Irish National Identity and Irish Drama:
A Social Psychological Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Using positioning theory, this study explores national identity in Ireland through an analysis of 20th century Irish drama. First, Irish drama’s social significance is examined through examples of Irish theatre and society’s mutually-affective relationship. The analysis then identifies three different storylines Ireland uses to position itself in its quest for national identity formation: Ireland’s way forward is to return to its traditional roots; Ireland is static and unchanging; Ireland’s way forward is to modernize. By looking at the ways in which storylines, processes of national identity formation, and social identity theory interact with each play, this study gives a better understanding of how different positioning statements co-exist in the Irish consciousness. This methodology also illustrates how a region’s literature can be used to access its national identity and to make specific observations that are more conducive to traditional research methods.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, nationhood has been described as something inherent in a region, meaning that its establishment is both natural and inevitable. The “nation state’s” birth is often attributed to the Romantic Movement in the 18th century as people began to exercise what they considered their natural right to legitimize distinctions between themselves and other regions that were different ethnically, racially, geographically, etc. However, contemporary theorists argue that there is nothing “natural” about nationhood; rather, a nation is an “imagined community” constructed by its people and by other nations (Benson, 2001; Anderson, 1983). The need to define one’s region in “national terms” has only increased since WWII (Anderson, 1983) making the questions, “What is a nation and how is it formed?” highly relevant in today’s globalized world in which physical and mental distinctions between nations are increasingly blurred.

National identity formation presumably involves some type of collective action. Therefore the processes involved in identify formation follow patterns that are used by groups in general to define themselves. One way of looking at group identity is that there is a content dimension and a value dimension. When discussing national identity specifically, the content dimension includes beliefs, attitudes, and attributes that are either created by the native population or absorbed from neighboring groups (Lyons, 1996). Psychologists have labeled this
process of absorption “internal colonization” (Taylor, 2002). The value component of group identity consists of perceptions of those self-ascribed or adopted characteristics (Lyons, 1996).

One key way in which the content and value of a nation’s identity is “imagined” is through culture. This is particularly true for Ireland whose ability to win independence from the British Empire in the early 20th century is often attributed to “cultural nationalism” (Benson, 2001). Nationalists from that time rallied behind organizations, such as The Gaelic League, that celebrated Irish sports, language, music, art, and tradition. Irish nationalists realized the mutually affective relationship that existed between society and culture and they exploited it by using Irish culture to establish Ireland’s distinctiveness from its British neighbor. A common byproduct of identity construction around society’s cultural elements is national stereotypes (Billig, 1996). These stereotypes can fuel nationalistic efforts granted that they “glorify the ingroup and posit outgroups as despised enemies” (Billig, 1996). The Republic of Ireland relied heavily on these stereotypes to unify its people and achieve independence in the early 20th century. However, over time those stereotype began to chafe many of the Republic’s citizens as certain characteristics, once exaggerated, came to be considered more backward than authentic (Harrington, 2009).

Methods of national identity construction and subsequent perceptions of created identities interest social psychologists because they are rooted in research on identity theories and motivation for identity formation. Psychologists consider national identity to be a kind of collective identity (Breakwell & Lyons, 1996) which stems from Henri Tajfel’s social identity theory. Through his research, Tajfel posits that one’s perception of their group depends first, on the group’s distinctiveness and second, on how the group is perceived by its members and by outsiders (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When discussing national identity in particular, analyses rely

If stereotypes that make up a nation’s identity are perceived negatively by the ingroup or outgroup (ex. “The Irish are backward, rural people.”) or are indistinct from that of other nations, an inadequate social identity will develop. There are three possible responses involving either individual (micro) or group (macro) action. First, the individual could choose to leave or exit the group. Second, the individual could compensate for the group’s inadequacy by finding ways in which he is better than fellow group members by comparison. Finally, the individual could inspire collective change in which he finds a way to improve the group’s status as a whole (Moghaddam & Taylor, 1994). For a summary of these processes of social change, see Fig 1.1.

FIGURE 1.1
Group 1: Inadequate Social Identity (Negative/Non-distinct)

1. Individual Exit  2. Individual Internal Comparison  3. Collective Change

Ireland is an interesting case study of national identity formation because its identity is so closely tied to that of its colonizer, Great Britain, that comparisons and their resulting courses of action are inevitable. The uncertainty in the Irish consciousness that stems from these constant comparisons accounts for the difficulty of articulating a clearly-defined Irish identity: a difficulty that this study will address.

This study analyzes positive and negative national identity using one particular cultural outlet: literature. One essential component of an area’s culture is language. The birth of “vernacular” languages and the decline of “universal” languages (i.e. Latin and Greek) is
historically considered a major factor for nation formation (Benson, 2001). The relationship between national identity and literature is particularly strong in Ireland because the memory of Great Britain’s aggressive Anglicization of their native tongue is still recent. Due to the importance of language to a nation’s literary canon, the written word has also been identified as a key component of national identity formation. The value of using literature to access national identity has been off-handedly alluded to in studies before: “With few exceptions, authors have tended to assume a single correspondence between the ‘contents’ of these media and the consciousness of ordinary folk” (Candor, 1996). Similarly, Irish writers are able to represent the Irish consciousness with an authenticity that is difficult to replicate in other psychological studies and experiments on national identity.

Unlike previous studies of social identity that allude to the connection between literature and national identity, but ultimately choose other methods of analysis (ex. Candor, 1996), this study will use Irish literature, namely Irish drama, to analyze Irish identity. Plays, in general are a useful medium to analyze because they are performance-based and therefore work best with positioning theory, the theoretical framework used in this study. It requires the thing of analysis to be “a socially significant or meaningful performance” (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010). Plays are also conducive to this study’s research question because drama is meant to be experienced by an audience as opposed to other forms of literature that are usually absorbed by individual readers in more isolated contexts. The group dynamics involved in drama and the group processes of national identity formation complement one another and make two different disciplines, psychology and literature, complimentary to each other.

The importance of Irish drama in particular, to Irish national identity in the 20th century stems from Ciarán Benson’s claim that writing in vernacular languages provides the foundation
for many new nations. He also claims, “Languages that remained oral characterized ethnicities but they failed to engender nations” (2001, p. 211). On the surface, Benson’s seeming disregard for oral traditions weakens this study’s focus on drama which is a very oral medium. However, Irish drama’s combination of written word and oral performance, both in the vernacular, make it one of the more formative literary genres for Irish national identity. This study’s sample includes popular Irish plays nationally and internationally because those presumably have had greater impact on Ireland’s cultural discourse. Then the sample was narrowed depending on whether or not play content grappled with methods of imagining Irish identity.

METHODS

This study analyzes the relationship between Irish drama and Irish national identity using positioning theory. This theory puts “focus on the narratives people use to position both themselves and others in the course of [a] process” (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010). Methodology for this type of study revolves around the positioning triangle and its three vertices: position, speech and other acts, and storylines (see Fig 1.2).

FIGURE 1.2
The Positioning Triangle

When using positioning theory, the first step in its methodology is to choose which vertex will serve as the entry point for the analysis. In this particular study, the narrative analyzed was Irish theatre in the 20th century. This study’s research question entered the positioning triangle at the “speech and other acts” vertices in which “every socially significant action, intended movement, or speech must be interpreted as an act, a socially meaningful and significant
performance” (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010). The first objective was to establish Irish plays as acts or “socially significant actions.” Once it was established that Irish theatre and its plays are acts dependent on a social context (ex. Ireland’s national identity), the study progressed to individual play analysis using the triangle’s “storyline” vertex.

After conducting a review of Irish history and Irish drama, certain storylines emerged from the Irish experience for analysis. *Storylines* are considered “established patterns of development” in society that have elements, characters, and situations easily recognizable to members of that community (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010). The three storylines that emerged from the review of Irish history and drama are as follows:

1. Ireland’s way forward is to return to and be proud of its traditional roots
2. Ireland is static and unchanging.
3. Ireland’s way forward is to move away from traditional influences and engage with globalization.

Based on these storylines, a list of plays was compiled using one or both of the following criteria. First, that the play implicitly or explicitly includes one or more of these storylines. Second, that the play has some historical and/or dramatic significance because presumably those are the ones that resonate with the Irish consciousness, more so than obscure works do. Creating a list of plays that spanned the 20th century was also a priority. See Table 1.1 for a list of the final sample of plays, their authors, dates of performance, dates of publication, and plot summaries. These storylines were then tested through play analyses and altered accordingly as the study progressed.

This study then identified certain common themes to focus on within these storylines. *Themes* are certain ideas, situations, or conflicts that interest people in a society and are explored by its members in various ways. For example, artists explore certain themes in their paintings,
Irish National Identity and Irish Drama

politicians in their speeches and policies, teachers in their classrooms, etc. *Themes* that interest a society are often explored in the storylines that they subscribe to. Three themes that emerged from the plays and their presentation of the storylines were 1. movement 2. ingroup/outgroup comparison 3. relationship with the larger international community.

Using these storylines and themes as points of entry in play analyses, it seemed that Ireland’s processes of forming a national identity depended on two variables: the direction of the characters’ movement (mentally or physically) in the process and the number of people involved. In other words, these methods and storylines could be characterized as a “return to” or movement “away from” Ireland and an “individual” or a “collective” process. For example, the “individual exit” response to inadequate social identity would be characterized as “individual” movement “away” from Ireland. As indicated in Table 1.2, each storyline, method of social change, and play can be described using some combination of these three variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storyline #1</th>
<th>Individual/Collective</th>
<th>Return/Away</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Exit</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Playboy of the Western World</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, a graph was created in which the x-axis indicates whether the narrative embraces traditional Irish identity or moves away from what could be considered Irish stereotypes. The y-axis indicates whether the process is an individual or collective change.
FIGURE 1.3
Processes Involved in Ireland’s Identity Formation

Each quadrant represents a method that has been used by Ireland in forming its national identity. For example, processes plotted in QIII represent collective movement away from traditional methods of definition. All plays were positioned in one or more quadrants and processes, but play placement within each quadrant is nonspecific. For example, Play A and C in Figure 1.3 are processes that are equally individual even though the points are not parallel.

Analyses will zoom in on each quadrant and explore Ireland’s relationship with that particular process of national identity formation using the storylines, play narratives, and psychological processes oriented in each quadrant. In doing so, those storylines that most accurately depict the “established pattern of development” for Ireland’s national identity will emerge (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010).

ANALYSIS

The “Speech and Other Acts” Vertex

This analysis must first show that a mutually affective relationship exists between Irish society and Irish drama. The argument that society influences drama gets its evidence from changing trends in Irish theatre throughout the 20th century. For example, Irish nationalism was on the rise at the turn of the century as nationalists rallied behind organizations such as the
Gaelic League (1983). The Gaelic League’s goal was to de-Anglicize Ireland by supporting Irish customs, sports, language, and art. This social trend of celebrating Ireland’s distinct identity enabled the establishment of Irish literary theatre by W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn in 1897. Their mission stated, “We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome” (Harrington, 2009, p. ix). Notice how Irish literary theatre, whose foundation was made possible by nationalistic trends in Irish society, sought to bring about change in Ireland through the stage.

![Irish Society ↔ Irish Drama](image)

Similarly, society’s influence on drama can also be seen in the content and themes of plays throughout the century. Yeats’ *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, a one-act play about an old, mysterious woman, is riddled with mythology and themes (i.e. martyrdom) that were celebrated by society’s nationalists at the time of its performance. Another example in which the social climate influenced theatrical content was during the 1950s and 60s: Irish theatre’s “second renaissance” (Murray, 1997). From 1951-1961, Ireland experienced a net loss of half a million people, mostly to London in search of labor (Harrington, 2009, p. xviii). This was the largest exodus of peoples since the Great Famine in the 1880s (Murray, 1997). Many popular playwrights at this time integrated this theme of migration into their work (i.e. Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come*).

Conversely, play content also played an influential role in the relationship between drama and society. For example, when the Abbey Theatre was built in 1904, it became an invaluable and often controversial site of identity exploration throughout the century. “Maintaining the
stability of the Irish state and supporting the Abbey Theatre, then, were mutually reinforcing activities” (Pilkington, 2009, p. 608). The importance of play content to Ireland’s identity is illustrated by the public’s response to the debut of J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre. Synge’s portrayal of the Irish peasantry as unintelligent and simple people was ill-received by Irish nationalists who staged protests at the Abbey as a result. Their major concern was that negative portrayals of Ireland during this sensitive period undermined their fight for independence and international respect. Once again, it seems that there is a complex, mutually-affective relationship between dramatic movements and content and societal trends. This relationship positions Irish drama is a “socially meaningful and significant performance” for the Irish people and their national identity.

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Irish Society ↔ Irish Drama
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**Storylines**

Because drama is so closely entwined with Irish society, this analysis can progress to the other vertices of the positioning triangle, storylines and positions, to analyze Irish drama’s link to Ireland’s national identity.

**Theme 1: Movement**

*Movement in the Irish Consciousness*

One way in which these storylines manifest themselves in the plays is through the theme of migration. Immigration and emigration are experiences that all countries face, particularly colonized ones, as people, ideas, and governments infiltrate causing natives to either adapt or move elsewhere. These processes of movement have played a large role in Irish history since the Tudor dynasty when outsiders, particularly from Great Britain, attempted to bring Ireland further from those things that define it (ex. customs, the Irish language, Catholicism). Ireland responded
with two major uprisings, both of which ended in mass migrations. The first rebellion, the Nine Years War (1594) consisted of Ulster’s Catholic landlords led by Conn O’Neil. Within four years of their defeat, O’Neil and 90 other rebels voluntarily left for continental Europe in what came to be known as the “Flight of the Earls” (Clarke, 2001, p. 153). A similar cycle of coming and going recurred the 1642 uprising of the “Catholic Army” against immigrant plantation owners from England and Scotland. Upon being defeated, the army was given the choice of exile or some alternative punishment. Thirty thousand rebels chose the former (Clarke, 2001, p. 162). Once again, Ireland watched as its leaders chose life in a foreign country over colonization in Ireland.

Throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, Ireland experienced a steady flow of British and Scottish peoples and ideas into Ireland and as well as the simultaneous exit of Irish natives. However, it was not until The Great Famine in the 1840s that Ireland experienced its largest and most devastating period of emigration. This natural disaster attacked the Irish working class’s most basic source of revenue and survival, the potato crop, increasing the estimated number of unemployed persons from 30,000 to 285,000 in three months (Green, 2001, p. 223). After two years of failed crops and a debilitating winter, Ireland experienced an unprecedented level of emigration. In 1847, about 130,000 people had relocated to Liverpool, the closest port and more than 100,000 sailed for Canada (Green, 2001, p. 225).

These examples of massive movements away from Ireland illustrate two problems with the island’s emigration-as-solution mentality prior to the 20th century. First, it deprived Ireland of many leading intellectuals, politicians, and artists who left to be educated or to live somewhere where they would be less oppressed. Such was the case with the voluntary and involuntary exiles of Irish rebels in 1594 and 1642 respectively. This dearth of innovative Irish
leaders was also felt in Irish theatre as any talented and remotely Irish playwright would probably be more accurately labeled Anglo-Irish. After writing and being educated abroad, these men’s plays often remained English in setting, target audience, and style (Morash, 2002, p. 36). Secondly, the death and exodus of people from Ireland’s working class, particularly during the Great Famine, deprived the country of those individuals most responsible for sustaining an authentic Irish identity and upholding its language and culture.

During Ireland’s fight for independence from Great Britain in the early 20th century, Ireland witnessed the return of many Irish leaders and renewed pride in Irish traditions and customs. After its independence was recognized by Great Britain in 1922, Ireland entered a period of isolation during WWII in which migratory trends subsided, with the exception of the emigration that took place in the 1950s. This isolationist policy was eventually replaced in the 1990s by a “miraculous” period of economic growth caused in part by improvements in the global economy and peace in Northern Ireland (Keogh, 2001, p. 341). As a result, Ireland experienced an influx of foreign labor and asylum-seekers from around the world. Once again, outsiders were infiltrating the island, but within the last century Ireland had become the active protector rather than the passive “protected.”

*Quadrant I: Individual Return to Irish tradition*

I would argue that while the immobility of Ireland is important for the measurement of the other two storylines, it also can be described using the same two variables used to describe the three processes of social change. In the graph that differentiates between types of movement in Irish plays and psychological processes, I would argue that quadrant I which represents individual movement returning to tradition, is where the static storyline lies.
If an individual chooses to return to Ireland’s traditions, social change is difficult. Often it requires the return to the group’s roots to be a collective movement. In order to apply this process of “individual return” from quadrant I to the plays, the “individual” component must be reconsidered. Often the static elements in the plays are communities or groups of people. However, the reason that they can be labeled “individual” is because while they belong to a group that is perhaps celebrating Irish traditions, they are not doing so with the intention of change. For example, if one compares the community in *Plough and the Stars* to that of Ballybeg or Roscullen, the difference is that *Plough and the Stars* takes place during the Easter Uprising when Irish nationalists were returning to Irish tradition in order to bring about social change. Those in Ballybeg and Roscullen uphold traditions out of habit or fear rather than pride. With respect to their placement in quadrant I, these communities might as well be considered groups of *individuals* returning to Irish tradition, carrying out their personal daily rituals and routines.

J.M. Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* also illustrates how a process that an entire community experiences can be considered “individual” in the context of processes of social change. In *Playboy*, Pegeen’s hopelessly static situation is emphasized by the setting (a one-
room public house) which never changes and is further emphasized by the cyclical structure of the narrative. The play concludes with the community returning to their old routines once Christy, “the Playboy,” exits. On the surface the process that they underwent would seem to belong in quadrant IV. However, it is better described as individual than collective because they all return to personal routines, including Pegeen who ends as she started: caring for her alcoholic father and dreading a pending marriage to the cowardly Shawn Keogh.

It is important to note that in order for individuals to be content with this static identity, there is often a process of social change occurring: internal comparison. By perceiving their neighbors as more static than themselves, individuals in an unchanging community feel less inadequate about their own constancy. This method of maintaining a positive identity is often illustrated in the plays by the act of gossiping. In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, Johnnypateenmike, the town gossip, is just as pivotal to the narrative as Cripple Billy and the more scandalous the piece of gossip, the happier he is. He defends his gossip saying, “My news is great news. Did you hear Jack Ellery’s goose and Pat Brennan’s cat have both been missing a week? I suspect something awful’s happened to them, or I hope something awful’s happened to them” (McDonagh, 1998, p. 50). Gossip is an essential part of a static community, as seen by Inishmaan’s reliance on Johnnypateenmike’s “news”, because it sensationalizes the most trivial occurrences and makes individuals feel better about their own mundane lives.

This quadrant representing the static storyline is not a traditional process of social change according to the literature. However, it remains a valuable part of this analysis because static groups or persons are often required in order to measure movement from the other three quadrants (Moghaddam, 2002). For example, in *Playboy*, it is through the community’s constancy that Christy’s evolution in *Playboy* is made evident to the reader. Another common
way in which social change is emphasized is when characters that left Ireland return and comment on its sameness. In Brian Friel’s *Translations*, Owen returns to his Ballybeg and says, “I can’t believe it. I come back after 6 years and everything’s just as it was! Nothing’s changed! Not a thing! Even that smell – that’s the same smell this place always had” (Friel, 1981, p. 272). The audience did not know Owen prior to this moment, but his positive assessment of himself in relation to his former neighbors suggests that his social change strategy of individual exit was successful.

The plays not only highlight static elements to emphasize change and movement in its narrative and characters, but they are included because this sameness is a commonly cited and often resented Irish characteristic. In George Bernard Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island*, Doyle describes the Irish village where he grew up and says, “Roscullen! Oh, good Lord, Roscullen! The dullness! The hopelessness! The ignorance! The bigotry! (Shaw, 1907/1984, p. 80). Like Owen, Doyle finds that he benefits from comparisons to Ireland’s constancy. However, his tone illustrates the resentment many Irish feel towards this storyline, especially when playwrights exaggerate certain characteristics for entertainment value as Synge was accused of doing with *Playboy*. These opposing perceptions of the static storyline which the play analyses outline highlight the complexities and contradictions present in Ireland’s national identity.

**Quadrant II: Individual Movement Away from Ireland**

The second quadrant of the graph includes processes characterized as individual movements away from traditional Ireland. It is closely aligned with the individual exit strategy in response to inadequate social identity. This has been a common response by discontented people in Ireland. For centuries, Ireland has watched many innovative minds, as well as members of its working class move to other countries to be educated or find work. This strategy
is also extensively represented in Irish drama. *Playboy, John Bull, Philadelphia, Translations,* and *Inishmaan* all contain characters whose response to inadequate social identity is to remove themselves from Ireland’s traditional influences. Notice in the tables that summarize the processes in quadrants I and III (Tables 1.3 and 1.4 in the Appendix) that every play that includes the “static” storyline also has a character who has escaped or is attempting to do so. This observation is indicative of the popularity of this strategy in Ireland’s conscience.

One characteristic of this common exit strategy is a perceived need to reject or forget the homeland and its traditions. This requirement is manifested through Gar’s conscience from the beginning of *Philadelphia* when “Private Gar” questions “Public Gar” saying, “You are full conscious of all the consequences of your decision? Of leaving the country of your birth, the land of the curlew and snipe, the Aran Sweater and the Irish sweepstakes?” (Friel, 1966, p. 18). The consequences Private Gar refers to include the need to abandon everything Irish about Gar: “Don’t look back over your shoulder. Be 100 percent American…Forget Ballybeg and Ireland” (Friel, 1966, p. 46-47). This need for a clean break progresses in the play from Ireland’s more trivial characteristics to Gar’s memory of the people in his life. In *John Bull’s Other Island*, the separation that is seemingly required by this strategy is manifested in Doyle’s complete disinterest in returning to his homeland: “I have an instinct against going back to Ireland: an instinct so strong that I’d rather go with you to the South Pole than to Roscullen” (Shaw, 1907/1984, p. 78).

Another characteristic of this individual exit strategy is that it is both a physical process and a mental one. The mental strategy that supplements the physical migration component of an “individual exit” is internal comparison. As previously mentioned, this strategy is what perpetuates a static society, but it also makes the process of leaving one’s group easier. For
example, when Christy’s father orders him to leave the community in which *Playboy* takes place, Christy says, “Go with you, is it? I will then, like a gallant captain with his heathen slave. Go on now and I’ll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal and washing my spuds, for I’m master of all fights from now (Synge, 1907, p. 111). Christy’s individual exit is untraditional because he is presumably not going very far, but this perceived superiority over his father and the community he has affected enables his departure. Similarly in *Philadelphia*, Gar often highlights his father’s faults when trying to convince himself to leave for Philadelphia the next day. The more superior one feels over their group, the easier it is for them to justify leaving it behind.

**Quadrant III: Collective Movement Away from Ireland**

Collective change away from Irish traditions is the dominant process in quadrant III. *John Bull’s Other Island*’s Doyle represents this process in its purest form. During his return to Ireland he is nominated to represent their community which he turns down saying, “I have strong opinions which wouldn’t suit you” (Shaw, 1907/1984, p. 118). Doyle then details his radical views about Ireland, land ownership, and religion, as well as his vision for its reformation. Upon concluding he says, “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Father; but I told you it would be no use. And now I think the candidate had better retire and leave you to discuss his successor” (Shaw, 1907/1984, p. 122). Even though it was too radical to become a reality, Doyle’s speech provides an example of well-intentioned collective change away from Ireland’s traditional priorities to a more modern, industrial worldview.

A more common version of this collective change away from traditional Ireland is one in which Ireland is forcefully or reluctantly taken from their past by some foreign influence, namely Great Britain. This is seen in the conclusions to both *John Bull’s Other Island* and *Translations*. In the former, Broadbent is an Englishman who comes to Roscullen with the intention of
developing it. However, in the process he becomes intrigued by the village-people’s lives and they with his. As a result, the Irish ultimately choose Broadbent to be their representative in parliament. In the play’s concluding line, Broadbent says, “I feel now as I never did before that I am right in devoting my life to the cause of Ireland. Come along and help me to choose the site for the hotel” (Shaw, 1907/1984, p. 163). The irony here is that the Ireland he is representing values the land he is about to destroy almost above all else. This contradiction call to mind the “White Man’s Burden” worldview in which one group accepts it as their duty to improve the “inferior” culture, assuming that they know what is best for the lesser group.

While in *John Bull* Ireland’s pathway to improvement, according to Broadbent, is the Anglicization of Ireland’s economy, in *Translations* the focus is on the Anglicization of the Irish language. England’s mission is made clear by Owen when he describes his position: “Me a soldier? I’m employed as a part-time, underpaid, civilian interpreter. My job is to translate the quaint, archaic, tongue you people persist in speaking into the King’s good English” (Friel 1981, p. 274). This description of the Irish language as “quaint” compared to “good English” is another manifestation of the “White Man’s Burden” mentality. This rhetoric suggesting inferiority contributes to Ireland’s inadequate social identity by impeding Ireland’s positive perception of itself. Ireland’s dissatisfaction with its identity is supported by the ease with which external groups are able to convince Ireland to move away from its traditional influences in order to join the international community.

The experience of being forced to undergo a collective change away from Irish traditions is one that the Irish are particularly sensitive to because of lingering resentment towards British colonization. *John Bull’s Other Island* satirizes the colonization process as Ireland unknowingly surrenders its government and land to England despite Shaw’s relentless emphasis of the groups’
differences throughout the play. Donald Taylor (2002) explored the effect that colonization had on communities like Roscullen in *John Bull*. He observed that when one nation imposes itself on another, the added “power differential” further exacerbates disparities between the collective identities of the “heritage culture” and “mainstream culture.” As a result of this subordination of cultures, the colonized country often experiences a kind of “internal colonialism” in which its members begin to value the empire’s characteristics more than those of their native land. The situation Taylor is referring to is quite similar to that of *John Bull*’s as Broadbent meets little resistance from the Irish community he is infiltrating because they assume he knows best.

The reason that *Plough and the Stars* and *An Giall* fall into this quadrant is less because of their narratives and more because of their messages. *Plough* takes place during the 1916 Uprising and *An Giall* includes a number of characters who are Irish nationalists that would traditionally celebrate Ireland’s past. However, in writing their plays, Sean O’Casey and Brendan Behan, called for a rethinking of Irish identity by critiquing many of the symbols, personalities, and beliefs that perpetuate the process in Quadrant IV. For example, in *An Giall*, the IRA’s headquarters is actually a brothel. This, among other reinterpretations of Irish nationalism, could be seen as an attempt by O’Casey and Behan to encourage audiences to look critically at their identity and traditions and decide which ones are impeding movement forward.

Quadrant III illustrates the tensions that can exist between the different ways Ireland experiences the same process. Brian Friel’s *Translations* provides a good case study of how one community can experience this collective movement away from Irish tradition as a voluntary process, a forced process, and a tentative reconsideration of Irish identity. First, Maire illustrates the desire actively join the international world, when she argues with her schoolmaster: “The old language is a barrier to modern progress…I don’t want Greek, I don’t want Latin, I want
Irish National Identity and Irish Drama

English” (Friel 1981, p. 270). Maire represents the members of Ballybeg who want modernize by learning the language of the international community: English. The play then progresses to the “re-thinking” type of process by having two ethnically different characters fall in love despite their inability to communicate. The Irish language is considered a key part of Ireland’s identity and by creating a relationship in which language is irrelevant, Friel critiques one of Ireland’s traditional identifiers, much like O’Casey and Behan did in their plays. Finally, the play’s ending serves as an example of an imposed collective movement away from Irish tradition as Ballybeg’s language is forcibly Anglicized. *Translations*’ portrayal of the different forms of quadrant III’s process of change illustrates how complex Ireland’s interactions with each process can be and how play analysis can help demystify seeming contradictions.

**Quadrant IV: Collective Return to Irish traditions**

The fourth and final quadrant represents a collective return to Irish traditions. This type of process is closely linked to the first storyline. It is also a second way in which a group can achieve collective change, the first being located in quadrant III. However, this process is not very common in 20th century Irish drama. If it is, the playwright often gives it an ironic twist (ex. *Plough* and *An Giall*). The only play in this study’s sample which addresses this process sincerely is Yeats’, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. This process was the one used by the likes of Irish nationalists, the Gaelic League, and Irish Literary Theatre at the turn of the century in their efforts to mobilize the masses and win independence from Britain. Therefore it makes sense that of all the plays from the sample, *Cathleen*’s narrative would be plotted in this quadrant seeing as it was written by one of the founders of the Irish Literary theatre during a period of heightened nationalism.
See Tables 1.3-1.6 in the Appendix for a complete list of the storylines, dramatic plots, and processes of social change plotted in each quadrant.

**Theme 2: Group Distinctiveness through Comparison to Itself and Outgroups**

Historically, Ireland’s process of forming a national identity mirrors that of many other countries that celebrate nationalism and appear to be moving toward a European identity. However, what makes Ireland distinct is that with the amount of movement into and out of the country, the Irish came into contact with a number of groups: British colonizers, American urbanites, Scottish landowners, African refugees, etc. As a result, in order to create a distinct social identity they often had to construct one in relation to outgroups. These groups, such as 17th century immigrant plantation owners from England and Scotland, made little effort to integrate themselves into the Irish culture: “With them they brought their own traditions, their own institutions and their own familiar way of life. They leveled the forests and devoted themselves to arable farming, rejecting the pastoral ways of the Irish” (Clarke, 2001, p. 153). As a result of this separatism, Ulster consisted of multiple and distinct groups for decades.

Sometimes the Irish knew so little about these outgroups that they imagined identities for them as well: a common strategy of national identity formation (Billig, 1996). If national identity formation consists of an ingroup trying to construct a positive social identity in the context of neighboring outgroups, there are three aspects to the process of imagining identity: self-categorization, incongruence with out-groups, and congruence with a global identity (Billig, 1996; Hopkins & Reicher, 1996) all of which are explored in Irish theatre.

*Self-Categorization based on Irishness*

The first two parts of the process of identification involves Ireland either looking to its traditions in order to define itself or comparing traditions and values with those of certain
outgroups. These methods help facilitate the process of collective change located in quadrant IV:

![FIGURE 1.3b](image)

Operating under the assumption that national identity is imagined rather than innate in a country’s existence, there are a number of methods commonly used to construct national identity that do not involve comparisons to other groups. The first method of self-categorization is horizontal comradeship: “all members of a community are bound together despite material inequality” (Hopkins & Reicher, 1996, p. 75). This method is employed by Yeats’ *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Michael goes from being an individual on the eve of his wedding day to one of the nameless masses rallying behind the old woman’s cause. The second method of self-categorization also fosters a sense of community in Ireland, but by emphasizing the connection between the living, the dead, and the unborn (Anderson, 1983). This method is illustrated in *Cathleen’s* rhetoric emphasizing the honor of martyrdom and the importance of future generations: “Many a child will be born, and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that had red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake; and for all that, they will think they are well paid” (Yeats, 1902, p. 10). The importance of establishing a united and expansive Irish community was a priority of the nationalist movement at the turn of the century and therefore themes that Yeats’ *Cathleen* channeled.

While the first two methods of self-categorization stress the importance of establishing an expansive, unified group, the remaining methods focus on establishing identity characteristics. Two popular methods of identity formation are the construction of symbols from Irish culture
(Hopkins & Reicher, 1996, p. 75) and the establishment of traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). With respect to the former, symbols take a number of different forms and are sometimes referred to as carriers because of their ability to pass on a group’s values and priorities to future generations (Moghaddam, 2002). Sean O’Casey’s *Plough and the Stars* takes place during the 1916 Uprising and therefore cites a number of symbols utilized by Irish nationalists who supported a collective movement back towards Irish tradition (QIV). The title itself alludes to the flag of the Irish Citizen Army: a political symbol of an independent Ireland around which its people could rally. O’Casey also illustrates the importance of national traditions to a country’s identity. For example, on the night of Patrick Pearse’s speech, one of the characters reprimands the others for “besmirching a night like this with a row” (O’Casey, 1948/1962, 113). Even as this event is unfolding, those who are looking to create a distinct identity for Ireland recognize that this day could potentially carry meaning for Ireland’s future generations.

*Categorization Based on Incongruence*

In addition to these methods of self-categorization, nations often position themselves in contrast to other countries in order to establish their own distinct social identity. This method is made explicit in McDonagh’s *Cripple of Inishmaan* when someone says, “Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place so if the Yanks want to come to Ireland to do their filming” (McDonagh, 1998, p. 14). This refrain is repeated throughout the book with various outgroups substituted into the comparison, from “French fellas” (McDonagh, 1998, p. 21) to groups as arbitrary as “sharks” (McDonagh, 1998, p. 78). These examples not only illustrate a common method of group identification, but the fact that so many characters use this rhetoric indicates how prevalent this strategy is in Ireland’s process of forming national identity.
The danger with defining oneself in contrast to another group is that the ingroup might find that the comparison does not yield favorable results. In other words, Ireland bears similarities to some other group and/or there are other groups that are considered better than Ireland. *John Bull’s Other Island* provides an excellent case study of what happens when this strategy for group-definition goes awry. Ireland’s perceived inferiority is illustrated by Nora when she asks a presumably well-traveled Irishman, “I wanted to know whether you found Ireland – I mean the country part of Ireland, of course – very small and backward like when you came back to it from Rome and Oxford and all the great cities” (Shaw, 1907/1984, p. 95). Not only is she basing her value of Ireland on how it compares to other places, but she refers specifically to the more rural portions of the island. These regions are often considered to be beacons of Irish tradition, yet even they engage in this definition-by-contrast strategy. The inadequate social identity resulting from ingroup-outgroup comparison subsequently prompts the group to move from QIV (collective processes returning to Irish tradition) to one of the other three processes, all of which are illustrated in *John Bull’s Other Island*.

**FIGURE 1.3c**

| QI | QII
|---|---
| Roscullen stays as they are. | Doyle leaves Ireland.

| QIV | QIII
|---|---
| Return | Away
| Ireland adopts a more Anglo-identity |

**Theme 3: Ireland and the World**
The collective movement away from traditional Ireland, located in QIII and in the third storyline, is particularly applicable today in the context of globalization as Ireland looks to modernize and join the international community. This congruence with a broad international outgroup is best famously illustrated by the Celtic Tiger era in which Ireland aggressively and deliberately entered the international stage. This process of modernization is illustrated by Doyle who grudgingly returns to Ireland in *John Bull’s Other Island*. At first, it appears that his bitterness is an example of internal comparison in which he feels superior to his former neighbors. However, eventually it becomes clear that his frustration stems from his hopes for a collective change away from Irish tradition that he knows will never be realized. He says:

[My father] is a Nationalist and a Separatist. I’m a metallurgical chemist turned civil engineer. Now whatever else metallurgical chemistry may be, it’s not national. It’s international. And my business and yours as civil engineers is to join countries, not to separate them. The one real political conviction that our business has rubbed into us is that frontiers are hindrances and flags confounded nuisances (Shaw, 1907/1984, p. 84).

Doyle emphasizes the importance of establishing congruence between a national and international identity in order to move forward. He emphasizes the importance of technology and modernization in order to achieve international unification. However, considering the importance of “flags” and “frontiers” to Irish nationalists, there is a clear tension between those who engage in processes that celebrate tradition and those who would rather move away from it.

**DISCUSSION**

*The relationship between Irish drama and Irish identity*
Studies have suggested the usefulness of studying psychology and literature in conjunction with one another in order to “better understand overt behavior and the mental life of individuals, and how these are related” (Moghaddam, 2004, p. 505; Candor, 1996). In this study, Irish drama is used as a method of analysis of Ireland’s national identity. A review of Irish history and the Irish experience paints a picture of a nation whose relationship to its identity is very complex. However, an analysis of any nation’s identity boils down to two questions. First, how is national identity formed? Second, how does an individual or the group respond to good and bad perceptions of the nation from the ingroup and outgroups. Do natives embrace national stereotypes in order to create a distinct identity or do they reject these exaggerated and potentially offensive generalizations? If the answer is the latter, do they seek collective change within their country or do they abandon their roots and move away?

With respect to the first question regarding methods, since national identity is considered a type of collective identity, it makes sense that Ireland’s methods of identity formation would mostly consist of collective processes. In looking at the types of collective processes within the plays, this study highlights three methods used when forming a distinct, positive national identity: self-categorization based on Irishness (ex. establishing symbols and traditions that are specific to Ireland), incongruence with oppressive or threatening outgroups (“We are different than England.”), and congruence with positively perceived outgroups (“Ireland is a member of the European community.”). Consequentially, these methods that were pulled from Irish plays are also found in a number of psychological discussions of national identity formation (ex. Billig, M., 1996; Hopkins, N., & Reicher, S., 1996).

While this study does not provide one preferred method of national identity formation, studying the narratives within each play helps illustrate the complexities and contradictions
within these questions. Looking at trends in Irish plays gives these abstract questions a concreteness that makes the psychological question of identity more conducive to analyses.

Furthermore, the plays’ accounts of complications that arise from using these methods of identity result in a more nuanced analysis. For example, with respect to the first method, *Plough and the Stars* calls for a reconsideration of traditions and symbols used by Ireland to categorize itself. *John Bull’s Other Island* presents a situation in which comparison to an outgroup (Great Britain) leaves Ireland feeling inferior to their powerful neighbor, thus causing them to take action in one of the four types of processes identified and analyzed in this study. Finally, *Translations* presents a situation in which congruence with the outgroup is a forced process that requires Ireland’s Anglicization, rather than a voluntary modernization.

By illustrating the ways in which these three methods of identity formation can go awry, Irish theatre provides an example of Ireland’s attempts to position itself in social discourse regarding Irish national identity. The way in which it positions itself is largely motivated by identity theories, particularly social identity theory which emphasizes the importance of an individual or group identity to be positive and distinct. Operating under the umbrella of Positioning Theory, which assumes that Irish drama is a type of socially significant performance, the plays highlight the importance of social identity in motivating Ireland’s efforts for identification.

Similarly, play analyses highlight the intricacies of Ireland’s responses to the feelings of inadequacy that result from misused or ineffective methods of identity formation. Examples of social change can be found in psychological studies on inadequate social identity. However, again, by looking at the plays as socially significant performances that Ireland uses to position its identity, the understanding of Irish national identity formation deepens. For example, only one
play’s narrative in the sample responds to inadequate social identity by collectively returning to Irish traditions, namely mythology. This observation suggests that this particular type of collective change was most popular in the early 20th century when nationalism was on the rise. Other such manifestations and treatments of psychological processes in the plays’ narratives paint a more complete picture of the myriad ways in which Irish people respond to imagined Irish identity. Many of these individual observations, such as the link that seems to exist between a static Ireland and the individual exit strategy, could be the subject of further, more specific psychological studies.

*The relationship between drama and national identity*

An important aspect of positioning theory that makes it a particularly effective lens for this study is its interest in the storylines that a society uses to place itself in a particular discourse. The three storylines chosen at the onset of this study appear to be narratives that the Irish consciousness grapples with when imagining its national identity. However, it is essential to emphasize that this study’s value lies in its articulation of the complex interactions between storylines, rather than in its ability to identify which storyline is the storyline that best describes Ireland’s process of forming national identity. It is difficult to say that all of Ireland is “static and unchanging.” It is much more credible reframe the conclusion by connecting the second and third storyline to show that a common response to Ireland’s immobility is for one character or individual to engage with the third storyline and “move away from [Ireland’s] traditional influences.”

However, it is difficult to access the differing perceptions of a group’s understanding of their national identity in a controlled lab setting or through the observation of particular sub-communities. As a result, it is dangerously easy to resort to generalizations when studying
national identity, thereby undercutting any possibility of exploring the complexities and contradictions that exist in a country’s perception of itself. Future studies looking to better understand a nation’s identity and people’s perceptions of that imagined community should consider analyzing a literary genre that carries particular importance for that region. Written works can serve as useful microcosms in which analyses of a region’s nationhood can take place.
REFERENCES


Great Queen-Street Theatre: “The Playboy of the Western World”. (1907, Jun 11). The Times, pp. 11.


APPENDIX

TABLE 1.3: Summary of Processes and Storylines in QI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storyline #2: Ireland is static and unchanging.</th>
<th>Individual/Collective</th>
<th>Return/Exit</th>
<th>Mental/Physical</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Change Method #2: Internal Comparison</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pegeen and Community in <em>Playboy of the Western World</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roscullen in <em>John Bull’s Other Island</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballybeg in <em>Philadelphia, Here I Come!</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballybeg in <em>Translations</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cripple of Inishmaan</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Return</td>
<td>Mental</td>
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TABLE 1.4: Summary of Processes and Storylines in QII

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storyline #1: Ireland’s way forward is to move away from traditional influences and engage with globalization</th>
<th>Individual/Collective</th>
<th>Return/Exit</th>
<th>Mental/Physical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>Mental and Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Change Method #1: Individual Exit</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>Mental and Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristy in <em>Playboy of the Western World</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>Mental and Physical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Larry in <em>John Bull’s Other Island</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>Mental and Physical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gar in <em>Philadelphia, Here I Come!</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen in <em>Translations</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Away</td>
<td>Mental and Physical</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Cripple of Inishmaan</em></td>
<td>Individual</td>
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<td>Mental and Physical</td>
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### TABLE 1.5: Summary of Processes and Storylines in QIII

<table>
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<th>Individual/Collective</th>
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<th>Mental/Physical</th>
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<td>Social Change Method #1: Collective Change</td>
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<td>Mental</td>
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<td>Away</td>
<td>Mental</td>
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<td>Broadbent in <em>John Bull’s Other Island</em></td>
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<td>Roscullen in <em>Translations</em></td>
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<td>Mental</td>
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<td><em>Plough and the Stars</em></td>
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<td>Away</td>
<td>Mental</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>An Giall</em></td>
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### TABLE 1.6: Summary of Processes and Storylines in QIV

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Storyline #1: Ireland’s way forward is to return to and be proud of its traditional roots</th>
<th>Individual/Collective</th>
<th>Return/Exit</th>
<th>Mental/Physical</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Social Change Method #1: Collective Change</td>
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<td>Return</td>
<td>Mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Playwright</td>
<td>Performance</td>
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<td>Cathleen Ni Houlihan</td>
<td>William Butler Yeats</td>
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<td>The Playboy of the Western</td>
<td>John Millington Synge</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1907</td>
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<tr>
<td>Island</td>
<td>George Bernard Shaw</td>
<td>1904; London</td>
<td>1907</td>
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<td>Plough and the Stars</td>
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<td>An Giall</td>
<td>Brendan Behan</td>
<td>1958</td>
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<tr>
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<td>The Cripple of Inishmaan</td>
<td>Martin McDonagh</td>
<td>1996; London</td>
<td>1998</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Timeline of Irish Theatre and History**

- **1509**: King Henry VIII becomes King of England
- **1541**: King Henry VIII becomes King of Ireland
- **1601**: First public production
- **1603**: Nine Years War ends
- **1607**: Flight of the Earls
- **1635**: Werburgh Street Theatre built
- **1639**: First historical play with Irish content (James Shirley’s *St. Patrick’s for Ireland*)
- **1652**: Act of Settlement and subsequent collapse of British court system
- **1662**: First play performed in Smock Alley
- **1691**: Era of Irish theatre as “model marketplace” begins with playwright George Farquar
- **1845**: Great Famine begins
- **1886**: First Home Rule bill defeated
- **1891**: Irish Literary Society founded in London
- **1893**: Gaelic League established
- **1897**: Irish Literary Theatre established
- **1901**: First performance by Irish Literary Theatre (W.B. Yeats’ *Countess Cathleen*)
- **1902**: *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (W.B. Yeats)
- **1904**: Ulster Literary Theatre established; Abbey Theatre opens
- **1907**: *Playboy of the Western World* (J.M. Synge); riots
- **1916**: Easter Uprising; *John Bull’s Other Island* (George Bernard Shaw)
- **1922**: Irish Free State
- **1926**: *Plough and the Stars* (Sean O’Casey); riots
- **1928**: An Taibhdearc established (theatre dedicated to Irish language)
- **1929**: Censorship of Publications Act
- **1937**: Irish Free State acquires new constitution
- **1939-1945**: WWII
- **1949**: Republic of Ireland declared
- **1951**: Abbey Theatre destroyed in fire
- **1958**: Second Renaissance of Irish drama; *The Hostage/An Giall* (Brendan Behan)
- **1964**: *Philadelphia, Here I Come* (Brian Friel)
- **1966**: Abbey Theatre reopens
- **1972**: Bloody Sunday
- **1980**: Field Day Theatre Company established; *Translations* (Brian Friel)
- **1984**: School of Drama and Theatre Studies founded at Trinity College, Dublin
- **1994**: Beginning of Celtic Tiger era; IRA and Loyalist cease-fire – The Mai
- **1996**: *Cripple of Inishmaan* (Conor McPherson)
- **2001**: Economic decline