



THE WAKE AND THE WEDDING: RITUAL FORM IN SYNGE AND CONOR MCPHERSON

Didachos Mbeng Afuhⁱ

Department of Official Languages and Translation,
University of Ebolowa,
Cameroon

Abstract:

This article examines the dramatic architectures of John Millington Synge and Conor McPherson, arguing that both playwrights deploy communal rituals — wakes, storytelling sessions, weddings, seasonal gatherings, and supernatural encounters — not merely as thematic content but as foundational structural principles of their dramaturgy. While Irish drama has been frequently analysed through the lenses of nationalism, postcolonial identity, language, and landscape, its formal debt to ritual structures remains comparatively underexplored. By placing Synge's early-twentieth-century plays (*Riders to the Sea*, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*) into sustained dialogue with McPherson's contemporary works (*The Weir*, *Shining City*, *The Seafarer*, *St Nicholas*), this study demonstrates that ritual form, in their hands, resists the linear, secular temporality of modern realism. Drawing on the performance theory of Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Catherine Bell, the article distinguishes between ritual as content (a play that depicts a ritual) and ritual as form (a play whose very structure enacts ritual logic — repetition, cyclicity, transformation, *communitas*). The work argues that in the work of these two playwrights, ritual allows the dead to remain present, time to fold back upon itself, and community to cohere through shared performance rather than through conventional Aristotelian plotting. Despite the century separating them, both Synge and McPherson use ritual as a dramaturgical architecture that challenges dominant theatrical forms and offers an alternative grounded in communal, cyclical, and sacred time. The article ultimately positions this ritual dramaturgy as a formal critique of modernity's temporal regime, preserving modes of knowledge, mourning, and community that colonial and capitalist modernities have repeatedly sought to displace.

Keywords: ritual, dramatic form, J.M. Synge, Conor McPherson, Irish drama, communal storytelling, the wake, temporality, sacred time, performance

ⁱ Correspondence: email didachosafuh30@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In the opening movement of Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1997), a small group of men gather around a turf fire in a rural Leitrim pub. Drinks are poured, idle gossip circulates, and the wind worries the door. Almost imperceptibly, the conversation shifts register: an anecdote becomes a story, a story becomes a ghost story, and the pub itself begins to feel less like a commercial premises than a precinct set apart for the dead. By the time Valerie, the outsider from Dublin, offers her own halting narrative of a drowned daughter and a telephone call from beyond, the audience is no longer watching a naturalistic Irish bar play but is sitting inside a ritual: a communal act of speech that gathers the bereaved, summons the absent, and reorders the relation between the living and the dead. As McPherson's stage direction notes when Valerie finishes, "*they are all very still,*" and that stillness is liturgical (McPherson, 1997a, p. 60).

A century earlier, in the kitchen of an Aran cottage, Synge had staged a comparable hush. *Riders to the Sea* (1904) ends with Maurya kneeling at the head of her last drowned son, the keening women filing in with "*red petticoats over their heads,*" sprinkling holy water on the body and on those who survive (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 25). The men hammer together coffin boards from "*white boards*" Maurya had bought "*above in Connemara*" (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 23). The play does not so much represent a wake as constitute one: its dramaturgy is that of mourning, its rhythm the rhythm of keen and response. What unites *The Weir* and *Riders to the Sea* across nearly a hundred years is not subject matter alone — both deal with grief, the supernatural, and the rural community — but a deeper formal commitment. Both plays are ritually structured. Both replace the engine of Aristotelian causality with the patterned recurrence of communal performance.

Irish drama is more often read for its content than for its form. Critics have long mined Synge and McPherson for what they say about Ireland: the politics of language, the residue of colonialism, the texture of landscape, the trauma of emigration, the secularisation of the post-Celtic-Tiger nation (Greene, 1999, p. 45; Lonergan, 2009, p. 17; Kiberd, 1995, p. 28). These readings are valuable and indispensable, but they have tended to leave a curious gap. Both playwrights have been described as "*storytellers*" — sometimes as a compliment, sometimes as a condescension — and that descriptor has, paradoxically, foreclosed sustained analysis of their dramaturgical architecture (Wallace, 2006, p. 112). To call McPherson a master of monologue, or to praise Synge for the music of his Hiberno-English, is to risk treating their formal innovations as mere ornament rather than as load-bearing structure.

The argument advanced here is that Synge and McPherson use ritual form — the wake, the wedding, the storytelling session, the supernatural visitation, the seasonal gathering — as a dramaturgical architecture that resists linear realism and produces a distinctive theatrical temporality. In this dramaturgy, the dead are not memories but participants; time does not march but circles; the protagonist is dispersed into a community that performs itself into being. Ritual, here, is not nostalgic decoration. It is a structural principle that challenges the dominance of Aristotelian dramatic form and offers an alternative dramaturgy rooted in communal, cyclical, and sacred time.

The pairing of Synge (1871–1909) and McPherson (1971–) is instructive precisely because so much divides them. Synge is the Anglo-Irish ethnographer-poet of the Aran Islands, a co-

architect of the Abbey Theatre, the lightning rod of the Playboy riots; McPherson is a Dublin-born playwright of the post-Troubles, post-boom Republic, equally at home with secular therapists and with Mephistophelean strangers. Yet both work in English, both draw deeply on oral culture and vernacular speech, both situate their plays in rural or small-community settings, and both have at times been misread as "simple" naturalists when in fact their forms are structurally inventive. As Christopher Murray observes, McPherson "renews rather than repeats" the storytelling tradition into which he is read, much as Synge "renewed rather than reproduced" the folkloric materials he gathered (Murray, 2007, p. 3). To compare them is to trace a continuous, if often submerged, tradition of ritual dramaturgy in Irish theatre — a tradition that runs alongside, and sometimes counter to, the more frequently invoked lineage of social realism running from O'Casey through Murphy and Friel.

The article proceeds in five sections. Section one develops a theoretical framework, drawing on Turner, Schechner, and Bell to distinguish ritual content from ritual form and to specify how ritual logic challenges Aristotelian structure. The next section offers a close readings of four Synge plays, showing how each is built on a recognisable ritual matrix: the wake (*Riders to the Sea*), the wedding-as-wake (*Deirdre of the Sorrows*), the storytelling session (*The Playboy of the Western World*), and the mock wake (*In the Shadow of the Glen*). Section three turns to McPherson, reading *The Weir*, *Shining City*, *The Seafarer*, and *St Nicholas* as secularised but structurally cognate ritual architectures. The next section brings the two playwrights into direct comparison along four axes — temporality, the presence of the dead, the communal voice, and ritually charged space, while section five considers the politics of ritual form, arguing that this dramaturgy works as a formal critique of modernity's commodified, linear time. The conclusion returns to the wager that, if theatre itself is ritual in origin, then Synge and McPherson are not importing ritual into drama so much as returning drama to a deeper memory of itself.

2. Ritual and Dramatic Form — A Theoretical Framework

To make the case for ritual as a structural principle in Synge's and McPherson's plays, it is important to say what "ritual" is and demonstrate how it intersects with dramatic form. The most influential modern account remains that of Victor Turner, who, building on Arnold van Gennep's tripartite model of rites of passage, theorises ritual as a process organised around "liminality" — a threshold phase in which "the attributes of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner, 1969, p. 94). Within this liminal phase, ordinary social structure is suspended and what Turner calls "communitas" emerges a "relational quality of full unmediated communication" among participants, "a generic bond" that cuts across hierarchies (Turner, 1969, p. 96). Ritual, in Turner's account, is not a static set of prescribed actions but a "social drama" with a recognisable shape — breach, crisis, redressive action, reintegration or schism — through which a community makes and remakes itself (Turner, 1982, p. 69).

Richard Schechner extends Turner's insight into the domain of performance. For Schechner, theatre and ritual are not opposites but points on a continuum of "restored behavior" — actions that are "twice-behaved," rehearsed, repeated, set apart from the flow of ordinary life (Schechner, 1985, p. 36). Ritual leans toward efficacy (it does something: marries, mourns,

exorcises); theatre leans toward entertainment; but "no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment," and the ratio between them shifts historically (Schechner, 1985, p. 120). Catherine Bell sharpens this by reframing the noun "ritual" as the verb "ritualization": a strategy whereby specific actions are differentiated from quotidian ones so as to produce a sense of the sacred, the significant, or the set-apart (Bell, 1992, p. 74). For Bell, ritualization is "*first and foremost a strategy for the construction of a particular type of power relationship,*" a way that communities organise time, space, and bodies to make certain events count more than others (Bell, 1992, p. 197).

These theoretical resources allow a crucial distinction: between ritual as content and ritual as form. A play may depict a wedding, a wake, or a Mass while still adhering to a thoroughly Aristotelian structure — exposition, complication, climax, denouement, the whole proceeding driven by an individuated protagonist whose choices have linear consequences. Here ritual is merely an event represented within the plot, an item of local colour. By contrast, a play in which ritual functions as "*form*" organises its own dramaturgy according to ritual logic. Such a play tends to be cyclical rather than linear, accretive rather than causal, communal rather than individuated, transformative rather than merely resolving. Its temporality is what Mircea Eliade called "*sacred time*" — a time of "*reactualization,*" in which "*every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past*" (Eliade, 1957/1987, p. 68). Sacred time loops; profane time runs.

This distinction matters because Aristotelian dramatic form, as codified in the *Poetics* and as elaborated through neoclassical and bourgeois realist traditions, has implicit temporal commitments. Aristotle insists that a tragedy must have "*a beginning, a middle, and an end*" and that its action must possess "*magnitude*" and unity such that "*the structural union of the parts*" is so close that "*if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed*" (Aristotle, trans. 1996, p. 14). The model presumes a linear chain of cause and effect, the singular agency of a protagonist, and a final point of arrival. This is the same temporal grammar that, much later, will undergird realist theatre's pact with secular, progressive history. Ritual form, in Turner's and Schechner's sense, breaks that grammar at every joint. Where Aristotle's plot is a line, ritual is a circle, or better, a spiral — each turn returning to a familiar pattern but at a different existential pitch.

Within Irish theatre history, the most explicit champion of "*ritual*" was W.B. Yeats, whose engagement with Japanese Noh drama led him to imagine "*an aristocratic form*" of theatre, "*a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic,*" capable of being performed in a drawing-room before "*fifty people*" (Yeats, 1916/1966, p. 221). Yeats's ritual theatre was esoteric, symbolic, and self-consciously elite. Synge and McPherson must be sharply distinguished from this strand. Their ritual dramaturgy is grounded not in occult symbolism but in the vernacular forms of communal life: the wake observed in a kitchen, the story told over a pint, the card-game played on Christmas Eve, the keen sung over a body. As Declan Kiberd observes, "*Synge's genius was to find in the speech of the Aran islanders not a museum-piece but a living instrument,*" and the same can be said of his ritual materials (Kiberd, 1995, p. 173). McPherson, in turn, finds his ritual instruments in the equally living idioms of the Irish pub, the AA meeting, the therapy room — spaces where modern Ireland still gathers to manage its dead.

The implications for dramatic form are several. First, where Aristotle privileges the individual hero, ritual form privileges the group; the protagonist may be present, but the unit

of meaning is the assembly. Second, where Aristotle privileges resolution, ritual form privileges transformation: at the end of a wake, the grief is not solved but redistributed across the community. Third, where Aristotle privileges linear time, ritual form privileges recurrence, layering, and return. The same pattern repeats — son after son drowns, story after story is told, hand after hand of cards is played — and meaning accrues through the repetition itself rather than through narrative escalation. Fourth, where Aristotle privileges the closed world of the fictional action, ritual form opens the stage to the audience as participant: the wake-goers, the pub-listeners, and ultimately the spectators are drawn into the same rite. To read Synge and McPherson under these specifications is to see how thoroughly their dramaturgies depart from the realist consensus that ostensibly contains them.

3. Synge's Ritual Architectures

Riders to the Sea is, in the most precise sense, a wake in dramatic form. The action unfolds in a single cottage on an unnamed Aran island and lasts no longer than the time required to recognise a death, prepare the body, and inaugurate the lament. The play opens with Cathleen and Nora handling "a bundle of clothes" taken from a drowned man, attempting to determine whether they belonged to their brother Michael (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 5). This is the first ritual gesture of the wake: the identification of the dead by their belongings, conducted in hushed practical tones. Nora's observation, "the young priest is after bringing them," frames the action from the outset within an explicitly sacramental economy (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 5). The play does not so much begin as enter a process already underway.

Synge's structural genius is to overlay this opening preparation with a second, simultaneous death: even as the daughters identify Michael's clothes, their last remaining brother Bartley is riding to the sea on a horse Maurya has cursed. The play's temporality therefore becomes layered rather than linear. The death already accomplished (Michael's) and the death about to be accomplished (Bartley's) inhabit the same dramatic present. When Maurya recounts her vision of "Michael himself" sitting upon the grey pony behind Bartley, "with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet," the play has crossed decisively into ritual time, where the dead ride alongside the living (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 19). It is precisely this collapse of past and future into a charged present that distinguishes ritual from realist temporality.

The arrival of the women is the structural pivot. Synge's stage direction is unusually explicit: "the door which Nora half closed is blown open by a gust of wind," and "an old woman" enters, followed by "more women," who "come in and pass down to the right, keening softly" (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 21). The keen — the formalised lament long practised in Gaelic Ireland — is not, in this play, an emotional outburst; it is a form. It enters on cue, occupies its allotted segment of stage time, and shapes the action that follows. Maurya's great speech, "They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me," operates as a ritual benediction rather than a tragic recognition (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 27). She is not undergoing Aristotelian "anagnorisis"; she is closing the rite. Her final blessing — "May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn" — names every drowned man in the household, gathering them into a single liturgical inventory (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 27).

The play's structure thus mirrors the four-fold movement of the wake itself: preparation (the clothes), recognition (Bartley's body brought in on a plank), lamentation (the keen), and release (the benediction). What looks at first like an arc of escalating tragedy is in fact the patterned execution of a rite. Crucially, the deaths do not differentiate themselves; they accumulate. As Maurya counts her dead — "*I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house*" — the audience is forced to register not a singular tragic event but a recurrence (Synge, 1904/1968a, p. 24). *Time in Riders to the Sea* is cumulative. Each son repeats the pattern of the last; the sea performs the same action again and again. This is ritual time made visible.

If *Riders to the Sea* presents the wake as dramatic form, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* presents the collapse of two rituals — the wedding and the wake — into a single event. Synge's last, unfinished play returns to the Ulster cycle and the legend of Deirdre, foretold from infancy to bring ruin upon Ulster. From the play's opening, the language of marriage and the language of the grave are syntactically intertwined. Lavarcham warns Deirdre that to flee with Naisi is to court "*great sorrow*" and "*the day [she will be] going down to [her] grave*" (Synge, 1910/1968b, p. 211). Deirdre, far from resisting, embraces the conjunction. "*It's a sweet life you and I could have, Naisi,*" she tells him, but in the same breath she insists they "*go away to the woods of Alban,*" knowing the seven years that follow are stolen from death (Synge, 1910/1968b, p. 219).

When the lovers finally return to Emain, the wedding-feast Conchubor has prepared is, structurally, indistinguishable from a wake. The tent is pitched; the food is laid out; the company is gathered; but the body — Naisi's body, soon — is the centre of the scene. Deirdre's great valedictory speech, delivered over Naisi's grave, does the work both of bridal vow and of keen: "*It's you three will not see age or death coming — you that were my company when the fires on the hill-tops were put out and the stars were our friends only*" (Synge, 1910/1968b, p. 267). The lyrical present tense, the address to the dead as living interlocutors, the invocation of cosmic timekeepers (hill-fires, stars) rather than of clock time — all of this is the rhetoric of ritual rather than of realist drama.

Synge's structural decision is to refuse the sequential logic in which one first marries and then dies. Wedding and wake are co-extensive. Deirdre says explicitly, "*It's a pitiful thing, Conchubor, you have done this night in Emain; yet a thing will be a joy and triumph to the ends of life and time*" (Synge, 1910/1968b, p. 267). The double valence — pitiful and triumphant, ending and inauguration — is precisely the temporal signature of ritual, in which the moment of greatest loss is also the moment of greatest meaning-making. Love and death are not arranged in narrative succession but compressed into a single ritual instant. The play thereby offers a dramaturgy in which mythic time supersedes biographical time: Deirdre and Naisi are not characters who grow and decide and err; they are figures who enter, occupy, and complete a pattern.

The Playboy of the Western World may seem at first an unlikely candidate for ritual reading: it is a comedy, set in a shebeen in Mayo, and its surface is loud with social satire. Yet the play is structured with extraordinary precision around the ritual of communal storytelling. Christy Mahon arrives a stranger and is, almost immediately, asked to tell his story. Each retelling intensifies and elaborates the original act, and each retelling is greeted by his audience as if it were a sacred recital. Pegeen Mike's response, "*I've heard all times it's the poets are your like, fine*

fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused," is not the response of a girl to a man's confession; it is the response of a community to a foundational story (Synge, 1907/1968c, p. 81).

The repetition is the ritual. In Act I, Christy tells the story tentatively; in Act II, under the pressure of the village girls' admiration, he tells it again with more colour: "*With that, the sun came out between the cloud and the hill, and it shining green in my face. 'God have mercy on your soul,' says he, lifting a scythe; 'or on your own,' says I, raising the loy*"; by Act III the story has become the property of the community itself, repeated and embellished by others (Synge, 1907/1968c, p. 121). This is ritualization in Bell's sense: the strategic differentiation of certain speech-acts from ordinary speech, such that they accrue power. Christy's patricide narrative is not a piece of information; it is a recital, demanding ratification by the assembly.

What Synge then dramatises is the failure mode of ritual: the moment when the rite collides with the literal. Old Mahon's arrival, very much alive, ruptures the ceremonial space of the shebeen. The community, willing to celebrate a "*narrated*" patricide, recoils from the "*enacted*" one when Christy strikes his father a second time in the yard. Pegeen's anguished cry — "*There's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed*" — is one of the most penetrating formulations in modern drama of the difference between ritual representation and brute event (Synge, 1907/1968c, p. 169). The "*gallous story*" lives in ritual time, where deeds are repeated and reframed and shared; the "*dirty deed*" lives in profane time, where deeds are singular and irreversible. Christy's tragedy, and the village's, is the puncturing of the ritual frame. The play does not condemn ritual; it shows how dependent identity itself is upon it. Christy leaves at the end transformed not by what he has done but by what has been told about him: "*I'm master of all fights from now,*" he declares, walking out into a world in which he will continue to perform the part the village made (Synge, 1907/1968c, p. 173).

In the Shadow of the Glen takes the wake itself and turns it inside out. Dan Burke, an old farmer, feigns death in order to spy on his much younger wife, Nora. As he lies stiff under a sheet on the bed, the wake unfolds around him — Nora receives a passing Tramp, offers him whiskey, and confides her loneliness; later Michael Dara arrives to discuss a possible marriage now that Dan is "*dead*." Dan, in effect, watches his own wake, and at the climactic moment rises from the bed to denounce his wife and drive her from the house. The conceit is comic, but the formal stakes are serious. Synge inserts the audience into the structural position of the corpse: we, like Dan, watch the wake; we, like Dan, register the conversations the dead are not supposed to hear.

The play's key dramaturgical achievement is the porousness it introduces into the boundary between the living and the dead. Dan's body is on stage from the opening; he is the silent fourth presence in every dialogue; his eventual return to "*life*" is, in dramatic terms, less a resurrection than a refusal to remain in the role assigned. Nora's closing speech, when she leaves with the Tramp into the world of weather and movement, refuses both the position of widow and the position of wife: "*we'll be going now, I'm thinking, and its small joy we'd have here from this day,*" she tells the men, choosing the road and its cyclical motion over the cottage and its fixed roles (Synge, 1903/1968d, p. 57). The wake, in *In the Shadow of the Glen*, becomes the device by which Synge explodes the Victorian marriage plot. By staging a wake that is also a sham, he holds open the rite and shows how its structure allows truths to be spoken that no realist scene of marriage would permit.

Across all four plays, then, Synge's practice is consistent. The plays are not about rituals so much as built as rituals. They proceed by accumulation rather than escalation; they privilege the communal over the individual; they collapse temporal distinctions; they put the dead and the living in the same frame. They constitute a theatre of ritual form, vernacular in its materials and rigorous in its construction.

4. McPherson's Ritual Architectures

The Weir is the clearest twentieth-century inheritor of Synge's ritual dramaturgy. The play takes place in "a small rural bar" in the north-west of Ireland on a single windy night, and its action consists almost entirely of the telling of stories (McPherson, 1997a, p. 5). Jack tells the story of the fairy road and the knock on the door; Finbar tells of the haunted house in Carrick; Jim tells of the man dying who appeared in a graveyard asking for a child's grave; Valerie tells of her drowned daughter and the phone call from the swimming pool. These are not anecdotes interrupted by plot. They are the plot, in the sense that the play's action is the performance of the storytelling sequence itself.

The pub functions, in McPherson's hands, as a sacred space — what one might call a secular church. As Eamonn Jordan notes, McPherson's spaces "operate as sites of secular liturgy, where confession, atonement, and witness are restaged outside the institutional Church" (Jordan, 2010, p. 192). The bar's door, repeatedly opened and closed against the wind, marks a threshold between the social world and the liminal one; once inside, the characters enter Turner's *communitas*. Differences of status (Finbar's prosperity, Jack's loneliness, Brendan's landlord-publican role, Valerie's urban refinement) are not erased but suspended. The ritual of buying a round, the ritual of pouring a small one and a brandy, the ritual of pulling the chair closer to the fire — all of these are exactly the kind of ritualization Bell describes, "ways of acting that distinguish themselves from more quotidian ones" (Bell, 1992, p. 90).

What makes *The Weir* a structurally ritual play, however, is the way the storytelling sequence accumulates. The first three stories are recognisable Irish ghost stories, told with a certain performative pleasure; they entertain. Valerie's story shifts the register entirely. "I just thought it might have been Niamh," she says of the call, and the past tense of her grief tears the ritual loose from its function as entertainment and turns it into mourning (McPherson, 1997a, p. 56). What had been a rite of *communitas* becomes a rite of confession. Jack's final story, told after Valerie's — the story of the lonely sandwich made for him by a stranger — is no longer a ghost story at all but a personal admission, an act of return offered to Valerie in exchange for hers (McPherson, 1997a, p. 70). The structural movement of *The Weir* is, precisely, the movement of a successful ritual: from gathering through entertainment through confession to *communitas*. By the end the wind has dropped, the night has aged, and the characters depart into a transformed dawn.

Shining City stages the modern therapeutic encounter and asks whether it can perform the ritual work that the wake or the confessional once performed. The play is set in the Dublin office of Ian, an ex-priest now training as a counsellor; his client, John, has come because he is being haunted by his recently deceased wife. The five scenes follow the cadence of a course of

therapy: opening intake, deepening disclosure, climactic revelation, ostensible closure, and a coda in which Ian is alone in the office.

McPherson's formal wager is to set up the therapy session as a candidate ritual — confession plus exorcism, modernised — and then to show it failing on its own terms. Ian's professional speech is studded with the cadences of a discipline that wants to be a rite: "*And that's a process, Mara, you know? It's not... it just takes, time*" (McPherson, 2004, p. 18). John's long, halting confession of his marital betrayals and his guilt is precisely the kind of unburdening for which the confessional was once designed. But the play withholds the absolution that would complete the rite. When John, in the fourth scene, declares that the haunting has stopped — "*I'm grand. Thanks. I think I'm ok now, you know?*" — the audience suspects, with Ian, that nothing has been transformed; only managed (McPherson, 2004, p. 50). Then, in the play's final image, Ian, alone in the empty office, hears a sound, turns, and sees the ghost of John's wife standing in the doorway. The stage direction is laconic: "*the ghost is standing there, looking at him*" (McPherson, 2004, p. 60).

That final apparition is the play's formal verdict on its own ritual frame. The therapeutic session, with its hourly slots and professional vocabulary, has been unable to contain or dispatch what John brought into the room. The supernatural ruptures the secular frame, exposing the inadequacy of an attempted rite stripped of its sacred warrant. McPherson does not ridicule therapy; he registers, with grave compassion, its insufficiency to the ritual labour the play asks it to perform. The structure is therefore that of a ritual that misfires — a form which is itself meaningful, since it shows that the need for ritual outlives the institutions designed to host it.

The Seafarer relocates ritual into the most ostensibly profane of frames: a Christmas Eve poker game in a "*rough-looking but homely*" north Dublin house (McPherson, 2006, p. 5). What unfolds, however, is a wager for a soul. The stranger Mr Lockhart, brought along by Nicky, reveals himself privately to the recovering alcoholic Sharky as the devil — the same figure who, decades earlier, had let Sharky walk free from a holding cell in exchange for a future debt now come due. The game is, in effect, a Faustian bargain restaged as kitchen-table cards.

The ritual scaffolding of the play is doubly inscribed. First, the seasonal calendar: Christmas Eve is the longest night, the liturgical threshold between Advent and Nativity, between darkness and dawn. McPherson's structure follows this pattern with strict fidelity. The play descends through hangover, quarrel, cold, drink, and Lockhart's glittering speech of damnation —

"*I am dying every minute. The constant terror... do you know what that's like?*" (McPherson, 2006, p. 75) — toward a midnight in which Sharky appears certain to lose. The second inscription is the game itself, with its own ritualised rounds: deal, ante, draw, bet, show. The repetition is not narrative; it is liturgical. Each hand restages the wager.

The play's redemptive turn is achieved formally rather than morally. Richard, Sharky's blind brother, mistakenly grasps Lockhart's cards in the final round, and Lockhart, bound by the rules he himself enforces, must accept the hand played. The damning straight is replaced by a winning two pair. The mechanism is comic, even slapstick, but its ritual logic is precise: the rite, properly observed, releases its participant. Sharky walks out into a Christmas morning in which "*the sky is bright*" and the bells are ringing, and the audience understands that what has occurred is not merely a lucky escape but the completion of a liturgy of darkness-to-dawn

(McPherson, 2006, p. 90). McPherson's achievement is to have written a Christmas Eve play in which the religious meaning of the season is restored not by piety but by structure.

St Nicholas, an early McPherson monologue, reduces the ritual apparatus to its most bare. A single speaker — a "bitter, washed-up theatre critic" — addresses the audience directly for ninety minutes, recounting his strange months in London among a coven of vampires (McPherson, 1997b, p. 5). The form of the monologue is, in McPherson's hands, a confessional rite. The speaker buttonholes the audience as one might a priest, an analyst, or a stranger on a long train. "I'm going to tell you something," he begins, and the audience is enlisted as the necessary second party of the rite (McPherson, 1997b, p. 11).

The structural feature that matters most is the recursive shape of the speech. The critic returns repeatedly to certain images — the smell of the pub, his own physical decay, the light through the window of the vampires' house — and each return arrives at the image with a different valence. This is not the linear structure of a confession aimed at absolution; it is the spiralling structure of testimony, in which the speaker circles the wound. The play implicates the audience formally: by sitting and listening, we are not consumers of a story but participants in the rite of telling. As Nicholas Grene observes of McPherson's monologue plays generally, they "make of the audience a constitutive presence rather than a passive spectator," shifting theatre back toward its ritual function as communal witness (Grene, 2017, p. 124). The vampire content, lurid as it is, matters less than the formal demand the monologue makes. Like Synge's keeners and McPherson's pub-goers, the audience of *St Nicholas* is gathered into a rite whose efficacy depends on their presence.

5. Comparative Analysis — The Politics of Ritual Time vs. Linear Time

Placed beside one another, Synge and McPherson reveal a remarkably consistent set of dramaturgical strategies despite the century that separates them. Four points of comparison can be drawn out: temporality, the presence of the dead, the communal voice, and the use of ritually charged space. The following table sketches their convergences and divergences

Both playwrights, first, refuse the linear plot of cause-and-effect realism in favour of accumulative or cyclical structures. *Riders to the Sea* unfolds as a sequence of identifications and laments rather than as a chain of decisions; *The Weir* unfolds as a sequence of stories. Each accumulates meaning by the very fact of repetition rather than by escalation. Time in these plays does not advance; it gathers. As Patrick Lonergan argues of McPherson, "the dramaturgy turns on the deferral and intensification of revelation rather than on the engineering of climax," a description that applies just as accurately to Synge (Lonergan, 2009, p. 189).

Second, the dead are active participants. In Synge, this is rendered through the literal and the visionary: Maurya sees Michael riding behind Bartley; Bartley's body is laid on the table; Dan's "corpse" rises from the bed; Naisi's grave is the centre of Deirdre's last scene. In McPherson, the dead enter through telephone, through ghost, through devil, through the frame of testimony itself. The structural effect is the same: the ritual stage is one on which the deceased retain agency. They are not flashbacks; they are presences. Schechner's observation that in ritual "the past is not over but is performed forward" describes both playwrights with precision (Schechner, 1985, p. 38).

Third, both privilege the communal voice over the individual protagonist. Synge's keening women are not characters in any individuated sense; they are a chorus. The villagers of *The Playboy* function similarly, as a single ratifying body whose collective judgement creates and unmakes Christy. McPherson's pub-goers are differentiated and deftly drawn, but their dramatic function is collective: each story belongs to the sequence, and meaning resides in the sequence rather than in any single speaker. Even *St Nicholas*, ostensibly a monologue, depends structurally on the audience as the second party of the rite.

Fourth, both deploy enclosed, ritually charged spaces. The Aran cottage, the Mayo shebeen, the glen cottage, the tent at Emain on Synge's side; the Leitrim pub, the Dublin office, the North-Dublin kitchen, the theatre auditorium itself on McPherson's. None of these is an "expansive realistic setting" in the manner of Ibsenite drawing-room realism. Each is a precinct set apart, marked off from the surrounding world by weather, by walls, by a closed door — exactly the kind of bounded space that ritualization requires (Bell, 1992, p. 90).

The crucial difference between the two playwrights is contextual rather than structural. Synge's rituals belong to a pre-modern, Catholic-pagan rural Ireland still legible in his own moment; the keen, the wake, the shebeen storytelling, the mythic-historical wedding are practices he could observe, gather, and dramatise. McPherson's rituals are secular adaptations. The pub stands in for the church, the therapy session for the confessional, the card-game for the Mass, the monologue for the homily. McPherson, that is, secularises Synge's sacred forms while preserving their structural logic. This is not a watering down; it is a translation. The need for a precinct in which the community can manage its dead, articulate its guilts, and perform its identities does not disappear with the receding of institutional Catholicism. It migrates.

The shared formal implication is what may be called a dramaturgy of "arrested time." In both bodies of work, the forward motion of plot is repeatedly halted by the act of telling, lamenting, dealing, or ritualising; in those halts, the past irrupts into the present, and the present opens into something other than itself. This is the temporality of ritual proper, as Eliade describes it: a "reactualization" in which "the participant is made contemporary with the mythical event" (Eliade, 1957/1987, p. 68). What Synge and McPherson achieve, against the realist current of their respective theatres, is the staging of arrested time as the very engine of dramatic meaning.

To recover ritual form as a structural principle in Synge and McPherson is also to recover its politics. Ritual time, as we have seen, is recursive, communal, and oriented toward meaning rather than toward production. It stands, by its very structure, in opposition to the time of capitalist modernity — which is linear, individuated, and oriented toward productivity, profit, and progress. E.P. Thompson long ago described the disciplining of the modern worker as a transition from "task-orientation" to "time-orientation," in which the irregular, seasonal, communal rhythms of pre-industrial labour were reorganised under the abstract clock-time of the factory (Thompson, 1967, p. 60). Ritual form, in dramaturgy, is one of the last places where task-time, season-time, and communal time can still be staged as the dominant order of meaning.

Both Synge and McPherson stage communities whose temporality is measured by deaths, seasons, returns, and stories rather than by clocks and contracts. Maurya does not count weeks; she counts drowned sons. The men in *The Weir* do not check their phones; they buy rounds, and rounds dictate the unfolding. *The Seafarer* unfolds across the threshold of Christmas Eve into

Christmas morning, a calendar drawn from liturgy rather than from commerce. *The Playboy's* shebeen marks time by the rhythm of the story's retelling. To stage these temporalities under proscenium light, in an industrial city, before a paying twenty-first-century audience, is to perform a quiet but pointed formal critique. The play asks the audience, for two hours, to live in another time. To accept the offer is to feel, by contrast, the particular pressure of the time one is otherwise under.

This argument is not nostalgic. Neither Synge nor McPherson presents the ritual community as innocent. Synge's shebeen is full of casual cruelty and gendered constraint; his glen cottage is the site of a stifling marriage; his keening women are bound by economies of gender and class that he does not pretend to dissolve. McPherson's pub is also a precinct of male loneliness, alcoholic harm, and historical violence; his therapy office cannot stop the ghost; his card game is set in a house "in disarray" and among men whose lives have largely failed by the conventional metrics (McPherson, 2006, p. 5). The point is not that ritual time is good and modern time is bad. The point is that ritual time is a different form of time, and that its presence on stage exposes the contingency of the temporal regime in which the audience otherwise lives.

In the postcolonial frame, this formal politics gains additional weight. As Declan Kiberd has argued, colonial modernity sought to "rationalize" Irish life along the temporal lines of the metropole, treating local rhythms — the wake, the pattern, the seasonal pilgrimage — as either backward survivals to be modernised away or as picturesque material to be folkloricised (Kiberd, 1995, p. 28). To preserve those rhythms not as ethnographic content but as dramatic form is to preserve, in the very architecture of the play, modes of community and knowledge that colonial and capitalist modernities tried to break. Synge's recovery of ritual form was, in his own moment, controversial precisely because his bourgeois Dublin audiences sensed, even if they could not articulate, that the structure of his plays was not theirs. McPherson's recovery of the same forms in a globalised, deregulated Ireland performs a comparable task under altered conditions: it offers a theatrical space in which the Tiger's linear time of growth-and-collapse is held momentarily at bay.

There is, finally, a quieter political claim implicit in this dramaturgy: that grief, guilt, and longing cannot be metabolised on a productivity schedule. The wake takes the time it takes. The story takes the time it takes. The card game runs the rounds it runs. To structure a play around these durations is to insist, formally, that human meaning is not a matter that can be contracted to a quarterly horizon. In an era of ever-accelerating informational and economic life, the slow accretion of ritual form is itself a counter-practice. Synge and McPherson are not anti-modern; they are arguing, in dramaturgical grammar, with modernity about the question of time.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that ritual, in the work of John Millington Synge and Conor McPherson, functions not as content but as form. The wake in *Riders to the Sea*, the wedding-wake of *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, the storytelling rite of *The Playboy of the Western World*, and the mock wake of *In the Shadow of the Glen*; the pub storytelling of *The Weir*, the failed therapeutic rite of *Shining City*, the liturgical card game of *The Seafarer*, and the confessional monologue of *St Nicholas* — these

are not eight depictions of rituals embedded in eight conventional plays. They are eight plays whose dramaturgies are themselves ritually constructed.

From the analysis, three contributions follow. First, ritual must be understood, in this lineage of Irish drama, as a formal principle, not merely a thematic motif. Reading Synge and McPherson for ritual content alone has blinded criticism to the deeper structural inheritance they share — a dramaturgy organised by repetition, accretion, *communitas*, and the co-presence of the dead. Once that structural lens is in place, plays as different in tone as *Riders to the Sea* and *The Weir* reveal themselves as cognate organisms.

Second, the continuity from Synge to McPherson constitutes an identifiable tradition of ritual dramaturgy in Irish theatre, parallel and at times counter to the better-known tradition of social realism. This is not to suggest a simple line of influence; McPherson's relation to Synge is allusive rather than imitative. It is to suggest that the dramaturgical resources Synge mined from a still-living rural ritual culture remain available, in altered form, to a playwright working a century later in an apparently secular and urban Ireland. The pub, the office, and the card-table can do what the wake-room and the shebeen once did, because the formal logic — the precinct set apart, the gathered community, the dead made present, the speech made rite — persists even when the explicit religious content recedes.

Third, ritual form carries political stakes. By staging communities whose temporality is recursive rather than linear, communal rather than individuated, oriented toward meaning rather than toward productivity, Synge and McPherson offer a sustained formal critique of modernity's temporal regime. This critique is not nostalgic; the rituals they stage are flawed, gendered, sometimes painful. But the form of ritual — the very fact that time can be made to circle, can be made to gather, can be made to hold the dead and the living in the same room — preserves a possibility that capitalist modernity tends to foreclose. To attend a Synge or a McPherson play is, briefly, to inhabit that possibility.

There is a final provocation worth making. If, with Schechner, one accepts that “*performance behavior isn't free and easy*” but is “*behavior heightened, if ever so slightly, and publicly displayed; twice-behaved behavior*” — that is, that theatre and ritual share a common origin in restored behaviour — then Synge and McPherson are not, properly speaking, importing ritual into drama (Schechner, 1985, p. 36). They are returning drama to a memory of itself. The wake and the wedding, the keen and the ghost story, the card game and the confession are not departures from theatre's essence; they are theatre's essence, recovered in a vernacular Irish key. To watch *Riders to the Sea* or *The Weir* is to be reminded that the stage is, before it is anything else, a place where a community gathers, by lamp or firelight, to summon its dead, to speak what is otherwise unspeakable, and to be transformed, however briefly, by the act of having gathered. Synge and McPherson — across a century of altered conditions — keep faith with that older purpose. Their plays are the rites in which Irish theatre remembers what theatre is for.

Creative Commons License Statement

This research work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>. To view the complete legal code, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.en>. Under the terms of this license,

members of the community may copy, distribute, and transmit the article, provided that proper, prominent, and unambiguous attribution is given to the authors, and the material is not used for commercial purposes or modified in any way. Reuse is only allowed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

About the Author

Dr. Didachos Mbeng Afuh is a Senior Lecturer of British Literature at the University of Ebolowa, Cameroon. His research work focus on Modern Drama, Comparative Literature and Postcolonial Studies. He has published numerous articles in national and international journals, with his research delving into topics such literature and globalization, myth, nature, and the female terrain, the authentic and the theatre of universality, language as a currency, exclusionary politics and postcoloniality, and many others. He is the author of the book *Synge, Shaw and the Drama of the Anthropocene*.

References

- Aristotle. (1996). *Poetics* (M. Heath, Trans.). Penguin Books. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Aristotle_s_Poetics.html?id=14gTwJMEI7UC&redir_esc=y
- Bell, C. (1992). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Ritual_Theory_Ritual_Practice.html?id=hQQYXZeK0ksC&redir_esc=y
- Eliade, M. (1987). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Harcourt. (Original work published 1957). Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_Sacred_and_the_Profane.html?id=zBzzv977CLgC&redir_esc=y
- Grene, N. (1999). *The politics of Irish drama: Plays in context from Boucicault to Friel*. Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from <https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/60518/sample/9780521660518wsc00.pdf>
- Grene, N. (2017). *The theatre of Conor McPherson: Conspicuous communities*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118902264.ch52>
- Jordan, E. (2010). *Dissident dramaturgies: Contemporary Irish theatre*. Irish Academic Press. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883310000805>
- Kiberd, D. (1995). *Inventing Ireland: The literature of the modern nation*. Jonathan Cape. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Inventing_Ireland.html?id=EFwcAKR3MqcC&redir_esc=y
- Loneragan, P. (2009). *Theatre and globalization: Irish drama in the Celtic Tiger era*. Palgrave Macmillan. Retrieved from

[https://books.google.ro/books/about/Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950.html?id=OFDwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Irish_Drama_and_Theatre_Since_1950.html?id=OFDwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)

- McPherson, C. (1997a). *The weir*. Nick Hern Books. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/The Weir.html?id=7pnymQEACAAJ&redir_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_Weir.html?id=7pnymQEACAAJ&redir_esc=y)
- McPherson, C. (1997b). *St Nicholas*. Nick Hern Books. Retrieved from <https://www.nickhernbooks.co.uk/st-nicholas>
- McPherson, C. (2004). *Shining city*. Nick Hern Books. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Shining City.html?id=2va8kJPnd-4C&redir_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Shining_City.html?id=2va8kJPnd-4C&redir_esc=y)
- McPherson, C. (2006). *The seafarer*. Nick Hern Books. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com.bn/books?id=6TPOfHESiMkC>
- Murray, C. (2007). Introduction. In C. Murray (Ed.), *Conor McPherson: Critical perspectives* (pp. 1–10). Carysfort Press.
- Schechner, R. (1985). *Between theater and anthropology*. University of Pennsylvania Press. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Between Theater Anthropology.html?id=g2sHhXkq7bAC&redir_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Between_Theater_Anthropology.html?id=g2sHhXkq7bAC&redir_esc=y)
- Synge, J. M. (1968a). *Riders to the sea*. In A. Saddlemyer (Ed.), *J. M. Synge: Collected works, Volume III: Plays Book 1* (pp. 1–27). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1904). Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/Riders to the Sea.html?id=QLrTEQAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/Riders_to_the_Sea.html?id=QLrTEQAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y)
- Synge, J. M. (1968b). *Deirdre of the sorrows*. In A. Saddlemyer (Ed.), *J. M. Synge: Collected works, Volume IV: Plays Book 2* (pp. 177–269). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1910). Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1922>
- Synge, J. M. (1968c). *The playboy of the western world*. In A. Saddlemyer (Ed.), *J. M. Synge: Collected works, Volume IV: Plays Book 2* (pp. 53–175). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1907). Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1240/1240-h/1240-h.htm>
- Synge, J. M. (1968d). *In the shadow of the glen*. In A. Saddlemyer (Ed.), *J. M. Synge: Collected works, Volume III: Plays Book 1* (pp. 31–59). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1903). Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1618/1618-h/1618-h.htm>
- Thompson, E. P. (1967). Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism. *Past & Present*, 38, 56–97. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119395485.ch3>
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Publishing. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/The Ritual Process.html?id=IBRuiOX8VEEC&redir_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_Ritual_Process.html?id=IBRuiOX8VEEC&redir_esc=y)
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. Performing Arts Journal Publications. Retrieved from [https://books.google.ro/books/about/From Ritual to Theatre.html?id=zNoOAQAAMA_AJ&redir_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/From_Ritual_to_Theatre.html?id=zNoOAQAAMA_AJ&redir_esc=y)
- Wallace, C. (2006). *Suspect cultures: Narrative, identity and citation in 1990s new drama*. Litteraria Pragensia. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Clare-Wallace->

[2/publication/284993084 Suspect Cultures Narrative Identity and Citation in 1990s New Drama/links/6295ee931117461e03acecec/Suspect-Cultures-Narrative-Identity-and-Citation-in-1990s-New-Drama.pdf](https://www.ejournals.org/publication/284993084-Suspect-Cultures-Narrative-Identity-and-Citation-in-1990s-New-Drama/links/6295ee931117461e03acecec/Suspect-Cultures-Narrative-Identity-and-Citation-in-1990s-New-Drama.pdf)

Yeats, W. B. (1966). Certain noble plays of Japan. In *Essays and introductions* (pp. 221–237). Macmillan. (Original work published 1916).