is an object that exists solely to circumvent nature's audacity at wanting to put water wherever it pleases.

In this it is a symbol of Apollonian categorization and order. Conversely, the water ushers a fierce and unwieldy sensibility that mocks the very order that it has, in the end, the power to destroy. By choosing this as the central image, McPherson suggests that while natural instinct, like water, is immeasurably strong, a structure can guide that instinct to desired ends. As he explains soon after *The Weir's* premier: "On one side... [it] is quite calm, and on the other side water is being squeezed through...the play is about a breakthrough, lots under the surface coming out" (qtd Wood 48). The end is an experience of the tragic for the audience and characters alike. In this sense, *The Weir's* symbolism is self-reflexive. It exists as a way to dissect one of the play's central tensions, that between the 'real' and the supernatural. It also suggests that very tension's futility. Like the abbey, the 'newly constructed' weir will one day no longer serve its purpose, and will crumble into or be overgrown by the earth. All that will be left are the pictures on the wall, and the potential for five people to come together on a windy night and direct their sorrow to their will.

This duality between ruin and rumination is relevant to McPherson's linguistic project. Like language, the images on which he places a directorial premium articulates how we must use what we have, even if it is something that has proved fallible and finite. To attempt to transcend the desolation that his characters are experiencing and that the audience can respond to, McPherson highlights that despite our trust in structures and contraption, they most likely will fail us. This tacit acknowledgement gives Finbar's later sarcastic comment "...yeah. That's why all them photographs are fake. I had them done years ago to fool Valerie, tonight" a broader implication (McPherson 27). The idea that the pictures themselves cannot

be trusted any more than the abbey lasts or the weir can always keep the water flowing where it is told to go, underscores that hope lies in the observer rather than the observed.

The imagery of the weir and abbey are symbolic on different levels, but their very presence indicates the possibility of their overthrow. As Ned Denny offers in *The Spirit of Music in Art*, “what’s important is that in the dream world the Apollonian images are used to represent the unpicturable force of Dionysus, that the fatal surge of Dionysian music leads to the images’ dissolution” (3). Under the photographs is where the surge occurs, through the connection between the five characters, whose interaction with each other reminds Jack Kroll of a “master quintet of musicians. When they embrace at the curtain call, you feel your own shoulders encircled and warmed” (2). While *The Weir* upholds the Apollonian aesthetic through key images, the overcoming of those images limitation is due to its Dionysian choral energy, a way to rise above the ruins.

The chorus functions in both a practical and metaphysical way, and operates as such in *The Weir* and *Shining City*. Pragmatically the chorus serves a purpose much like subtitles, a way for those who don’t speak the language to understand the play. The chorus enunciates what cannot be gleaned from the subtleties of human expression by, in effect, spelling it out for the audience. The other way in which the chorus operates, and what is relevant for our purposes here, is the degree to which the chorus serves as a bridge between the said and the not said. Harold Pinter, the master of ellipsed dialogue, made use of the not “saids” within his works for, arguably, the purposes of ambiguity. McPherson, on the other hand, brings to bear the passionate desire to tell a story and unites it with the admission that his very language is inadequate, as this excerpt from the end of Valerie’s tale highlights:

Valerie: ... I think Daniel was. I don't know if he actually, blamed me, there was nothing I could do. But he became very busy in his work. Just. Keeping himself...em. But I was, you know, I was more, just I really didn't know what I was doing. Just walking around, wanting too...Sitting in the house, with Daniel's mother, fussing around the place. (McPherson 56)

The infusion of subjectivity required to complete Valerie's thoughts does not dictate reaction on the part of the audience. Rather, the offering here is one of community with a character's sorrow, not a reflection of the spectator's experience. Brecht's call for giving the audience back its dignity is answered in McPherson's emphasis on the inadequacy of scripted despair and the favoring of a unifying ellipses. His remedy for the inadequacy complements Nietzsche's idea of how true tragedy is achieved: through the chorus. Nietzsche equates the ancient chorus with being the very foundation, if not the cause of, tragedy. In music, he argues, humanity has found what is at the very essence of all things, including and especially drama. The philosopher never explains what form the chorus must take to fulfill this ambition, but it is not the choreography of a dramatic work that interests him but whether or not it gets above our fruitless seeking in art of representation –especially in the plastic arts-- and rests, rather, at the very heart of things. For him, this was possible only through the chorus, and he holds Euripides as the best example of a dramatist who understands this, as he:

“Perceived in every line...something quite incommensurable: a certain deceptive clarity and, together with it, a mysterious depth, an infinite background. The clearest figure trailed after it a comet's tail which seemed to point to something...that could not be wholly elucidated. A similar twilight seemed to invest the very structure of drama, especially the function of the chorus” (McPherson 75).

The choral aspect functions differently in *The Weir* and *Shining City*. *The Weir* expresses a Dionysian sensibility mainly through the weir-like guidance by the character of Valerie. The chorus is an internal energy within the tales themselves and their arrangement. *Shining City's* chorus exists paradoxically in more of the ancient sense of plot advancement, only it is the audience that is achieving the notes. Both works achieve the same end: a united catharsis that democratizes the audience by giving them a role and implicit recognition in the culmination of tragedy. *The Weir's* choral quality lies within its characters, in their self-sustaining stage within a stage. While they speak to each other, the effect on the other characters is shared by the audience. The bar itself both separates its patrons and brings them together, just as the stage divides and unites. In the dualities of both form and content and purpose and project, this play serves Nietzsche's Dionysian ideal by allowing the Apollonian (the energy of the image, representation, and repetition) to be superseded by the strength of the female qualities of nurturing, desire, and the creation of a place of open discourse for feeling one's way in the unknown.

Discussion of the Apollonian - Dionysian duality has been discussed in many contexts. It has become synonymous, in some sense, with the tension between reason and passion, and between body and mind. While these binaries are simplistic, they exemplify how Nietzsche's aesthetic treatise has become engrained in cultural criticism for the past century (Pizzato 78). The chorus for Nietzsche was not a convenience but the essence of all tragedy. It was not, according to Pizzato, a mere portion of the triad of stage, chorus, and spectator, but rather was the only spectator that mattered. The audience is fused with the chorus, and in works without an overt chorus (almost everything) the chorus is not a literal choir but an energy, a propulsion

of the unnamed tragic element that answers for the audience why they are sitting there in the first place. In *Shining City*, McPherson gives the audience the privilege of becoming that chorus. We are not, and I see this applying to the reader of the play as well, apart (a part) of *Shining City* but are its most treasured inhabitants. Without the collective acquiescence of the audience, the play would lack its relevance its tragedy, and its power (portal to the human soul). In *The Weir*, the task of the audience is relegated to spectator, but, because *The Weir's* characters are spectators themselves, the audience are as much the function of the Nietzschean choral womb, a place of both comfort and the potential for re-birth, as if we were physically sitting at the bar.

*The Weir's* latent preoccupation with gender also speaks to another element of the Dionysian aesthetic, that of the Bacchant, a follower of Dionysus usually mythologized as a female overcome by the frenzy of revelry. McPherson follows in ghost-story form a narrative that is even older than that of the haunting, that of the difference between the sexes and the qualities to which each aspires. Except for Finbar, the men are single and are worse for the wear of their solitude. The banter between each other is jovial yet melancholy. Although they apparently care for one another and have grown up together, their communication is limited initially to casual musings on the weather and horseracing. The bar itself is part of an actual house, the family home of Brendan, importing how the life of domesticity and female companionship is close but never really in reach. The significance of Valerie's story is not only in the emotional effect on the men but also on what the grief that brought her to the area in the first place demonstrates. Mourning and delusional in missing her daughter, hers is a frenzy of

sadness that has turned her inside out, bringing her to the bar, which serves as a surrogate altar for her offering of the story.

Valerie begins and ends the action of the play. She is the reason that Finbar comes around and in turn why Jack decided to stay: "Don't want to leave Jimmy in the lurch. You know?" (11). Valerie serves initially as a sexual object, enticing the men before they meet her just by virtue of their expectations of "a fine girl. Single. Down from Dublin and all this" (10). In this preamble to her humanizing influence, she exists in the realm of image. This is a prelude to her later position as catalyst for the stories and their subsequent culmination in the final two tales. In the early portion, she is merely a form, a newcomer whose youth and yet untold yarn awaken the interest of the men, who also at this point remain in the pre-story state of superficial banter. Take Jack, who foreshadows the emotional conclusion with his dismissive ramblings on marriage, as he agrees with the younger Brendan that "Tch. Maybe. Maybe there's something to be said for the old independence" (13). Valerie's unsubstantiated dalliance with Finbar forges a bond between Jack, Brendan, and Jim as they let their imaginations run rampant and then proceed to stay on the side of propriety. When Brendan complains to the others about Finbar "I'm trapped in here behind this fucking thing. And you wish he's stop acting the mess", he exemplifies how the men are trapped in their respective messes before the guest's entrance (13). This scene previous to Valerie's actual arrival connotes ideality and ultimately falsehood. The others have based opinion on their idea of her, and even seem to seal their position in a ritualistic group lighting of some cigarettes as they together "puff contentedly for a moment" (18). It is with her presence and willingness to share her experiences that this seal is broken and the profound and disturbing truths come full circle.

Both Valerie and Neasa are catalysts in works that operate under a Nietzschean privileging of the Dionysian form of tragedy, of an ebb and flow of qualities embodied by Dionysus that has since been historically viewed as the schema of the female: hysteria, nurturing, and desire. The female characters of Neasa and Valerie echo what Helene Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, called “that element which never stops resonating...that element is the song; first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman” (Cixous 879). The resonating of both women’s stories “profoundly and imperceptibly touches” the other characters in the respective works, and the concept of feminine transcends biology and opens up the female voice as part of a choral function that heightens and pursues a holistic transformation on the part of both *Shining City* and *The Weir’s* male characters. The voice of the female parallels that of the voices of a chorus in ancient time, it embodies the movement and rebirth of the men. Mari’s haunting and Vivien’s flirtations feed the male’s sense of their own tragic selves and generate a self that is not wholly separate from the women in body and spirit. Ian cannot bear to even look at Neasa after he tells her he no longer wants to be together, and the bar patrons are chastened after Valerie tells them of her daughter. At this point the atmosphere in the theater and that in the bar become one, changing from a creepy, playful ghost story to something much more intense, the human tragedy embodied in Valerie and later Jack. It is when the female stories have been told, or in the case of *Shining City* when exclusively female pain is felt (being left alone with a child to raise), that the narrative becomes one that while not written exclusively in “white ink” becomes highlighted in it. This duality between the feminine energy and the male drive informs, beyond sex and gender, both works’ choral system.

Both Valerie and Neasa's predicaments are predicated on the fear of losing one's grip on reality; theirs are stories pulled by the undertow of instability. This dynamic situates Conor McPherson's *The Weir* and *Shining City* as rightful heirs to a Dionysian ideal. It is informed by both work's preoccupation with haunting and madness. Both pieces demonstrate the conceit of storytelling to propel action, and each suggest to the audience that logic must be suspended for truth to be exposed in all is gravely glory. Tragedy constitutes the most immediate expression of whatever it is that haunts its creator and its spectator, and in the chorus of ancient drama we find the spirit of unveiling come to fruition. Drama's physicality demonstrates this haunting more than a painting or sculpture, for the audience is able to both see and be seen, in its dynamic is where

"man is incited to strain his symbolic faculties to the utmost; something quite unheard of is now clamoring to be heard; the desire to tear asunder the veil of the Maya, to sink back into the original oneness of nature; the desire to express the very essence of nature symbolically" (27).

The idea that one must embark on a journey of return echoes a primal need to, essentially, go back *in*. When viewed from this perspective tragedy becomes not the end in itself but a way to understand "the need for a whole world of torment in order for the individual to produce the redemptive vision" ( Nietzsche 34). Tragedy is the best example of embracing the alienation and damaging apathy that confounds the human spirit and conquering it on its own terms, which McPherson evokes as a type of re-imagined modernism.

Steven Knoblach's study, *The Apollonian Eye and the Dionysian Ear* examines how the flow of physiological and emotional rhythm can be applied in a therapeutic setting, enabling an

analytical breakthrough. Knoblauch uses a case study of one of his own patients to demonstrate how whatever is not said is privileged over what is uttered. Using gesture and body language as starting points, he draws a connection between Nietzschean philosophy and effective therapy: “Subtle shifts in face, posture, tone, and rhythm...seem to be the indicators of faintly conscious stimuli...these seem to be the basis for the Dionysian experience” (Knoblauch 332). This analysis is useful in highlighting how the Dionysian chorus is not limited to plot advancement but extends to every gesticulation, word, and pause. McPherson alludes to the doctor-patient duality with the fact that Ian and John are therapist and patient, but more importantly both plays are significantly dependent on non-verbal signifiers. Ariel Watson’s study, *Cries of Fire: Psychotherapy in Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, understands this dependency in terms of the actor-spectator binary. Watson describes the act of listening on the part of therapist Ian to be the “antithesis of acting, a refusal to attract attention, an abnegation of the self” (204). Her analysis aligns Ian’s listening as simultaneous with that of the audience. Success or failure in his treatment of John is situated not in what is shared between therapist and patient, but in Ian’s agency within the parameters of that duality. John, when he first appears on stage in Ian’s office, has about him an “air of confusion” and “regards himself as a benchmark for normality” (Wallace 1713). *The Weir*'s bar customers shuffle and grumble, uttering nonsensical fillers in place of conversation, as do the characters in *Shining City*.

A uniting of the seen and the unseen, the haunted and the ‘real’, is in the end the objective truth that can be said to be the goal of these works. The objective conclusion, the appropriation of a transcendent truth, is achieved in these works by the uniting of the choral voices of male and female. After Valerie tells her tale, the tone at the bar changes from one of

tipsy banter to the language of nurturing. Finbar tells her, "And we'll make sure you're alright and you're settling in with us. You're very welcome" (61). In telling her story she has swallowed her fear of being labeled as crazy and has embraced what Cixous would qualify as the ability to speak despite "her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away" (878). In this way Valerie has exercised a 'transgression' by invading the masculine site of language and storytelling, in this case the bar, and telling her tale of heartache to a group of strangers. She enters the space of Apollonian representation through her invasion of the form, in this case the familiar diegesis of the men's conversation. The men's banter assumes a world that superimposes defensive jocularity for substantive conversation. The narrative that this world implies is static due to the four males' inability to speak outside of their construction of safety and stagnancy inherent in speaking around sensitive subjects such as loneliness and specifically any brush with the supernatural. This diegetic space is itself an image, a Brechtian tableau of complacency that is pierced with the female energy. The attitude towards Valerie changes after the story, but also the dialogue between the men softens. Jim gets a ride home with Finbar, who gladly gives it to him, but only after Brendan without fanfare gives him a small bottle of whiskey with a 'wave of the hand" (McPherson 61). After this, the characters become the product of the choral womb that creates and is created by the audience. Valerie's honesty about her breakdown and her delicate, nurturing manner towards the group as a whole directly enables the men's emotional advancement.

It is Jack's ending tale that brings the feminine full circle, however. His character is haunted, not by a ghost, but essentially by the lack of one. He has never married, nor had children, and is consumed by his own mistakes made years ago towards his lost love. He is

forced to face this specter in himself and Valerie's tale gives him the courage to do this. Jack's tale signifies a truth that the play challenges, through the other stories, to achieve. Even within Jack's story the nurturing quality is evident. He is not bitter towards the girl, and admits his own faults in his reaction toward her news that she was marrying someone else. His memories of her wedding day culminate in the memory of a tragically simple act of kindness. When a bartender at a pub he had wandered into made him a sandwich with unconditional charity, Jack remembers it as the best meal he has ever had. Jack relates these facts after the party has broken up and the others have gathered by the fire for one last drink. Valerie has fostered this place of comfort through her courage, and Jack is the prime beneficiary. Her elevation in stature in the story from pretty stranger to mourning mother shifts her out of fear and makes her deserving of true empathy from the men, establishing a safe place for Jack. The Dionysian qualities here have risen from the dustbin of Apollo. In perfect form we have a work of art whose chorus breaks, like a weir, the river of representation of life and ushers and guide the water of life itself. Within the womb of the bar, the storytellers break their respective cords to the comfortable representation of reality and forage towards the 'heart of world' that summons their innards and brings their humanity to its fruition. By becoming a fourth wall that is an essential part of the emotional trajectory of the characters, the audience's participation and reaction is operating as a metaphorical weir along with Valerie and the structural buildup of the stories the McPherson gives the characters to tell.

As *The Weir's* characters gather slowly into the bar, McPherson allows each to become acclimated to their 'theater' as a safe place that will germinate a space for camaraderie and confession. Rhona Trench discusses the space of the pub as emblematic of Paul Ricoeur's

formulations of the self as a product of narrative construct, as understanding the world through stories is the way to determine our place in those stories. Trench suggests that the pub setting lends itself to this kind of self-creation, a “space that mediates the signs, symbols, and contexts where self-understanding corresponds to the interpretation given to these mediating terms” (Trench 3733). Through a Nietzschean prism, the bar-space and theater-space are dependent on each other, not as reflective carbons but instead as intertwined sites of celebration and exposition. Indeed, the stories told by each character defines them. They are stories that they may not have told had they been in a different setting or with different people.

The interaction of the play is based upon the peculiar combination of comfort and agitation that defines being in a bar in the first place. McPherson’s set directions also point to defining characteristics of a particular place and time that give the individual narratives specificity. The passage of time, the changing landscape, and the mercurial nature of relationships are manifest in the photographs on the wall and in the structure of the bar itself. As the bar is situated in a building attached to a house (one has to go through the house to get to a real bathroom, Valerie’s wine is fetched from the kitchen), it is a home and not a home at the same time. The characters also interact with each other in a mediated emotional space that strides the fence of camaraderie and eggshell walking. Clare Wallace asserts that this space between is created by the “confessional dimension” (4). Her suggestion that the characters are “often highly ambivalent, or downright negative” demonstrates that there is animosity within the characters that must be overcome. This tension allows the individual narratives to be established in the first place, and for our purposes here, provides the acoustics to the choral drive of the play.

This animosity is prevalent, particularly in the beginning when Finbar becomes indignant at any suggestion that his motivations are more than friendly: “There’s obviously something going on...in her life. I’m just trying to make it easier for her. Give her a welcome, for fuck’s sake. So don’t...be implying anything else. I don’t like it” (McPherson 35). The narratives begin innocently enough as the male characters, instigated by Finbar, are trying to impress the girl from Dublin with anecdotal tales of the supernatural, which are stereotypical of the Irish countryside. Valerie, the city girl, upsets this stereotype by telling the foursome and the audience of watching her daughter’s body being wrapped in a towel following her drowning. She tells of going into a deep depression and hearing knocking in the walls and her daughter calling her, wanting her to pick her up. When this ghost story turns out to be the most visceral one of all, if not the most realistic, the idea that the setting of the bar enables both local stories and a story from the other side of life, the urban work-a-day sprawl, Trench’s take on Roceur’s ideas in *Time and Narrative* correspond with and offer reciprocity with *The Weir’s* Nietzschean chorus. Personal narratology accords the speaker a grasp on time’s intangibility, and in this sense the stories provide both teller and listener with a validation that otherwise would be confined to the intangible.

*The Weir’s* choral tendencies become manifest in the natural setting as well. The wind is discussed by Jack and Brendan as fierce yet ‘balmy’ and at the beginning of the first story, becomes a set piece (10). The use of the wind to bring about the scene establishes that the wind is a portal for employing unpredictable forces to present a united narrative. Jack has begun to tell Valerie of the background of Maura Nealon’s house, and as he progresses to the heart of the story, at the point when Maura and her mother hear the knocking of the fairies, he

ushers in the wind to join his speech: “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. Am I setting the scene for you?’

(McPherson 31). The natural power of the female schema is demonstrative of how that power, like the wind under the door and the water under the weir, can be redirected towards a goal.

The way in which Valerie and Neasa are established as objects of desire and their progress as determinants of the other character’s stories echo a Dionysian quality of frenzy, illustrating that sexuality. As Nietzsche put it, “the duality of the sexes, their constant conflicts and periodic acts of reconciliation” (19) are lynchpins for expression. Without that conflict, without the wonderment towards Valerie and even Ian’s abusive interchanges with Neasa, the element of wonder and desire would not spark the progeny of a united representation of tragedy.

*The Weir* takes upon itself the task of unmasking the haunting in its characters. In Valerie specifically the play illustrates a conduit for the flow of narrative within the plot. But in a more important sense, this flow is relevant in its presentation to its audience. The different stories in the play have been argued by Nicholas Grene and Kevin Kerrane to build upon each other, resulting in Valerie’s testimony about her daughter, but what many critics have failed to acknowledge is that Valerie’s story is not the last story of the play. Kerrane argues persuasively for the position of *The Weir* as a classical drama. He underscores how its qualities are post-Aristotelian, obeying the unities of time and place. Referring to the how the play’s action exists in a “climactic order”, he notes that the action as told through the characters enters the realm of myth starting with the first story, about the fairies, and extending to Valerie’s narrative

about her little girl (Kerrane 108). This order suggests a vocal one-upmanship that transcends dramatic effect and presents a kind of masque that is actually the play in itself as play. The self-awareness of the characters as storytellers would clearly shift from the Aristotelian ideal towards that of the Nietzschean foregrounding of the Dionysian, in which “we see a community of unconscious actors all of whom see one another as enchanted” (Nietzsche 56). It is only after she tells her tale that Jack confesses his life’s haunting, that of a lost love from years ago and his appearance at her wedding, described in Dantean terms. In this way Valerie resembles Dante’s Beatrice but also a connection must be made with Andre Breton’s *Nadja*, a woman whose haunting presence obsesses his narrator and who ultimately gives him the space to tell his story, the story that is told in the novella of the same name.

For McPherson’s Brendan and Jack particularly, self-actualization involves the breaking down, metaphorically, of the town weir, and Valerie is the wrecking ball. Jack opens up about his real-life haunting of regret, while Brendan jumps to Valerie’s defense at the hint that she somehow misinterpreted the phone call. That the weir was used both in title and set design, and that the fairy road, described in the first tale, was ripped apart to allow for its construction suggests that the unnatural redistribution of water can be a significant metaphor for the transformation garnered by the men. By the play’s end and through Valerie, the water is allowed to flow freely again, if only for the short time it takes to tell the stories. In particular, Brendan’s defense of her insistence that the phone call was really from Niamh is perhaps the simplest, most poignant line of the play. Following Valerie’s tale, the men assume the nurturing role as counselors, offering heartfelt (if unhelpful) explanations at what Valerie actually heard when her daughter called from the beyond. Brendan does not engage in this whatsoever, and

cuts the men's attempts at soothing her, implying that it is they themselves that need to be comforted when faced with the possibility that what she went through was not a product of her grief and imagination. Without irony or swagger, he simply tells the others 'She said she knew what it was" (58).

While *The Weir* incorporates the act of listening into its plot and narrative structure, in *Shining City* McPherson circumvents the obligation of the audience to applaud by prioritizing that act. He does this by putting words up for a vote to the audience and letting its members decide where they will take us. In so doing, the audience may react and applaud but they are applauding their own freedom. By democratizing the theater experience, *Shining City* stands, as the title suggests, as a beacon of light among those who would rightly say that some theater, and indeed most mainstream entertainment, is confined in that stifling room that Nietzsche warned against in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where man is a perpetual imitator who "remains eternally hungry, the critic without strength or joy...blinding himself miserably over dusty books and typographical errors" (BOT 112). McPherson accomplished this Dionysian glasnost through the dialogue in his work between audience and language and the lack of cluttered dictatorial stage directions, allowing the flow between script and audience to take place.

In a rehearsal for *Shining City* at the Huntington theater in Boston, director Robert Falls and the actor playing the role of John, John Judd, discussed how John's character is supposed to sit while first telling Ian his story, either nervous and perched on the edge of his seat or relaxed. The choice to play the scene in a nervous way gives a powerful visual effect, for Falls and Judd

have John barely sitting on the couch, shoulders hunched, and head down. When he makes the statement that he has seen his dead wife, Mari, around the house, he does so in a manner that suggests not only fear at the reaction of his new therapist but from the audience itself. Other playwrights in this pivotal scene would likely have made sure of John's movements in this juncture, perhaps having him "nervously pace" the room, but McPherson grants the character's movements to the director and in turn every pause and hesitation to the audience. We feel John's pain and anguish in his refusal to get to the point rather than in what he says:

John: And no one else was injured. And I've no...idea...wh...(Long Pause) But, em, I've...em...I've seen her. (Short Pause) I've em...

Ian: You've seen her? (McPherson 13)

This brief exchange signals the beginning of Ian and John's relationship and establishes how McPherson is going to have his way with the audience by letting them have theirs. The role of the audience is established as an active and participatory one, invitees to the cast as chorus. Audience members of the premier of Falls' production acknowledged their feelings of involvement. One man commented on how powerful the play was despite its "sparseness". An older woman explained that she could finally get inside the head of a man and now what he is thinking, because of the style of McPherson's dialogue.

The textual awareness of the action is presented in the form of McPherson's spatial and verbal organization. Instead of expounding on a certain character's outward appearance and mannerisms, psychological accoutrement is the core of stage directions. The direction for the preceding lines are less concerned with where the chairs are organized and more concerned with explaining a particular motivation or backstory for how an actor is to play an action.

Fundamentally, *Shining City* is a study in how we communicate and why, and the phrase “tripping over one’s words” can exemplify how the characters try to grasp each other’s respective crisis, only to realize they have no hold on each other. In a play about the failure of human communication, the unspoken unity between observer and stage signals that McPherson has strong opinions on the failure of language, but demonstrates an understanding of the motivations behind never giving up on it.

Intimacy, whether sexual, professional, or familial, is in *Shining City* not a measure for truthfulness or understanding between characters. The common thread in all of the conversations in the play is that pausing between thoughts or not even finishing them and lying at the same time brings communication to a grinding halt, and also to a place where our shared modern sensibilities are: a kind of digital middle earth inhabited by cyborgs. John’s obsession with Vivien’s text messages allude to this limbo, as the combination of immediacy and distance in this medium parallels what draws him to her in the first place. He does not want to delete them and holds on to a physicality of words as a security blanket. Vivien is married, wealthier and more sophisticated than he, and any casual affair would be short-lived, and McPherson’s use of ‘text’ illustrates how contrived their relationship is, but also how tragically poignant. John tells Ian of about how he was upset over erasing her messages and “ wanted to look at [them] again as something to hang on to, which was, you know, whatever” (24).

These characters present themselves to each other as if there was a wall between them. Through McPherson’s descriptions of them they are overtly self-aware of this wall and particularly of their own culpability for their individual circumstances. Yet in their interactions

they persecute each other mercilessly, arguably murderously in the case of John, by failing by themselves to break the barriers inherent in trying to vocalize the intangibility of the universal positions of pain and fear. McPherson, in the same interview at UCD, explains his dark subject matter as a site for the universal: “What’s worth writing about? It’s love and death and...disappointment. Those are the things that we all struggle with. We have to make some sort of peace with. It has to have that for me”. In the *New Yorker* review of *Shining City’s* American debut, Als Hilton notes how Ian’s character “can[not] look away from the grief he has caused” (86). The characters are guiltily letting their relationships fail, and the audience understands that guilt and can wordlessly contribute to that failure’s fruition by their role as chorus. Rather than an evil force catapulting the downfall of Ian, John, and Neasa with the observer serving as witness, the audience participates in their tragedy as modern minstrels who echo the unspoken angst of the characters.

It is the lack of a true villain in *Shining City* that marks it as a true tragedy and away from what, if told in a different style, could be labeled melodrama. In Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea*, Nietzsche’s one time philosophical mentor offers three ways in which tragedy can be accomplished on stage. In his view, a lower- order tragedy involves either an altogether evil character or simply cruel twists of fate. The highest order or tragedy, and that of the reality in which we live, involves characters of ordinary morality, “under circumstances which so often occur, are so situated with regard for each other that their position compels them...to do each other the greatest injury, without any one of them being entirely in the wrong” ( Schopenhauer 291). The predicaments of the characters are not due to an evil outside themselves and their flawed relationships, but rather to human weakness and fear. *Shining City*

achieves this highest order because the constant verbal movement between John and Ian, Ian and Neasa, and the exchanges we are told of in hindsight between John and Mari are not reflective of evil, but of the much more accessible tragedy of inherent helplessness. In her preface to a 2007 interview with McPherson, Cassandra Csencsitz notes that the author is “not giving voice to the victims of tragic circumstance...but to people who freely self-destruct” (38). The injury in this play, the true tragedy, stems not from a boogey man but from the jockeying of one ill fated, helpless utterance to another.

The scene between Neasa and Ian illustrates this helplessness early on. The couple is fighting but do not possess an arsenal big enough to bring the fight to a settlement. They cannot communicate to each other the possibilities of what their own dialogue actually means. In McPherson’s stage direction, we are told that Ian is a man in his forties who is “essentially a gentle man, but sometimes his desire to get to the lifeboats, to feel safe, drives him in ways that even he himself doesn’t fully understand” (4). In his conversations with Neasa, Ian demonstrates an impulse to protect himself that trumps a desire to protect his partner. As he is breaking up with her, halted speech suggests that he wants her to make the change easy for him, illustrating a childish selfishness that is not evil but certainly damaging. In the following exchange, Ian talks in circles, and wants to stay on his lifeboat as long as he possibly can.

Meanwhile, Neasa is drowning:

Neasa: What do you mean, my own place?

Ian: Can you not see that this is happening? I don’t...want...I can’t...I can’t...I can’t...I don’t...I don’t want this relationship anymore.

Neasa: What the fuck are you talking about? What the *fuck* are you talking about?

Ian: God! Can you hear me? Can you not listen to what I'm saying? (McPherson 9).

The musicality of the above lines is apparent even in its rhythm. Its three beat, pause, fourth beat repetition of Ian's refrain "I can't" carries the melody of a relatively simple yet altogether sad refrain. The audience here is listening to a sad song it has heard before, and hums the verses with reticent recognition, forming a bond between material and spectator, and establishing a "community of unconscious actors all of whom see one another as enchanted" (Nietzsche 56). The audience in this sense is the choral basis for the music of McPherson's symphony, one that forges the "matrix of the dialogue...of the entire stage world of the actual drama" (56). The ellipses in the preceding lines offer the audience a chance to bind to what is going on onstage, contributing their "oracular words of wisdom" and participating, not as spectators of an event, but as actors on the world's stage. It is for us to fill in just what it is that Ian can't do-be a father, settle down, sleep with women, make a sandwich. It is all the theater and minutia of a life if not well played then at least attempted. Ian's self-preserving nature and the commonality of his hurt and anger converge with the audience's familiarity with his hesitancy to verbalize his pain, to put himself out into the world.

By functioning as chorus, the audience is the medium of transference between McPherson's artistic vision and reality. As Ian and Neasa cannot connect, the spectator connects for them, serving the over-arching goal of artistic expression itself. The communal projection of the universality of what the failure of communication can do to us as spectators and the ones we love brings the action to its true potential and the characters to their full potential. Our projections illuminate the tragedy. When the audience members fill in Ian's

ellipses, the universality of his “can’t” and “don’t” reverberate, for Ian’s are familiar failures with which most people are on an intimate level.

An over-used phrase when praising a work of art is “it touched me”. It is natural for something that echoes one’s feelings and experiences to hold a special place in the spectator’s heart and hard drive, and this quality should not be regarded diminished. With *Shining City*, the members of the audience are not only seeing themselves in a work of art, as is common whenever a novel is read, a song heard, or a painting gazed upon but they also become part of the medium. This effect is also felt in reading the play as closet drama, as on the page the effect is similar, though not as pronounced. It is worth mentioning that McPherson was first exposed to drama on the page, and as such a hermeneutic approach to his work offers much the same insights into the characters. On the stage, as opposed to other media, the subtleties of communication--sighs, gestures, glances-- are at their most raw and immediate. Also, the dynamic not just of audience/spectator but audience/audience is relevant- who has not seen someone cry at the movies and followed suit-even a little? That said, film cannot replicate the dynamic between live actor and audience, and *Shining City* gives this phenomenon a fully realized potential.

Language, as symbolic representation, offers only a way to recognize something already agreed upon by those who speak a given tongue. McPherson’s manipulation and mistrust of language fuels the audience’s opportunity to fill in Neasa’s “What the fuck are you talking about?’ with ourselves (9). Relationships are prime ground for such projection. Although it is a dramatic cliché for a man and woman to argue over commitment issues, the scene above I see

not as a representation of something that already occurred and is regurgitated, but a scene that exemplifies how McPherson exposes the fact that while we recognize what the characters are going through our reaction is not a commodity. Just as an actual chorus does not sound exactly the same in a given performance, so the spectator cannot fuse with the play in identical fashion every time. It is this distinction, also, that brings to bear how theater is a more of a collective experience than that of film. A movie, painting, or recorded music will always be the same, although the observer is not. Both a reading of *Shining City* and attending its performance transcends the passive and reactive elements of art and transforms them into effort. McPherson's direction and dialogue, together with the audience, operate as legitimate, profound, and complete form of communication; this confluence is the *Shining City*.

*The Weir* and *Shining City* exemplify kinds of narrative that are both timeless and contemporary. Loneliness, alienation, and grief are not avenues of optimism, and yet their place in McPherson's drama offers community rather than condescension. McPherson grants the audience autonomy through his language, imagery, and structure. In this he has succeeded in a hopeful and ultimately transgressive act. By empowering the audience, these pieces illuminate a chance of victory over the complacency that provoked Nietzsche to write the call to arms that is *Birth of Tragedy* and the frustration that Beckett elucidated in *Texts for Nothing*. McPherson's Dionysian sympathies are relevant in a discussion of how the playwright appropriates tradition because he uses these elements in a way that ultimately transcends his bleak subject matter and gives the audience dignity and freedom in its act of spectatorship.

The ending scenes of both plays speak to the dual nature of dignity and freedom, and also the responsibility that comes with the possibility of self-actualization. For *The Weir's* Jack, a return to the idea of culpability at what happened with the girl lets him tell the story without guile. His character and the story he tells navigates around Valerie's tale as climax and leaves the audience with a final narrative that is realistic and approachable. If the audience was left with the horror of Niamh's death, the effect of community would have been erased by emotional manipulation. That McPherson chooses not to end with Valerie but with Jack illustrates her character as not simply the locus of our sympathy but also as a liberating creation that brings about the light in the darkness of Jack's long overdue story.

*Shining City's* final scenes work similarly in that John and Ian have reached place of familiarity and respect. John brings Ian a gift, a lamp, and Ian seems genuinely concerned about his patient's wellbeing. Mari has stopped appearing to John, and Neasa and Ian have moved back in together with their child. At this point the audience has forged a relationship with these characters and, as I have hoped to demonstrate, facilitated the acts as much as the playwright. This community between author, script, and audience is made even closer by the final second of *Shining City*. When Ian turns around and sees Mari, the audience sees her for the first time as well. Here the play comes full circle with Artaud and Nietzsche as in that second the audience is in complete and horrified communion of having the same reaction as the character. Complacency is impossible.

### WORKS CITED

Artaud, Antonin. "The Theater and Its Double." *Theater Theory Theater: The Major Texts from Aristotle And Zeami to Soyinka and Havel*. Ed. Daniel Gerould. Applause: New York, 2000. 433-443. Print.

Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Short Prose* S.E. Gontarski Ed. Grove: New York, 1995.

Beckett, Samuel. *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* Arcade: New York, 2011.

Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa" *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-893. Web. 10 March 2014.

Costa, Maddy. Interview with Conor McPherson. *The Guardian* (2006): 18 Web. 18 January 2011.

Csencsitz, Cassandra. "Conor McPherson Lifts the Veil." *American Theater* 24.10 (2007): 36-83. Web. 15 March 2011.

Denny, Ned. "The Spirit of Music in Art" *Modern Painters* 16.2 (2003): 68-71. Web. 1 January 2014.

Fricke, Karen. "Same Old Show: The Performance of Masculinity in Conor McPherson's *Port Authority* and Mark O'Rowe's *Made in China*." *The Irish Review* 29 (2002): 84-94. 19 February 2013.

Greene, Nicholas. "Ireland in Two Minds: Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson." *Yearbook Of English Studies* 35. (2005):298-311. Web. 15 April 2011.

Hilton, Als. "Shining Hours.." *The New Yorker* 82.14 (2006): 84-87. Print.

Jmkennedy. "Shining City: An Irish Ghost Story at the Huntington." Online Video clip.

*YouTube*. YouTube, 13 March 2011.

Kent, Brad. "McDrama: The Sentimental in Martin McDonagh's 'The Beauty Queen of Leenane' And Conor McPherson's 'The Weir'." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 28.1 (2002): 30-45. Web. 22 February 2013.

Kerrane, Kevin. "The Structural Elegance of Conor McPherson's *The Weir*" *New Hibernia Review* 10.4 (2006): 105-121. Web. 14 February 2013.

Kershaw, Baz. "Oh for Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Audience Participation in Twentieth Century Theater." *Modern Drama* 42.2 (2001): 133-154. Web. 12 April 2012.

Knoblauch, Stephen H. "The Apollonian Eye and the Dionysian Ear." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 26.3 (2006): 326-343. Web. 8 December 2013.

Kroll, Jack. "The Weir." *Newsweek* 133.15 (1998):77.

Leavell, Linda. "Nietzsche's Theory of Tragedy in the Plays of T.S. Eliot." *Twentieth Century Literature* 15.7 (1985): 111-126. Web. 7 January 2014.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals* Translation by Francis Golffing. Anchor: New York, 1956.

McPherson, Conor. *The Weir and Other Plays*. Theater Communications Group: New York, 1999.

McPherson, Conor. *Shining City*. Dramatists Play Service: New York, 2007.

Pizzato, Mark. "Redressing the Chorus: Nietzsche in Eliot" *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6.2 (1992): 1-25.

Web. 7 January 2014.

Renner, Pamela. "Haunts of the Very Irish" *American Theater* 15.6 (1998): 16-19.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. "The World as Will and Idea" *Theater Theory Theater: The Major Texts from Aristotle And Zeami to Soyinka and Havel*. Ed. Daniel Gerould. Applause: New York, 2000. 287-300. Print.

Seana67. "UCD Connections: Conor McPherson Interview Part 1" Online Video Clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 November 2013.

Shanley, John Patrick. Interview with Conor McPherson. "The Supernaturalism of the Everyday." *American Theater* 68 (2013): 68-69.

Trench, Rhona. "Spirit in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*" *The Theater of Conor McPherson: 'Right Beside the Beyond'* Eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan. Carysfort: Dublin, 2012. Kindle AZW File.

Velissariou, Aspasia. "Language in 'Waiting for Godot.'" *Journal of Beckett Studies* 8 (1982): 45-67. Web. 20 February 2014.

Wallace, Claire. "A Micro-Narrative Imperative: Conor McPherson's Monologue Drama." *Irish Studies Review* 14.1 (2006): 1-10. Web. 12 March 2013.

Wallace, Kevin. 'shame shame shame': Masculine, Intimacy, and Narrative in Conor McPherson's *Shining City*." *The Theater of Conor McPherson: 'Right Beside the Beyond'* Eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan. Carysfort: Dublin, 2012. Kindle AZW file.

Watson, Ariel. "Cries of Fire: Psychotherapy in Contemporary British and Irish Drama" *Modern Drama*. 51.1 (2008): 188-210. Web. 31 January 2013.

Wolf, Matt. "Haunting and Healing in a Shimmering 'City.'" *Variety* 395.8 33  
Web. 21 February 2013.

Wren, Celia. "Ghost Stories: 'The Weir' and 'Civil War.'" *Commonweal* 126.11 (1999): 21-22.  
Web. 16 February 2011.

Wood, Gerald. *Conor McPherson: Imagining Mischief*. Dublin: Liffey, 2003.

## WORKS CONSULTED

- Bradley, Patricia. "The Birth of Tragedy and The Awakening: Influences and Intertextualities." *Southern Literary Journal* 37.2 (2005): 40-61. Web. 16 February 2013.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "The Modern Theater is the Epic Theater" *Theater Theory Theater: The Major Texts From Aristotle And Zeami to Soyinka and Havel*. Ed. Daniel Gerould. Applause: New York, 2000. 446-453. Print.
- Jordan, Eamonn. "Pastoral Exhibits: Narrating Authenticities in Conor McPherson's *The Weir*" *Irish University Review* 10.4 (2004): 351-368. Web. 18 November 2012.
- Miller, James. *Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
- Noudelman, Francois. *The Philosopher's Touch: Sartre, Nietzsche, and Barthes at the Piano*. New York: Columbia, 2012.
- O'Toole, Fintan. "Shadows Over Ireland" *American Theater* 15.6 (1998): 16-19. Web. 15 February 2013.
- Ratner- Rosenhagen, Jennifer. *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas*. Chicago: UP, 2012.
- Reid, John. "Biting the Sour Apple': The Nietzschean Undertow in 'Little Eyolf.'" *Modern Drama* 52.1 (2006): 1-18. Web. 12 September 2013.
- Rooney, David. "Men in Shining City Confront Their Ghosts" *Variety* 15.3 (2006): 41-42.

Schrift, Alan. Ed. *Why Nietzsche Still? Reflections on Drama, Culture, and Politics* Berkeley: UP, 2000.





