

## **THE WEIR by Conor McPherson**

### **Themes, Time, Setting, Supernaturalism**

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*Warning: Contains spoilers*

### **Themes**

#### **Old-Ireland-good, New-Ireland-bad**

From “The Structural Elegance of Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*” by Kevin Kerrane

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20558119>

“Even as McPherson’s plays follow the conventions of realism, he succeeds in mapping the interior landscapes of an Ireland in transition. In a 1999 interview, the playwright recalls hearing an academic say that the popularity of *The Weir* resulted in ‘its representation of old Ireland meeting new Ireland.’ In this reading, the men in the pub – comfortable with superstition and secure in their social roles – are remnants of a traditional culture that offers consolation to a lonely and confused Dubliner: ‘They accept her belief that she has had a terrifying supernatural encounter and they don’t judge her’, McPherson says. ... ‘People see *The Weir* as a sort of Old-Ireland-good, New-Ireland-bad play and this is why they’ve liked it” (p. 118)

#### **How does this manifest in the play?**

Almost immediately in their conversation, on p. 3, Jack and Brendan show disdain for “the Harp drinkers”, as opposed to those who drink Guinness. Although many Irish drink Harp, Guinness is the beer of the “real” Ireland, with origins that trace back to 1759. It’s a dark, heavy stout: not for the faint of heart or many non-Irish palates, despite being exported, albeit in a weaker form. It appears black, although the manufacturers call the color “dark ruby”. It is drunk from a tap, not just to taste it at its best, but for the ritual of sharing it with friends in the social setting of a pub. Bottled Guinness is not as robust. Exported, bottled Guinness is weaker still – out-and-out insipid compared to Guinness on tap. Guinness started making its lager, Harp, in 1960. It’s amber in color and significantly lighter in taste with less alcohol than their stout.

Throughout the play, Brendan, Jack, Jim and Finbar discuss the Germans, their name for tourists from the Continent, who are generally regarded as intruders and not particularly welcome. The Germans would be among the “Harp drinkers,” and therefore, in some cases, symptomatic of New-Ireland-bad. Tourists have come to the area for some time for its natural beauty, beaches, and the peace and calm offered by its secluded location. Their increased influx is a recent phenomenon, a byproduct of the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger (on pp. 8-10 of this paper). Both Finbar and Jim drink Harp, but in this context, Jack and Brendan would not categorize Jim as a “Harp drinker” or an outsider. On the other hand, Finbar, though born and bred in the local countryside, has made himself an outsider, having left the area decades ago, and choosing to return only to profit from buying, developing, and reselling the property of its residents.



Our set designer, Andrea Bechert, found this photo of an Irish pub interior.  
At the top center hangs the Irish flag bearing the Guinness logo

A section of the play, reprinted below, shows the characters' attitude towards the tourists and towards New Ireland profiting from Old Ireland, which Jack consistently derides Finbar for doing. With the advent of the Celtic Tiger, real estate developers like Finbar built fast, cheaply made, over-priced housing developments all over Ireland, including locally on the shores of the North Atlantic, in the shadow of the Knock.

JACK. Another week or two now, you'll be seeing the first of the Germans.

BRENDAN. Mm. Stretch in the evening, yeah.

JACK. You still wouldn't think about clearing one of the fields for a few caravans  
*[note: in Ireland, a caravan, or carbhán, is a camper equipped with living quarters]*

BRENDAN. Ah.

JACK The top field. *[note: the one his sisters had urged Brendan to sell earlier that day]*

BRENDAN. Ah there wouldn't be a lot of shelter up there, Jack. There'd be a wind up there that'd cut you.

JIM. D'you know what you could do? The herd'd be grand up there, and you could, you know, down here.

BRENDAN. Ah. *(Short pause.)* They do be around anyway. You know yourself.

JIM. Ah, they do.

JACK. You're not chasing the extra revenue.

BRENDAN. Or the work!

JIM. They do be around right enough.

BRENDAN. I'll leave the campsites to Finbar, ha? He'll sort them out. *[note: a campsite of caravans is pictured on the next page]*

JACK. Ah, Finbar's in real need of a few shekels. *(They laugh.)*

BRENDAN. Ah he's in dire need of a few bob, the poor fella, that's right, that's right.

JACK Mm. *(Pause.)*

BRENDAN. Yeah. If you had all ... the families out there. On their holliers [*note: Irish slang for holidays, which are a UK word for vacations; in this case, summer vacation*]. And all the kids and all. You'd feel the evenings turning. When they'd be leaving. And whatever about how quiet it is now. It'd be fucking shocking quiet then. *(Short pause.)* You know? *(Pause.)*

Pictured below is a busy caravan and camping park under the grey clouds of Strandhill, County Sligo, during the holiday summer season. Knocknarea hill ("the Knock" of the play) is in the background. Strandhill is situated at the western base of Knocknarea. Both are on the Cúil Irra (Coolera) peninsula in Sligo Bay, five miles west of Sligo town, and face the Atlantic Ocean.



Brendan may hate the Germans, but it's notably quiet after they leave for the season. On one hand, that's a good thing: he doesn't have to tolerate the noisy chaos they bring or hear them "playing all old sixties songs on their guitars", as he says in the final minutes of the play. But there's also a negative side to the sudden quiet when they are gone, which has to do with the isolation and alienation of day-to-day life in the region, described by Jack when he talks about the auto shop he operates, which he inherited from his father:

I'm down in the garage. And the fucking tin roof on the thing. On my own on that country road. You see it was bypassed by the main road into Carrick. And there's no ... like in the summer the heat has the place like an oven, with the roof, or if it's not

that, it's the rain pelting down on it like bricks, the noise of it. And there you'll be, the only car stopping in be someone that knows the area real well. Ah, you'd definitely feel it, like.

Isolation and alienation are some of the factors, along with largely grey, dank weather, that contribute to a "pervasive dissonance" for these characters, which is discussed further on pp. 17-19 in this paper.



Though situated NW of Dublin in County Meath, this building could easily be Jack's auto shop with its tin roof and limestone walls.

Jack and Brendan have no desire to sell their land, homes, or other real estate holdings to Finbar. Brendan's sisters periodically visit him on the family farm to try to change his mind. As he tells Jack in the beginning of the play, earlier that day, "I had the sisters over doing their rounds. Checking up on me ... At me to sell the top field". "Checking their investments," Jack commiserates. "Keeping the pressure on you". The passage below from suggests that Brendan and Jack may be among only a few who are holding out:

*(Brendan returns with a bottle of wine [for Valerie].)*

FINBAR. You'd want to be giving her a neighbourly ... rate, now, is the thing, ha?

JIM. Oh yeah.

JACK. Would you listen to him? "Neighbourly rates ..." Wasn't by giving neighbourly rates you bought half the fucking town.

FINBAR. Half the town' *(To Valerie, winking.)* I bought the whole town. Eye for the gap, you see.

JACK Eye for your gap is right.

An “eye for the gap” is Irish vernacular for the ability to see opportunity, from a phrase often used to describe rugby players who can spot the weakness in their opponent’s defense. Jack may be the loudest critic of what he sees as Finbar’s opportunism, but he has already questioned Brendan twice about selling his land. Is he testing Brendan’s comradeship and loyalty as part of Old Ireland? Is his question a reflection of his own possible conflict over deciding not to sell to Finbar? Or does it have to do with his choice in the past not to leave the area with his fiancée for Dublin, of which he is reminded every morning he wakes up? His conflicting emotions, like Brendan’s about the chaos the Germans bring vs the quiet when they are gone, are just some of the “opposites” that run through the play,

David Ledingham talked to me recently about the complex relationship his character, Jack, has with Finbar. Some of their animosity is related to the Old Ireland–New Ireland divide and how Jack earned his wealth. Some of it also has to do with the circumstances under which Finbar moved out of the area. Jack, who is Old Ireland, is “comfortable with superstition” per the Kevin Kerrane quote that opens this paper, whereas Finbar fled from the area after spending the night in fear of a perceived haunting. Jack sees that as a weakness. He also regards himself, Brendan, and Jim as the stalwarts who remain, despite the lure of new wealth to be found if they sell their homesteads to real estate developers like Finbar. They have pride in their strength to bear the isolation as well as the climate, which in Sligo is as challenging as that of the rest of coastal Ireland. It is windy and mostly cloudy year-round, with rainfall throughout the year. The temperature is moderate – it typically varies from 38°F to 64°F and is rarely below 31°F or above 71°F – but with the wind, rain, and lack of sunshine, it can be downright dismal.

The men, even the younger Brendan, have lived in the harsh conditions of the rural Northwest, doing the best they can with limited opportunities. Brendan comes from a family who long ago established a farm. Jack works a family auto business, and Finbar’s father was a “pillar of the community,” as he tells Valerie shortly after they arrive at the bar, who had extensive real estate holdings. Finbar is riding the crest of the wave of the boom. He took off for Carrick, converting his inheritance into real-estate investments. His hotel there, the Arms, is full of out-of-towners spending their newly acquired wealth. Jack, Brendan, and Jim are suspicious, resentful, and certain that the economic upturn is not going to last, as are many other Irish people. In fact, the economy would implode around 2008, and the housing bubble would burst (more on this later).

Despite the region’s hardships, neither Jim, Brendan nor Jack wish to leave. Jack’s final monologue reveals that he sacrificed his one true love rather than accompany his fiancée on her move to Dublin. He begins by saying: “And I don’t know why it was a thing with me that I ... an irrational fear, I suppose, that kept me here”.

Like Jack, Brendan seems unable to fully articulate his reasons for staying – for why he won’t sell the top field of his family’s land, in spite of his sisters’ urging and the value it has recently gained. He admits he doesn’t use it much, “Too much trouble driving a herd up”. (The herd are either sheep or goats, as they are the only animals that can feed off the rough vegetation and navigate the rocky terrain.) When Jack suggests that Brendan is trying to

spite his sisters, he replies, “Not at all. I’m, just. It’s a grand spot up there. Ah, I don’t know. Just ...”. “They’ve no attachment to the place, no?”, Jack says. “No they don’t”, Brendan replies. “They look around, and it’s ... ‘Ah yeah’ ... You know?” After he and Jack laugh a little, Brendan adds, “It’s gas”. “Gas” in Irish slang means funny or odd. A person or a situation can be gas. It can also be used to express shock or disbelief. In this context, either can work.

The photo below depicts the area around Knocknarea Mountain in Sligo, on the north side from Strandhill Beach. Brendan’s farm could be one of those pictured at the foot of the Knock.



They may be unable to verbalize it, but there is an underlying and deep-rooted reason why the stalwarts remain. Many consider it incumbent upon themselves to preserve the Irish way of life. When I was dramaturge and director for Martin McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, which Jewel produced in 2016, I wrote about Ireland’s long history of invasion. Vulnerably open to the North Atlantic, the Northwest, where Sligo is situated, was raided throughout history. The conquerors forbade the use of the Gaelic language and suppressed the ancient traditions. An additional threat came in the form of the Great Famine. Although there have been numerous famines in Ireland dating through to the end of the nineteenth century, the Great Hunger (“An Gorta Mor” in Gaelic) was the worst. In that famine, also known as the Great Famine, the Great Potato Famine, and the Irish Potato Famine, roughly one million Irish people died of starvation and epidemic disease between 1846 and 1851, nearly one-eighth of the entire population. Some two million emigrated in a period of a little more than a decade (1845-55), with most going to England and North America. The emigration from the area continued unabated during the second half of the

19<sup>th</sup> century. It continues to this day at a lesser degree, although there was a sharp spike during the severe economic downturn that followed the demise of the Celtic Tiger.

An Gorta Mor was a turning point in Ireland's cultural history: as the population diminished, the traditional communities were dislocated, the identities of the residents were fragmented, and the Gaelic cultural and linguistic heritage began to dissolve. Those who remained endeavored to maintain it, especially in the more remote parts of Ireland. To this day, enclaves exist deep in the rural provinces where only Gaelic is spoken, and the traditions are upheld.

The efforts to preserve Ireland's rich traditional folklore and culture endured, and in recent years, has become more widespread, with the Gaelic language being used in the media, taught in schools, and seen on street, highway, and other signs throughout the country. A win for team Old Ireland? In the time of transition of the Celtic Tiger, when New Ireland threatened to overtake Old Ireland, Brendan, Jack, Jim, and others like them dug in their heels, held on, and ultimately prevailed as stewards of their homes, businesses, communities, and traditions.

Valerie has likely chosen the area as a refuge, a balm for her soul. Like tourists before her, she may have come to rural Sligo for its natural beauty, beaches, and the peace and calm offered by its secluded location. Dublin, as the hub of New Ireland, is choking with newly sprung tech companies and burgeoning building construction. By moving from Dublin to Sligo, Valerie seems to be making a conscious move from "New-Ireland-bad" to "Old-Ireland-good", seeking comfort and stability. Perhaps she vacationed in the area with her husband in happier times, returning later with their daughter, Niamh, for a few summers. Niamh may have developed her desire to learn to swim while playing in the waves on the beaches. Valerie also could have been raised, at least for a time, in a rural area; when she tells Brendan, "This glass is fine," about reusing her bar tumbler for another pour, Finbar says, "Oh, Country ways! Good girl!" and the rest laugh good-naturedly. She may not be from the country, but she is certainly adaptable.

The different environments of Sligo and Dublin embody the old and the new, the stable and the tumultuous, the trusted and the uncertain. The bar itself offers succor: it is a room in a cottage that was the original home Brendan's great-great-great grandparents built on the farmstead. Much of the furniture is home furniture; Brendan and his friends built the bar itself. The pub is spare and utilitarian, but spotless: the glasses shine, the wood gleams. There is an inviting warmth. The bar belongs to the community. It is a place where locals, who have known one another since birth, and their families before them, are welcomed. No one has to pretend or impress; no one needs to put on airs. It reflects the Old Ireland. It is why Valerie has come there.

It is also why Finbar has brought her to the pub. He wants her to feel welcome in her new home, and he knows that Brendan, Jack, and Jim will provide that. He also wants to impress Valerie with how different he is from the others; that he is more refined, worldly, and wealthy than his peers. They know his game and his pretentiousness, and don't let him get

away with it. What the others see as negative, Finbar sees as shrewd, as evidenced by this exchange:

FINBAR. *[to Valerie]* ... Don't mind these country fellas.

JACK. Jays. You're not long out of it yourself, says the man, ha?

FINBAR. *(Winks.)* They're only jealous Valerie because I went the town seek my fortune. And they all stayed out here on the bog picking their holes.

JACK. Janey, now, ha? You didn't have very far to seek. Just a quick look in Big Finbar's will, I think is more like it.

FINBAR. Big Finbar's will! That's shrewd investment, boy. That's an eye for the gap.

**Celtic Tiger/Time Setting of *The Weir*:** As mentioned earlier, the characters in *The Weir* are living amid the effects of the Celtic Tiger, a period of huge economic growth in Ireland that began around 1993 and continued until it came crashing down nearly overnight in late 2007. It was preceded by some of the worse economic conditions in Ireland's history, characterized by wide unemployment and a surge of emigration. Its aftermath plunged the country back into an economic depression, with the rates of unemployment and emigration returning almost to where they had been before.

Martin McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* was written in 1993, shortly before the economic boom. Leenane is in one of the poorest regions of Ireland, so they were hit hard. Rural Sligo didn't fare much better. To show how the contrast of Ireland before and after the Celtic Tiger affects the characters in *The Weir*, here's a relevant passage from the glossary I wrote for *Beauty Queen*. The names mentioned are characters in the play:

Until shortly after the time of the play, Ireland had been in a lengthy period of economic stagnation marked by high unemployment, emigration, and crippling public debt, even though tax levels were high. Some, like Pato, opt to emigrate to countries with more opportunity. Others, like Maureen, stay in Leenane and give in to frustration, bitterness, and weary hopelessness. The remainder, like Ray and Mag, just survive day-to-day.

Starting in the mid-nineties, much of Ireland would experience tremendous financial growth in a very short time. The time of the play, 1992, precedes the "Celtic Tiger," a nickname for Ireland during its economic boom years between 1993 and 2001, when Ireland jumped from being one of the poorest countries in Europe to one of the richest in only a matter of years. Much of it was due to an influx of investors, many of which were tech firms, attracted by the country's favorable tax rates. "Celtic Tiger" is a play on "Asian Tiger," a name given to Asia's economic growth.

The economic prosperity didn't last – it was followed by a severe downturn due in part to a land boom, which occurs when the market price of real property increases rapidly until it reaches unsustainable levels and then declines. It caused a housing bubble or real estate bubble, a rapid increase in housing prices fueled by demand, speculation, and exuberant spending to the point of collapse. The Celtic Tiger brought new industries to Ireland's cities,



which necessitated new commercial and residential construction for their offices and for their new employees who relocated from other areas. Newfound wealth meant second homes in vacation areas like Strandhill in County Sligo, named for the strand of beach below Knocknarea Mountain, pictured below and on p. 6 of this document. Increased demand met limited supply, which was followed by speculators who poured money into the market, further driving up demand. These high levels of investment, combined with inflows of money into the housing market and loose lending conditions, provided the climate for a major real estate crash. Inevitably, demand decreased at the same time supply increased, resulting in unsustainable prices, thereby bursting the bubble.



The McMansions of Strandhill town at the foot of the Knock, which sprung up during the housing bubble. Some are now “ghost estates”

Ireland’s housing bubble – as housing bubbles do – didn’t just impact the real estate market, but also had a significant effect on the country’s overall economy and its people. Many had to dig into retirement accounts to afford to live in their homes. Many ended up losing their life’s savings. It took years for the economy to recuperate, and the housing market has yet to recover.

Finbar got in on the ground floor, so to speak. He was buying and selling early on. If he was fiscally conservative to begin with, alert to signs of a downturn, and didn’t go all-in with a huge investment towards the tail end of the bubble, he would have emerged with his wealth intact.

As discussed earlier, Finbar’s financial gain is not looked on favorably by Jack or Brendan

but seen instead as greedy and opportunistic. Yet, it could very well be that Finbar felt that he was investing in and building a strong New Ireland, thereby helping usher in and sustain an economy that would take Ireland once and for all out of economic hardship. That goal might be as important to him as stewardship of Old Ireland is to Jack, Brendan, and Jim.

Some reading related to the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath:

This is an [examination of the causes](#) of the Celtic Tiger.

This is a [personal account](#) of the impact on a young man who came of age when the Celtic Tiger was in full swing.

This article is about [abandoned housing developments](#), byproducts of the housing bubble. The Sligo area has ghost estates as well.

This article is about a man who was planning to [raffle off his house in Sligo](#) this past July for just €23 in hopes to alleviate the current housing crisis. “It’s sad”, he says, “because if you think back to just over 10 years ago, we were tearing down ghost estates and that was due obviously to the financial crisis at the time, but now we’re in another housing crisis.”

### **Supernaturalism and Sligo’s weir**

The supernaturalism in *The Weir* is directly connected to the Old Ireland-New Ireland theme. It is also centered on the local weir, the dam pictured in the photos of its dedication in 1951 that are hanging in the bar. The weir was built on what was then known as the Sligeach or Sligo River, which is now the Garavogue or Garvoge (An Gharbhóg in Gaelic).

Some of the connections and concepts linked to the weir are explored in “[Uncanny Spaces: The Supernatural and the Land in \*The Weir\*” by Jake Spangler](#), who presented his paper at DePaul University’s Spring 2018 English Conference. I’ve included relevant passages from it, in quotes, in my discourse below.

Fairy lore, like that associated with Maura Nealon’s house, is part of Irish culture, where Irish legends and tales of the supernatural have a strong connection to the land. “Long before Ireland was ravaged by the Great Famine and subjected to the colonization of the British, the Irish had woven their histories and, in turn, their culture from the land, though many of the earliest writings have been lost owing to the turbulent condition of the country in the first Christian centuries ... The magic of nature; not merely the beauty of nature ... the intimate power of nature, her weird power, and her fairy charm, defined these works that originate, at their oldest points, out of Northern Ireland, and give rise to myths and legends of pagan spirits and sorcery.

Steeped in myth and historic lore, Ireland’s green hillsides hold many secrets and serve as the perfect location for Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*, set in ‘a small rural bar... a rural part of Ireland, Northwest Leitrim or Sligo’. This play, made of, among other things, a collection of ghost stories, evokes an intimate connection between man and nature. The darkness is amplified by the remoteness of the pub, contributed to a growing tension established by

the howling wind, shifting direction at will, which suggests that the land beyond the boundaries of the bar is alive.

Fairy lore is prevalent in early Irish history and literature,” and passed down orally from generation to generation. Fairies are an essential part of the bond between the Irish and their land, apparent in Brendan’s refusal to sell his hillside property, despite his sisters’ urging and his non-use of it for his herd. These fairies are not the Tinkerbell type, but rather “members of an old race who came to Ireland from the northern isles of the world. Fairy lore became an integral part of Irish history, connecting those creatures to natural phenomena. Fairies were said to be able to become invisible by enveloping themselves in mist, as well as play beautiful music, still associated to this day with cries of a banshee, meaning a fairy woman, whose wailing warns of an impending death in the distant hillsides”. Many legends that were centered around a particular place of the past are often tales of “an unquiet spirit, a phantom apparition that traces a path on the crumbling ramparts of a castle or walks the old roads in the dead of night. Fairies are noted to appear and often take mortals back with them to wage wars or to enjoy the delights of Fairyland, revealing a darker side to these supernatural beings.”



Queen Maeve's Cairn

County Sligo has been a seat of Irish myth and legend for centuries. In addition to the fairy dwellings, bushes, and trees dotting the surrounding hills, the Knock was a major place of ritual and meeting in the Neolithic era. The Great Cairn of Knocknarea – also known as

[Queen Maeve's Tomb](#) – sits on the highest part of the flat top of Knocknarea Mountain, 1,073 feet above the sea.

Below the tomb of the famous warrior-queen lie many dolmens, or single tombs made of three or so upright stones supporting a large, flat, horizontal stone, surrounded by a circle of boulders.



A dolman in Carrowmore, County Sligo

Legend has it that one should not be near the fairy forts, fairy trees, and ringforts at night. Nor should one be near the dolmens and cairns at night for fear of being taken by the fairies or sucked down into the underworld. The Sidhe, or the fairy people, are known to have enchanting powers that they use to outwit humankind whenever they wish. They embody both good and evil; they can either bless or curse mortals. This potential to bestow both fortune and misfortune makes them feared and respected.

It is believed that the Sidhe move easily between the underworld and our world, using burial mounds, bodies of water and the base of fairy trees as their gateways. These portals are very important to the fairy folk, so they are fiercely protected. Disturbing them carries great misfortune, and even death.

Finbar was born and bred in County Sligo, and was aware of that darker side; it is why he spent a sleepless night after his neighbor's daughter opens a path to an unquiet spirit from the other world while innocently playing with an Ouija Board. Late that night alone at home, he is unable to leave the sitting room for his bedroom, fearful that he will encounter what he senses is the same spirit on his stairs. It precipitates his move south to Carrick, eager to distance himself from the Old Ireland of ghosts and fairies to the New Ireland, where these stories are "nothing more than an amusing tale ... Following Ireland's modernization in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these ghost stories became a form of entertainment, the old landmarks transformed into tourist attractions."

In the passage reprinted below from the play, Finbar identifies Brendan's hillside property as one of those tourist attractions.

FINBAR You get all the Germans trekking up here in the summer, Valerie. Up from the campsite.

VALERIE. Right

FINBAR They do come up. This'd be the scenic part of all around here, you know? Em. There's what's? There was stories all, the fairies be up there in that field. Lsn't there a fort up there?

BRENDAN. There's a kind of a one.

VALERIE. A fairy fort?

FINBAR The Germans do love all this.

BRENDAN. Well there's a ... ring of trees, you know.



A ring of trees in County Sligo, also called a ringfort or fairy fort

Spangler posits in his paper that Brendan “half-believes the land has been inhabited by fairies since time immemorial, and also believes it would be sacrilege to let go of land that has been handed down from generation to generation by his ancestors. For Brendan, land that is alive with narrative and myth and legend is sacred soil“. This adds another dimension to Brendan’s reasons for not selling his land and is consistent with the Old Ireland–New Ireland divide. So are Finbar’s dismissive remarks, and Brendan’s response. Once again, Finbar seizes an opportunity to disassociate himself from the ‘bog-dwellers“ he grew up with and the Old Ireland they represent. “This’d be the *scenic* part of all around here ... There *was* stories all ... The Germans do love *all this*” he says, reducing the ancient myths to “stories” of the past that have no place in the modern world except as a quaint curiosity for visitors. Brendan, on the other hand, cites the sacrosanct presence of a ring of trees, or a Fairy Fort, in his field. Also known as ringforts, hundreds of them can still be found in Ireland today. Manchán Magan, in his article, “Fairy forts: Why these ‘sacred places’ deserve our respect” for the August 9, 2017 issue of the *Irish Times*, describes the two types of ringforts, “the circular clumps of trees or bushes in a high spot in a field” and cashels, which are “the more stone-based defensive structure found in the West of Ireland, where soil was scarce”. It is believed that as time passed and people abandoned the sites, fairies made these ringforts their new homes and their entrances to their underworld realms. Thus, they came to be called Fairy Forts.

Regarded as sacred sites, many have not been disturbed due to the superstitions that are associated with them. It is common for farmers to work around these fairy forts. Magan writes, “Why else would rational, sophisticated farmers still go to the trouble of leaving unproductive patches of weeds and wild nature in their meticulously manicured, expensively fertilized and pesticided fields?” There are also many stories around Ireland of roadwork being delayed because fairy forts would be in the path, and workers would refuse to touch them. On most occasions, roads were re-routed to bypass the ringfort.

“It is widely believed,” Magan writes, “that the demise of Sean Quinn’s cement and insurance empire in Cavan and of John DeLorean’s sports car industry in Belfast were directly attributable to the conscious destruction of ‘sacred’ ringforts”.

According to Jane Gilheaney Barry, an Irish author whose writing is steeped in Irish folklore and fairy tales, “fairy trees and forts (any ring of trees) are protected by law in Ireland and there’s not many people would feel comfortable with damaging as much as a twig in case it would bring them bad luck. We think we don’t believe these things, but superstitions run deep.

While walking in Sligo in the early 1900s, WB Yeats asked an elderly man he met on the road if he believed in fairies. ‘I do not,” replied the man, ‘What do you take me for? What kind of eejit [idiot] would believe in the little people or in witches and goblins and leprechauns? Don’t be ridiculous. I do not believe in them. Not at all ...’ There was a pause. ‘But they’re there,’ the man concluded ...”

Douglas Hyde, Ireland’s first Uachtarán (President), and their Nobel Laurates, writer W. B. Yeats, who is buried in Sligo, and the playwright Samuel Beckett, all believed in fairies.

### Connections to Sligo's weir

Spangler expounds further on the self-appointed role of many of the Irish to steward their land and consequently, their culture: "In *The Weir*," Conor McPherson plays upon humanity's eager desire to be grounded in the history of a place through legend and lore, thus exposing society's fear of the unknown and emphasizing the necessity of remembering the past ... The action takes place near, and is dominated by, the physical structure that stands forebodingly in the background as the play's title. This weir, or dam, is a man-made structure that restrains and redirects the free flow of the river, thus enabling man to exert power over the land and control the resources offered. Yet, to McPherson, the weir 'itself is richly figurative as a place of personal and communal revelation. 'On one side it is quite calm,' [McPherson] asserts, 'and on the other side water is being squeezed through. Metaphorically the play is about a breakthrough. Lots under the surface is coming out.' From the weir, it is implied, things beyond the scope of the living have emerged.

The weir acts as a disturbance on the land, covering what was old and using the power of the earth in a transformative way. It is a place where old world values collide with, and are restrained or diverted by, new world values, [*note: this is consistent with the play's theme of Old Ireland vs New Ireland*] indicating an Ireland that ... was wrenched from its rural, unelectrified past into a modern nation-state. For McPherson, such a shift has caused a disturbance, one that has a direct influence on the tales told by the patrons of the bar."

Spangler finds other corollaries and connections, some of which involve Valerie's daughter. I'm not including them here because I don't necessarily subscribe to them. One has to do with a tie-in between Niamh Walsh and Valerie's daughter, also named Niamh. In an interview from July 5, 2005, McPherson told Kevin Kerrane, author of "The Structural Elegance of Conor McPherson's *The Weir*", "I didn't even realize until I heard from a critic [Eammon Jordan] that I'd repeated the name Niamh in Valerie's story". Another has to do with "[The Shannon Scheme, Rural Electrification, and Veiled History in Conor McPherson's \*The Weir\*](#)", a paper written by Andrew Hazucha for *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 17, no. 1 in 2013. Spangler supports several of Hazucha's positions that I find inconsistent with the text of the play.

Kevin Kerrane has another view of the metaphorical role of the weir in the play, which derives from Jack's telling his story of going to his ex-fiancée's wedding:

Jack left for the wedding reception feeling chastened and humble. "But goodness wears off," he says, and now he finds himself stretching out small jobs over the long days at his garage: "stops you thinking about what might have been and what you should have done... And I'll tell you - there's not one morning I don't wake up with her name in the room". Jack - a bit embarrassed by his long confession - blames his volubility partly on drink but he also realizes that it was elicited by Valerie's presence: "Something about your company. Inspiring, huh?" [pp. 52-53]

This cause-and-effect relation clarifies the play's title and central metaphor. At first glance, the weir seems to represent the modernization of rural Ireland and, in the Maura Nealon story, the end of the fairy world. But Nicholas Grene [author of *The*

*Politics of Irish Drama*] suggests that the weir is not so much a marker of social change as a psychological symbol: 'It acts as a metaphor for the controlled release of emotion through talk and storytelling.' The play's original director, Ian Rickson, goes even further: "The image of the weir is important because, if you like, water is the unconscious the paranormal the feminine ... Jack is sort of feminized by Valerie. He's able to tell a story about himself that he never would have at the beginning of the play."



Sligo's weir, ca 1951

### **Dissonance**

*Help me create ever-enduring love from my persistent dissonance with the world.*

– Czesław Miłosz

The Old Ireland-New Ireland conflict is an example of dissonance in the play. The weather is another factor that contributes to isolation and the "persistent dissonance" of living in a remote environment where it's cloudy and windy nearly every day. Overcast days and relentless howling of wind can exacerbate the sense of alienation, especially for Brendan and Jack, who live alone.

The text suggests the time of the play as late spring, early summer. Jack reminds Brendan, "Another week or two now, you'll be seeing the first of the Germans". ("The Germans" is the name that Brendan, Jack, Jim and Finbar give the Continental tourists who descend on the area in the summer, as discussed on p. 2 of this document.) Finbar tells Valerie, "You get all the Germans trekking up here in the summer, Valerie. Up from the campsite".

As the three remaining characters exit the play, Jack asks Valerie and Brendan where the Germans are from: "Is it Denmark, or Norway? It's somewhere like that".

I looked up the time of year that Danes usually vacation outside of Denmark, and learned



that school holidays are six weeks, and depending on the region, some start in early July and some later that month, ending at the end of August. Both months are peak holiday season. Summer vacation for Norwegians typically lasts from mid-June to mid-August, for a minimum of 8 weeks. So, my guess is that they'd be the first to arrive in "another week or two".

I also looked up the year-round weather in Sligo and confirmed the dreary weather conditions on [WeatherSpark.com](http://WeatherSpark.com): "In Sligo, the summers are cool; the winters are long, very cold, and wet; and it is windy and mostly cloudy year-round. Over the course of the year, the temperature typically varies from 38°F to 64°F and is rarely below 31°F or above 71°F".

Based on the tourism score, which measures factors like temperature, precipitation and cloud cover, the best time of year to visit Sligo for warm-weather activities is from early July to late August. The temperature doesn't vary that much month-to-month in the summer. It begins to climb in mid-June, with a high of 60° and a low of 51°. The highest it gets is in early August, where the high is only 64° and the low is 55°. It is windy and mostly cloudy year-round and doesn't get very warm, even in the late summer. At any rate, families have their vacations when the kids are out of school and not necessarily when the weather is perfect. Regardless, the campsites mentioned in the play, which consist of caravans – an Irish colloquialism for camper vans – clogged rural Sligo in the summer months. Strandhill in County Sligo had been a popular tourist destination for some time but became very crowded at the time of the play because of the economic boom. Named for its location by the sea and at the foot of Knocknarea, Strandhill is a popular surfing spot.

Below are a father and daughter on the shores of the North Atlantic, photographing the Knock. The rocks are limestone, as are the steep cliffs of Knocknarea Mountain. The sky is characteristically cloudy and grey.



Czesław Miłosz prays that an “ever-enduring love” be brought forth from his “persistent dissonance with the world”. In March 1999, Charles Spencer, then a theater critic for London’s *Daily Telegraph*, reviewed the New York premiere of *The Weir*, its second run in London with a new cast, and the touring production that had just launched in the UK. He had high praise for all of them: “I can’t think of many contemporary plays I would happily sit through, still less review, for the third time, but *The Weir* seems to get richer with each viewing ... It is an unmistakable modern classic, with its roots deeply embedded in the great tradition of Irish drama.” Spencer sees this great Irish tradition embodied in McPherson’s work through his blending of tragedy and comedy: “Four of the five characters in this play are leading lives of crushing isolation. Yet they are capable of wonderful humor, tender compassion and good companionship.”

Jack demonstrates those qualities both as giver and recipient, telling Valerie why he comes to Brendan’s bar, “But you know. I get down here for a pint and that. There’s a lot to be said for the company. And the ... you know, the ... someone there. Oh yeah”.

Kevin Kerrane points out how McPherson’s play “sustains a mood of compassion, and even communion”. His final paragraph of “The Structural Elegance of Conor McPherson’s *The Weir*” reads:

Tragicomedy is hardly unique to Irish drama; world literature abounds with brilliant examples in the work of Chekov, Pirandello, Brecht, and Anouilh. But, over the last century, no other national literature has so mined the possibilities of this genre as fully as have Irish playwrights. Synge, O’Casey, Behan, Samuel Beckett, Tom Murphy, Brian Friel, John B. Keane, Billy Roche, Martin McDonagh – and now, Connor, McPherson – have shown how comedy, rather than being inserted into serious drama as “relief, “can shine in the dark corners of any scene and create a fusion of emotions. Tragicomic plots have their own fascinating logic, and perhaps one variation could’ve been included here [his paper, as a seventh principle of structure. But that would take us beyond dramatic engineering and into the realm of artistic vision and humanistic value. If we need a final term to describe this congruence of sadness and humor, the intersection of the aesthetic and the ethical, we might simply call it “grace”.

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