Social, Cultural, and Psychological Resonance in John B. Keane's *The Field*

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What Lies Beneath

By

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For Joe

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began as an idea I had as an undergraduate student at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Having written my undergraduate dissertation on markers of change in *Sive* and *The Field*, I noticed how relatively little there was written critically on John B. Keane. I then embarked on a journey of postgraduate research on his work, culminating in a doctoral thesis from which this book has drawn heavily.

During the course of this endeavour there are many, many people to whom I owe a sincere debt of gratitude. Your support and belief were inspiring to say the least. I will now list some of you, but to mention everyone would simply be impossible.

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Finally, to you, the reader. For your curiosity and giving this writer a chance, thank you.

ABBREVIATIONS USED

TP 2001	Keane, John B. 2001. *Three Plays–The Year of the Hiker, The Change in Mame Fadden, The Highest House on the Mountain*. Cork: Mercier Press.
TP 1999	Keane, John B. 1999. *Three Plays–Many Young Men of Twenty, Moll, The Chastitute*. Cork: Mercier Press.
TMFC 1992	Keane, John B. 1992. *The Man From Clare*. Cork: Mercier Press.
TP 1990	Keane, John B. 1990. *Three Plays–Sive, The Field, Big Maggie*. Cork: Mercier Press.
BM	Keane, John B. 1969. *Big Maggie*. Cork: Mercier Press
Hut	Keane, John B. 1968. *Hut 42*. California: Proscenium Press.
SG	Keane, John B. 1967. *Sharon's Grave*. Dublin: Progress House.
TF	Keane, John B. 1966. *The Field*. Cork: Mercier Press.
TYOTH	Keane, John B. 1963. *The Year of the Hiker*. Cork: Mercier Press.
TMFC	Keane, John B. 1962. *The Man From Clare*. Cork: Mercier Press.
S	Keane, John B. 1959. *Sive*. Dublin: Progress House.

INTRODUCTION

This project undertakes an exploration of the work of John B. Keane, with particular focus on his best-known play, *The Field*. Keane's work remains hugely popular, as may be seen in The Druid Theatre Company's recent production of *Big Maggie* in the Gaiety Theatre, which ran for approximately six weeks, from 29th January to the 12th March 2016. On a local level, Tomás MacAnna, former artistic director of the Abbey Theatre, on hearing of Keane's passing away, stated "I doubt if there is a parish in the country that hasn't enjoyed his plays over and over, and his gift to the profession was always full houses and, as the poet Paddy Kavanagh would say, 'Applause, applause'" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 320). Furthermore, Keane's work is now appearing on the Irish Leaving Certificate syllabus and exposing a new generation to him. Thus, it may be argued that Keane's works remain both relevant and popular in the present-day, and such popularity suggests that his work resonates with audiences to this day. It is precisely this resonance [1] that will be interrogated here, alongside the underlying modes of identification made by audiences, and for that matter, readers, with his work. The re-examination of his work put forward by this project is of significant merit, as through it, further methods of addressing Keane's work are both employed and highlighted, and the critical field on Keane is furthered.

Firstly, having made such a claim, current literature on Keane must be accounted for. The research field on Keane is relatively sparse in comparison to other prominent Irish writers, with Keane being a popular success long before any critical acclaim. It is only since critics such as Fintan O'Toole began writing seriously about Keane in the 1980s that scholarship on him has developed. In terms of published material the range of criticism is relatively small, something that is at odds with Keane's popularity as a writer and the cultural longevity of the characters created by him. To begin with, the works of the American academic, Marie Hubert Kealy, will be addressed as she has written most extensively on Keane. Following this, literature on Keane's work will be examined in a chronological fashion.

[1] For further definition of what is meant by resonance, and how the concept is examined in this project, the reader is directed to p. 5.

In an article titled "Spirit of Place: A Context for Social Criticism In John B. Keane's 'The Field' and 'Big Maggie'", published in the *Irish University Review* in 1989, Kealy explores both *The Field* and *Big Maggie* in terms of their location within a specific place, and asserts that "the cultural landscape in the plays of John B. Keane provides the context for a critical examination of the plight of individuals constrained by their environment" (Kealy 1989, 288). She then continues by analysing the characters of the Bull McCabe and Maggie Polpin as being both characters representative of "the larger-than-life qualities of the Kerry landscape" (Kealy 1989, 288–289) and also products of that cultural landscape, drawing on "communal heritage" while maintaining a primary focus on "the ordinary person who is coping with traditional values and a changing society" (Kealy 1989, 301). This article also forms much of the bedrock for Kealy's major publication on Keane, her 1993 publication *Kerry Playwright – Sense of Place in the Plays of John B. Keane*.

This publication, one of the few full-length academic works on Keane encountered by this author, expands considerably upon her previously published article. Again, the focus is on the use of place as an interpretative device and Keane's ability to "draw on the importance of place in Irish culture as a way of ordering […] perceptions of contemporary society" (Kealy 1993, 13). Kealy divides this work into seven distinct but interrelated chapters. Her first chapter is titled "Landscape of a Writer" and offers a biographical take on the influence of Keane's surroundings on his work. In her next chapter, "Sense of Place, National Identity, and Irish Drama", she draws on Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Strindberg's *Miss Julie* to illustrate "a clear exposition of the theory of place as a vehicle for interpretation" (Kealy 1993, 33). She then expands upon this hypothesis and applies it to an Irish context from Boucicault through the Celtic Literary Revival up to Keane, placing him within that context, seeing him as "a successor to the peasant playwrights of the Celtic Literary Revival who demonstrates the vitality of the sense of place in contemporary literature" with place functioning "as a formal and thematic element" in his dramas. (Kealy 1993, 47).

Kealy's next chapter, "Dramatic Devices and the Sense of Place", discusses Keane's use of setting and characterization as leading to "a definition of place that, in turn, provides a clue to meaning" (Kealy 1993, 66), with particular reference to *Sharon's Grave*, *The Year of the Hiker*, *Sive*, and *The Highest House on the Mountain*. She expands upon the power of Keane's characterization in his work in the following chapter, titled "Stage-Use of Language, Music, and Folk Customs" (Kealy 1993, 67). In this chapter, she addresses Keane's use of the North Kerry dialect,

his use of song as seen in the tinker characters in *Sive*, and in *The Year of the Hiker* and *Many Young Men of Twenty*, and his representation of folk customs as seen in the wake scene in *Sharon's Grave*. Through the presence of these elements in his works, Kealy argues that Keane is reinforcing a sense of place within them, something that is essential to Keane's drama according to her. Referring to *Sharon's Grave*, she offers a statement that may be equally valid in relation to Keane's other dramas; "The characters emerge from the landscape; the cultural and spiritual milieu has shaped their attitudes and their experience. To miss the importance of place is to misread the play" (Kealy 1993, 81).

Having discussed the role played by "local characters and customs" in making up "the cultural landscape of Ireland", Kealy continues by addressing "certain values and attitudes [that] also contribute to the spiritual milieu known as spirit of place" in her next chapter, "Contexts for Social Criticism" (Kealy 1993, 82). In this chapter she explores Keane's work as thematically reflective of the "values and attitudes" mentioned earlier. The theme of land, and its relation to the "Irish concern for name and family" which "leads to a consideration of the problem of authority" (Kealy 1993, 83), is then explored by Kealy, with particular attention to *Sive*, *The Year of the Hiker*, and *The Highest House on the Mountain*. Through this analysis, issues of tradition and gender are also touched upon, albeit briefly, and Keane's ability to document "the struggle between traditional values and the mores of twentieth-century Ireland" (Kealy 1993, 92) is documented through his creation of a sense of place in his work, and his juxtaposing "present-day problems against a backdrop of age-old custom" (Kealy 1993, 92).

The focus of the next chapter remains on the concepts of land and authority, and it discusses two of Keane's major plays in a chapter titled "Lust for Land: *The Field* and *Big Maggie*" (Kealy 1993, 93). In this piece Kealy equates the "larger-than-life qualities of the Kerry landscape" with Keane's "larger-than-life figure[s]" of the Bull McCabe and Maggie Polpin (Kealy 1993, 93). What follows is a very astute analysis of McCabe and Polpin. Both characters are looked at in terms of the motivations that lie behind their actions, within the framework of land and what is symbolized by it in the case of McCabe, and questions of authority and security in relation to Polpin. Kealy locates both characters at crossroads of identity that are reflective of "an appreciation of place in the plays of John B. Keane [which] depends both on a grasp of the influences from the past and an understanding of the ways in which new ideas are received in the rural environment" (Kealy 1993, 110).

Having explored *The Field* and *Big Maggie* in terms of the "themes of economic security and sexual frustration" creating "the 'place' in which he [Keane] examines contemporary Irish life" (Kealy 1993, 111), Kealy goes on, in her final chapter "Separation from the Land", to explore the theme of emigration in his work, looking particularly at *Hut 42* and *Many Young Men of Twenty*. Through this analysis she develops the theme of a broader separation from a cultural landscape in Keane's work, as seen in is later plays such as *The Crazy Wall*, *Moll*, and *The Chastitute*, which, Kealy asserts, look at "personal frustration and isolation from family and community as characteristic of contemporary life […], while he [Keane] does not advocate a return to the past, he does lament the erosion of traditional values" (Kealy 1993, 118). Kealy concludes by reinforcing the role played by a sense of place in Keane's work, and reiterating her persistent claim throughout the study that Keane's "particular gift of recreating the larger-than-life figures of the Kerry countryside permits his love of place to form a foundation for his social criticism" (Kealy 1993, 124). Subsequent to this publication, Kealy also published an article titled "John B. Keane – An Appreciation" in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 1999. This short article is somewhat biographical, and returns to her assertions regarding the role of place in Keane's work outlined earlier, addressing the plays *Sive*, *Big Maggie*, and *The Field*.

Kealy's works remain as extremely insightful pieces of criticism and this book seeks to expand upon them significantly in two ways. Firstly, though her focus thematically throughout her work remains consistent in her appraisal of the functions of place in Keane's dramas, her application of it is somewhat broad, focusing on multiple texts by Keane. This project will remain focused on *The Field*. Some of Keane's other dramatic works will inevitably be drawn from also, but they will be used to aid in the interpretation of *The Field* that will follow them. Secondly, this book will adopt a multi-faceted approach to *The Field*, applying historical, psychoanalytical, and postcolonial [2] filters to the piece, while also examining the workings of gender, both masculine and feminine, within it. Such a broad approach applied in a narrow fashion is of merit as, given the sparse research field on Keane, and particularly *The Field*, it will both contribute greatly to the scholarship available on the work, and open up

[2] The term is used in its unhyphenated form to refer to the various schools of thought that have developed in the area of postcolonial theory, and also, as defined by Victor Merriman, "a strategic epistemological stance" as opposed to "a periodization of consciousness, or characterization of experience" (Merriman 2011, 21). When referring to a specific timeframe, the hyphenated version of the term, i.e. post-colonial, will be used.

further possible lines of enquiry into it.

Other literature on Keane will now be addressed in a chronological manner. A collection of writings on Keane was published to mark his fiftieth birthday in 1979, and was titled *Fifty Years Young*, edited by John M. Feehan. Of note in this text is Phyllis Ryan's contribution in a chapter titled "John B.'s Women" where she explores Keane's representation of women on the stage and the challenges to traditional constructions of gender embodied by his female characters. Other contributors are James N. Healy who documents "The Birth of *Sive*", Thomas A. Duff who explores Keane's treatment of sexuality on stage as representative of the human condition, Brian Cleeve who discusses Keane as a short story teller, Des McHale who discusses Keane's use of humour and the comedic elements to his work, Christy Brown who looks at Keane's poetry, Robert Hogan who looks at the art and craft of Keane, a letter of tribute from Tony Butler, and a poem from the actor who originally played the part of the Bull McCabe, Ray McAnally.

Rosa Gonzalez, in an article from 1992, addresses "The Unappeasable Hunger for Land in John B. Keane's *The Field*" and, similarly to Kealy, focuses on the cultural landscape represented by land in the play. She also channels the themes of survival and legacy in the work, and asserts that McCabe's:

> unappeasable hunger for land derives not so much from the memory of the past landlord-peasant struggles but from the Irish peasant's ingrained commitment to the land that sustains him and which will prevent his children from the fate of emigration, as well as from his attitude of distrust toward technology (Gonzalez 1992, 83).

Leonard Robert Falkenstein, in a PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Alberta in 1997, looks broadly at Keane's work, along with that of Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard, Brian Friel, and Thomas Kilroy, and examines the representations of change present therein. In terms of other academic works, Kelly et al (2002), look briefly at *Sive* along with works by other contemporary playwrights such as Vincent Woods, Patricia Burke Brogan, Bernard Farrell, Tom Murphy, and Marina Carr in a review of activity in the theatres of the country in 2002. The above works are valuable pieces of research in their own rights, and have been drawn from where appropriate, but none represent the narrow focus on *The Field* and the multiple modes of enquiry applied to it by this project.

Another text dealing with Keane, and *The Field*, is that of Cheryl Temple Herr's 2002 contribution to the "Ireland Into Film" series, simply titled *The Field*. Though this text deals primarily with Jim Sheridan's 1990

film adaptation of Keane's play, her analysis of Keane, and the play, to be found in the opening chapter is quite astute. Following his death in 2002, the North Kerry Literary Trust published a book of tributes to Keane entitled *John B. Keane–Playwright of the People*. This publication features articles and tributes from friends, family, and fellow writers such as Brendan Kennelly, Hugh Leonard, Gabriel Fitzmaurice, Fintan O'Toole, Mary Kenny and Con Houlihan. In total there are over forty tributes presented in this work, and through them an appreciation of Keane's popularity, along with his unwavering socially critical eye, becomes apparent.

Another valuable resource, and one that has been drawn from frequently here, is a collection of lectures from a summer course organized for National School teachers that was held in Tarbert in the summer of 2003 titled "Literature in the Locality: the Local Writer and the Curriculum as Exemplified in the Writings of John B. Keane". This collection was published in 2004, with the assistance of the then Director of Tarbert Education Centre, Gabriel Fitzmaurice, in an editorial role. This work assumed the less cumbersome title of *Come All Good Men and True–Essays from the John B. Keane Symposium*. This work features a mix of the personal and the academic, and opens with a piece by Keane's lifelong friend, Danny Hannon, that recalls Keane's youth, and contributes some biographical detail about Keane. The next essay, by journalist, social commentator, and theatre critic, Fintan O'Toole, details the operation of tragedy in Keane's work, particularly in *Sive* and *The Field*, through the intersection of two opposing visions within his work, one being an "acute and sociological" perspective which is "very much of its time and place" set against a "dark and mythological and pagan" vision "which is not simply of a different time but in a sense is of no time at all" (O'Toole in Fitzmaurice 2004, 52). This chapter has been drawn from frequently here, as it offers a novel perspective on reading Keane's work and the social commentary contained within it.

This is followed by Nora Relihan's recollection of Keane as an emerging playwright, and his early contribution to the amateur Listowel Drama Group, and their production of *Sive*. Paddy McElligott and Pat Moore then offer a comparative analysis of some of the themes common to both Keane and fellow North Kerry man Brendan Kennelly in a chapter that looks not just at Keane's drama, but also at his poetry and prose. The theatre producer and director, Michael Scott, contributes the next essay in the collection, and he pays particular attention to *The Field* in terms of Keane's documenting a society in transition, and his depiction of loneliness that is disguised by laughter within the work. The final chapter

of the volume comes from its compiler and editor, the poet, and former schoolmaster, Gabriel Fitzmaurice, who advocates the suitability of Keane's work to be taught in primary school under the headings of; travellers, place, emigration, and fathers and sons. This edited collection forms a useful backdrop for further investigation into Keane, particularly the contributions of O'Toole and Scott, from whom this book has drawn where appropriate.

In terms of biographical detail, Keane's 1964 *Self Portrait* provided some insight into Keane's youth and his early career. Gus Smith and Des Hickey's 2002 revision of their earlier biography *John B.–The Real Keane*, simply titled *John B.*, has proved an incredibly useful resource for information regarding Keane's life, both personally and as a writer. On a personal level, this author was lucky enough to conduct an interview with Keane's late wife Mary in 2012, which added to the historical and biographical context through which Keane may be viewed. Similarly, the poet, and friend of Keane's, Gabriel Fitzmaurice was also interviewed and provided further understanding of Keane and his work. These interviews offer great insight into the social contexts from which Keane, the writer, emerged, and will, it is hoped, prove to be useful resources for future scholars of Keane. The transcripts of both interviews may be found in the appendices of this book.

Having outlined the current literature available on Keane and *The Field*, it must be noted that it is, relative to his popularity, a sparsely populated sphere. This book hopes to expand the scholarship on Keane, and on *The Field* in particular, through a narrow, close reading of the text in conjunction with the application of various theoretical filters.

However, it is essential at this juncture to delimit what this project is not, and what it does not aspire to be. Firstly, this is not a grand exploration of Irish drama; instead it maintains a narrow focus on a singular text in an attempt to extract further possible methods of reading it. This is not to disregard the vast dramatic heritage present in Irish drama, but is merely an issue of focus and if the large field of Irish dramatic heritage were to be explored it would be at the expense of analysing the text at the heart of this book. Similarly, this book is not looking at Keane in the context of other writers; instead it is focusing solely on Keane in an attempt to thoroughly interrogate his work.

Secondly, this analysis is focused on the original text of *The Field* and any reference to the Ben Barnes' revision of it will be duly annotated. Equally, the analyses of Keane's other plays within this volume utilise the original, unrevised (where applicable) editions as their base, and any citation from other versions will be noted. This is for reasons of

consistency, as with a revision of any text it is impossible to be sure what changes came from whom. Having said that, a comparative reading of the original texts alongside their revised versions would prove an interesting exercise, particularly in terms of the changing social contexts that are reflected in the adjustments to the original text. As the Barnes revisions of Keane's texts, for the most part, involved a shortening of the works from three acts down to two, an analysis of their being symptomatic of globalization and the "*phenomenology of compression*" (Lonergan 2010, 37) (italics in original) inherent to it, would also prove quite valuable[3].

It must also be noted that, as theatre is an ever-expanding, experiential, and temporal realm, and as the production of any play is subject to many variables in terms of performance and interpretation, this analysis is focused on the one constant behind such variables, that is, the text itself. This is not to relegate the element of theatrical performance to a position of subordination, as any play is only given life when it is performed. However, as this project is rooted in Literary Studies as opposed to Theatre Studies, the locus of meaning is taken to reside in the text itself, privileging dialogue over action, and looking at the script as text, rather than as a pre-text for performance. Occasional reference will be made to elements of the performed text such as theatre reviews, stage adaptations, and the stage directions contained within the text, but this will be done to aid the textual literary analysis that accompanies it.

Finally, this analysis is not addressing the film adaptation of *The Field*, as though there are similarities between the two works, there are also many inconsistencies. Similarly to Ben Barnes' revision of the play, any reference to the film adaptation of it will be duly annotated.

In essence, this book attempts to examine an intangible and abstract entity in Keane's work, that is, resonance. Firstly, this concept of resonance must be looked at in relation to the application of it in this project. The Oxford English dictionary offers a definition of resonance as

[3] Patrick Lonergan, in his 2010 work, *Theatre and Globalization – Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era*, utilises Marshall McLuhan's concept of "time-space compression" (quoted in Lonergan 2010, 36) in his appraisal of theatre's relationship with globalization. He goes on to document how "the desire to quicken the pace of entertainment", itself an effect of globalization, has resulted in the current reality that the "traditional three or five act structure of plays has generally been replaced by loosely structured series of short scenes that tend not to last longer than 15 minutes each" (Lonergan 2010, 182). Thus, though not as drastic, Ben Barnes' revisions of Keane's works from three acts to just two in the late 1980s/early 1990s may perhaps be seen as early indicators of such changing global contexts.

"The power to evoke enduring images, memories, and emotions" (O.E.D. 2016, online) and Keane's popularity, along with the enduring nature of his plays characters within Ireland's cultural landscape, would speak to the presence of some form of resonance within his work for Irish audiences. However, this definition alone remains quite vague in relation to the concept of resonance and its operation. To expand upon this, and to give some insight into how the concept of resonance is applied in this volume, it is useful to look at the concept of resonance in a musical context. The concept of resonance is central to musical theory, the physics of music, and the manufacturing of musical instruments. In essence, resonance is seen to operate on the principle of "sympathetic vibration" (Schmidt-Jones 2016, online) as the body of the instrument resonates in response to the original vibration, that is, the note being played. For example, the body shape and the materials used in the production of an acoustic guitar will greatly influence the sound created by that guitar due to its resonant quality, that is, its ability to vibrate sympathetically to the original vibration (a string being plucked). In terms of the discussion presented here, it is this concept of "sympathetic vibration" that is being explored in its examination of resonance. Inherent to the concept of sympathy is that of identification, thus through the exploration of resonance presented here, and through the examination of sources of sympathetic psychological vibration in the work, an analysis of conscious and unconscious identifications made by audiences with Keane's work is entered into.

Though this resonance may be an entity that is impossible to quantify, its exploration is of merit, as through this examination, unconscious identificatory processes at play in the space between *The Field* and the audience receiving it may be posited, thereby illuminating further possible methods of looking at his work. Indeed, as asserted by Victor Merriman, "In common with other art forms, the *raison d'être* of Drama is to enable critical interpretations of our social world. It exists to turn statements into questions" (Merriman 1999a, 15). It is precisely within the questions raised by *The Field*, and the challenges to stable identifications presented by those questions, that resonance may be located in the work. The following chapters will attempt to explore such resonant factors at play within Keane's work, and will examine the identificatory processes intrinsic to such factors, in the following manner.

The first two chapters provide a contextual backdrop through which the remaining, more theoretical, chapters should be read. Chapter one offers a brief biography of Keane's early life. Certain influences on Keane are suggested by this biography, such as his time as a youth spent in the Stack's Mountains with his cousins the Sheehys, where Keane

encountered an older tradition as opposed to the relatively modernizing Listowel in which he was living; his treatment as a student in St. Michael's College, Listowel, which revealed to him the space in between the ideal and the reality that refutes it, a trope common to much of his work; and the influence of his parents on him and his future works. A brief analysis of Keane's dramatic work up until the publication of *The Field* is then offered in an attempt to provide a literary context to aid in the reading of it that follows, and to identify common tropes present in his work. The plays *Sive*, *Sharon's Grave*, *The Highest House on the Mountain*, *Many Young Men of Twenty*, *Hut 42*, *The Man from Clare*, and *The Year of the Hiker*, are all explored, and through them, Keane's subversive nature highlighted.

The second chapter begins by addressing the real-life, still unsolved, murder that provided the inspiration for *The Field*. The play's journey from the notebook to the stage is documented, and illustrates Keane's ability to observe the operation of common human anxieties in local and particular events, and transpose such themes successfully to the national stage. The staging of *The Field* in Moscow is also commented upon in terms of illustrating the potential global resonance of Keane's thematic content despite his work being rooted in a particular time and place. This chapter continues by addressing the economic, social, and political landscapes present at the time of writing of the play. At that time, Ireland was a nation in transition from the pastoral idealism enshrined in de Valera's constitution of 1937 to the more expansive, industrial, and outward-looking nation proposed by T.K. Whitaker and Seán Lemass. Keane's representation of a nation and a national identity in transition is then discussed in this context. Finally the reception of *The Field* among both rural and urban audiences is then discussed, and the shared social anxieties, in the context of a changing Ireland, represented by Keane in the work highlighted. This chapter and the preceding one constitute a contextual basis from which the remaining chapters, through the application of varied, but inter-linked, theoretical frameworks, develop.

The third chapter takes a psychoanalytical approach to *The Field*. It begins by discussing Carraigthomond as a possible site of neurosis, suffering from an excess of repressive social structures, reflective perhaps of a parochial form of living common to many. The character of the Bull McCabe is then looked at in terms of his constituting a character frustrated in love. His narcissism, displaced libidinal energy, and ultimate crisis of potency are addressed in an examination of unconscious motivations at play within his character. The roles played by two opposing sons, namely Tadhg and Leamy, in the text is then examined and further unconscious

motivations behind McCabe's actions are revealed, particularly in relation to the concept of legacy, as Maggie Butler's field becomes a site of condensation, a composite image of repressed anxiety. In terms of resonance, McCabe may be seen to be representative of a nation in transition, and the negotiation of identity, on personal and national levels, is illustrated to be central to the text through the application of Freudian and Lacanian filters.

The fourth chapter examines the text through a postcolonial lens, and begins by discussing the suitability of *The Field* to be addressed in such a manner. Edward Said's theories of Orientalism are then applied to McCabe's construction of the character of William Dee as an 'Other' in order to further his own position within Carraigthomond. Keane's subversive project in destabilizing such constructions within the text is also illustrated, as a collective colonial history is both channelled and challenged by Keane's exploration of simplistic, monolithic narratives in the work.

The role of ambivalence within the text is then discussed through the application of Homi K. Bhabha's theories of hybridity, liminality, and mimicry. The juxtaposing of the characters of McCabe and Dee in this context further highlights Keane's subversive nature in highlighting the space between contesting processes of identification on personal and national levels, and may be seen to be another resonant element at play in his work. Finally, the concept of nationalism and its representation in *The Field* is addressed in a Lacanian framework, which once more highlights the challenges presented to essentialist modes of national identification within the work. This may be seen to operate in a resonant fashion, particularly in the context of a perpetually changing and redefining concept of nationhood and national identity.

The focus of both the fifth and sixth chapters is on Keane's representations of gender in his work. The fifth chapter explores, without adopting an overtly feminist stance, the representations of the feminine in Keane's work. To begin with, issues of femininity, both in the mid-twentieth century and in the present-day are explored and the relevance of Keane's subversive representation of gender is discussed. Following on from this, the characters of Sive and Mena from *Sive*, Maggie Polpin from *Big Maggie*, and Mame from *The Change in Mame Fadden*, all female titled plays, are explored in terms of gender performance, gender anxiety, and traditional expectations of gender, and in them Keane's destabilizing of traditional gender stereotypes is highlighted. Keane's representations of womanhood in *The Field* are then addressed. The characters of Maimie, a rebelling but ultimately submissive force, and Maggie Butler, the title-

holder to the field who is denied any social standing within Carraigthomond, are investigated. The role of the wife is then explored by contrasting the positions occupied by the unnamed wife of Dandy McCabe, the unnamed and absent wife of the Bull McCabe, and the named but absent wife of William Dee who is, after all, acting on her behalf. Throughout this analysis Keane's questioning of gender stereotype, and performance according to societal expectations of gender is evident, and suggests further possible resonant elements at play within the work.

The approach taken in the sixth and final chapter is comparable to that utilized in the previous one, but instead the focus is on the opposite side of the gender binary, that is, masculinity. Firstly, in a similar fashion to the previous chapter, issues of masculine anxiety, both at the time of writing of *The Field* and in the present-day are explored and commented upon. The characters of Padraic, Daigan, and Morisheen from *The Man from Clare* are explored in terms of hypermasculinity, masculine performance and anxiety, and masculine stereotype. The Hiker Lacey from *The Year of the Hiker* is looked at in a similar fashion, and Keane's representation of varying interpretations of masculinity, and the anxieties therein, in these plays form a backdrop for the analysis of representations of masculinity as seen in *The Field* that follows. In terms of *The Field*, the character of the Bull McCabe, and the hypermasculine mask he applies to his own gender based anxiety is discussed. An opposing interpretation of masculinity is then discussed through the character of William Dee. Following on from this, the only young child character in the piece, Leamy, is explored as he represents an interpretation of masculinity caught between the two opposing versions of it presented previously. Finally Keane's representation of masculinity in *The Field* is looked at in terms of current literature regarding a crisis of masculinity, and possible masculine resonances within the piece are further explored.

Through the six chapters outlined above, and the close textual analysis contained within them, Keane's *The Field* is thoroughly interrogated and possible resonant factors at play within the text are suggested. Such an examination facilitates, and anticipates, further exploration of Keane's work in terms of identificatory processes contained within his writing while also presenting a multi-faceted approach to *The Field*. Such an approach is necessary and, it is hoped, will contribute greatly to the scholarship on Keane, an often-overlooked writer in terms of his ability to connect with audiences, represent their anxieties on stage, and challenge the dominant social structures that contribute to these anxieties in a subversive manner.

CHAPTER ONE

JOHN B. KEANE: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Early Years

To begin with, a short biography of the formative years of John B. Keane up until the first production of *The Field* will now be detailed. This biography will help to illuminate Keane's background, and will examine some early influences on him, thereby suggesting possible motivations lying beneath the surface of Keane's writing. Keane's dramatic works up until the first performance of *The Field* will be detailed and a brief analysis of each play will be given.

Keane was born on the 21st July 1928, at 45 Church Street, Listowel, County Kerry. Son to national-school teacher William and his wife Hannah, Keane was undoubtedly influenced by his father's love of books. Keane's father, William, created a library of sorts in the house, which was a refuge for him, and an escape from the day to day running of the house, "leaving his hard pressed wife the task of keeping order in the family" (Smith and Hickey 2004, 35). Young John Keane's visits to his father's library became more frequent as he got older, as did the amount of time spent there by his father, as bills mounted and sanctuary called. Father and son would sit there, "where they would talk about characters in literature" (Smith and Hickey 2004, 39). Keane's love of books was also aided by Dan Flavin who had a bookshop on Church Street and, according to Keane, he "lent us young fellows books because we could not afford them" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 40). Keane would later say of his father: "my father was a schoolmaster, and he never imposed. I see now how very lucky I was to be born under the broad influences of this penniless but far-reaching instructor" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 141). Such "broad influences" of his "far-reaching instructor" would instil in Keane a sense of a wider, more expansive, world in contrast to the narrowing attitudes he encountered in the Ireland of his time.

Keane enrolled as a student at St. Michael's College Listowel in 1938, and while there, along with his studies, he wrote poetry and received five shillings for the publication of one of his poems in *Ireland's Own* (Smith and Hickey 2004, 40). However, Keane's schooldays were somewhat unhappy, as corporal punishment was still the disciplining method of choice. Keane continued writing, and in his final year at the school he had some more of his poems published. One such poem was about Church St. in Listowel, entitled "The Street", and he recited it once as part of an elocution class. When his teacher, Father O'Connor, asked him who had written the poem, Keane replied that he had, only to be met by the priest's fist, which knocked him to the floor. Through ignorance, disbelief, or perhaps thinking that Keane was being deliberately disingenuous, the priest lashed out, in an act that was typical of the Irish educational system of the time. Keane later commented, "A bad beating is no asset to the self respect or dignity of an eighteen-year-old boy […] Misusing an eighteen-year-old is like baiting a three-year-old bull. He might not charge there and then, but he will explode later on and people find it hard to analyse the reasons" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 42). Such beatings at the hands of both authority and religion may have fed Keane's questioning nature as the physical manifestation of the ideal left a lot to be desired, resulting in an examination of the hegemonic order in which Keane found himself situated. Such a questioning attitude towards the forces of authority and in particular towards the hypocrisy of religion would recur throughout his works.

Keane's mother would have an influence on him also, particularly on his portrayal of female characters. When coupled with his experiences with female customers in his role as a pharmacist's assistant in both Listowel and in Doneraile in later life, Hannah Keane would give young Keane an insight into the female psyche of the time. As related in a personal interview by Keane's wife Mary "his mother was a great woman for mixing with people and they would call in and she would give them the cup of tea. They'd have a chat and he'd be there and he'd be listening. And he got a real insight into rural women" (Devaney 2012a, Appendix One). However, though it was a happy homestead, the burden of running the house fell solely on Hanna, who also "suffered from depression, despite her sense of humour" (Smith and Hickey 2004, 36). This came to a head eventually and she suffered a minor breakdown while Keane was still a schoolboy (Smith and Hickey 2004, 36). This may have had a significant influence on the young Keane, and the portrayal of women in his work along with his questioning of the patriarchal status quo through them, would suggest that it did indeed resonate profoundly within him.

As a youth Keane spent his summers in the Stack's Mountains with his cousins, the Sheehys. During these summers Keane was brought into contact with a world where the old traditions were alive, as opposed to Keane's native Listowel, which would have been in a state of relative modernization. The Sheehy's homestead also served as a rambling house, where folk stories were exchanged and songs were sang. Keane himself "would have his spake in as well" according to cousin John Joe Sheehy, who maintained that the Stack's "was the place for him. He could run himself to death here" (Smith and Hickey 2004, 33). In a personal interview, Keane's wife Mary claimed, "It was better than going to college, he learned about human beings and the way people lived, and lived there happy" (Devaney 2012a, Appendix One). Therefore Keane, from a young age, was influenced not only by a modernizing culture in his native Listowel, but also by the older culture he experienced in the Stack's. According to Brendan Kennelly, Keane's time in the Stack's opened his eyes to an elemental, almost pagan way of life, and instilled in him an appreciation of nature and of the natural: "I would say that he was opened up there [the Stack's] to paganism and Christianity interlocked" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 286). Keane's ability to negotiate between the realms of the catechism inscribed since youth, and the natural, almost pagan world, sets him apart as a writer according to Kennelly: "our struggle is to return to the primordial freshness that created us in the first place. Keane has that kind of drive. He has the drive to be utterly natural. It's in Rousseau, it's in Patrick Kavanagh, and it's even in George Orwell within an urban setting. It comes easy to Keane" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 286).

Early Adult Life

As a young man, having been refused a job as a junior reporter at *The Kerryman* newspaper, Keane became an apprentice to a local chemist, Keane-Stack. However writing was still at the fore of his mind and in his early twenties he started up a local newspaper, the *Listowel Leader*, with friend Stan Kennelly. This newspaper, containing such essential news as a story about a woman on Church Street with bandy legs, and another about Mary O Shea's missing bloomers, was short-lived (Smith and Hickey 2004, 45). A story attacking county councillors over the unfortunate state of the local park sparked outrage at the council meeting, resulting in a massive loss in advertising for the newspaper. The *Listowel Leader* ultimately closed down, but Keane's sense of humour and mischief was far from finished. In 1951 Keane and his friends from Curly's public house

created the persona of Tom Doodle, a fictional politician who was campaigning in the election of the same year. Posters were hung on telegraph poles around Listowel declaring: "Vote No.1 Tom Doodle. Use Your Noodle and Give the Whole Caboodle to Doodle" (Smith and Hickey 2004, 48). Eventually a rally was organized in The Square in Listowel where the character of Doodle addressed a good-humoured crowd. Later Keane would insist that the whole thing was done to take the "bad taste" out of local politics (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 48). This episode illustrates both Keane's sense of humour and his purposeful wit, characteristics that would resound throughout his writing career.

In that same year of 1951 Keane met his future wife, Mary O'Connor. Having decided that his prospects in the pharmacy trade were not good, Keane made the difficult decision to go to England in order to provide some sort of a future for himself and Mary. On the 6th January 1952, Keane left Listowel bound for the factory of British Timken in the town of Northampton, where the work, as a furnace operator in a steel factory, was tough but it was well paid. While in Northampton, Keane began writing poems and stories, one of which was published in *The Irish Press*. He then began working on a novel. Keane himself admitted: "I started writing out of desperation. If I hadn't, I'd have gone mad" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 56).

However, certain liberal aspects of life in England appealed to Keane. Having come from a country where book censorship was rife, and where he was angered by narrow social attitudes and the vice-like grip the church had on the people, England was an escape. Keane stated "At times I felt imprisoned in my mind, and I think now that it was one of the reasons I took the boat to England" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 58). In England, Keane experienced a world free from the claustrophobia induced by the church and social myopia, and this taste of freedom would have a massive influence on his work. It is also of note that in present-day Ireland the spectre of emigration has returned to loom over a post-Celtic Tiger nation, thus giving Keane's work, and his perspective on emigration added import.

In England Keane encountered, and formed part of, the emigrant Irish. Those that he met in Northampton, many of whom had little education due to the combination of their poor Irish language skills and the fact that classes in Ireland were conducted through Irish, would be another huge influence on Keane, and may have influenced his later involvement in the Language Freedom Movement (LFM). This was a movement against the compulsory teaching of the Irish language in schools, and Keane, due to his high profile, became a figurehead for the movement. At a time of

nationalistic fervour this movement went completely against the grain. Such was the outrage caused by the Language Freedom Movement that one meeting in Dublin in 1966 descended into chaos with Keane being escorted out by friend and garda Tony Guerin. According to Martin Reynolds, one of the LFM stewards "For the revivalists, it was a turning point, for we had questioned the whole concept of nationality. We were denying that an ability to speak Irish was equivalent to being a patriot" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 185-186). According to Keane's wife Mary, what had triggered his interest in such a movement was "all the people he knew that emigrated without any bit of schooling at all" due to the educational system being "too much through Irish", and Keane felt that "If they could just learn it [the Irish language] themselves for their own entertainment and joy it would be better than having it rammed down their throat" (Devaney 2012a, Appendix One). Keane's involvement with the LFM illustrates his ability to challenge and question the status quo when lived reality refutes the idealized concept, a common trope in his best work.

Keane was also very aware of the structuring of identity on nationalistic grounds. In the City Theatre, Limerick, in 1963, following a production of *The Man from Clare*, Keane addressed the crowd on the subject of the Irish language and "the hypocrisy of some of the people behind it" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 140). That same year Keane also wrote an article for *The Sunday Independent* titled "Confessions of a Second Class Citizen" in which he stated "I am a second-class citizen because I do not believe in compulsory Irish" (cited in Smith and Hickey 2004, 141). He would continue in that article to question such nationalist constructs as the ban on playing foreign games imposed by the Gaelic Athletic Association and contended that such a ban "should not be permitted to exist within the frame of Europe's most outstanding democracy" (cited in Smith and Hickey 2004, 141). Such writings show Keane's awareness of the constructed nature of identity, in this case national identity, for ideological gain.

While in Northampton Keane applied for, and was successful in securing, a position as a chemist's assistant in Doneraile, County Cork and he returned for good to Ireland in 1954. However, Keane still longed to be at home in Listowel, and an opportunity arose with his former employer Keane-Stack, which enabled him to move back home to Listowel. Keane then proposed to Mary, who duly accepted. Around this time The Greyhound Bar was advertised for sale in Listowel, and Keane put in a successful bid with the aid of a bank loan (Devaney 2012a, Appendix One). Now a publican, Keane began to write late at night. He started a

play for radio titled *Barbara Shearing*, which was accepted by Radio Éireann in early 1958. The pub and it's various characters provided endless inspiration for Keane as he admitted himself "I could not help seeing some of them as characters for a play. I encouraged them to sing and recite and tell stories" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 66). This has been put more succinctly in an anecdote related to me in interview by the poet Gabriel Fitzmaurice, a friend of Keane's. Keane was approached by an old customer of his, sometime in the 1960s, who said to him: "John B., you're the smartest of us all, you takes down what we says and you charges us to read it!" (Devaney 2012b, Appendix Two).

It was in this pub that one winter's night in 1958 Keane's wife, Mary, asked him a fateful question. She said to him "I'm going up to see [Joseph Tomelty's] *All Souls Night*, you can come if you want to" (Devaney 2012a, Appendix One). On his return from the play he turned to Mary and said: "You know, I could write a play like that" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 15). According to Mary "that very night he pulled out the table, put a few more sods on the fire, filled a pint, got a big copy book, and that was the start of *Sive*" (Devaney 2012a, Appendix One). The play may have been influenced by an encounter with an older man who was "a bit ancient, but he had a big farm of land" looking for a cheap wedding ring for his bride-to-be who was "a young girl, a nice young girl" (Devaney 2012a, Appendix One). Keane himself was "appalled by the difference in ages" and to him "the man was nothing but a sorry old dotard" (quoted in Smith and Hickey 2004, 17).

The play was completed in a number of weeks and Keane sent it off to the Abbey Theatre, but to no avail, as the play was rejected. However, the play was taken up by the Listowel Drama Group and was staged in Walsh's Ballroom in February 1959. It went on to win first prize at the All Ireland Drama Festival in Athlone in 1959. Around the same time, James N. Healy of the Southern Theatre Group bought the performing rights to *Sive*, and Keane received a cheque of fifty pounds. Thus, the analysis of Keane's dramatic works will now begin with a brief examination of this play, Keane's first major success.

Sive

Sive is an important play as it contains tropes that run consistently throughout Keane's work. Firstly, the play is set in a rural location, "*in a remote mountainy part of Southern Ireland*", and in a household of the 1950s, being situated in "*the recent past*" (*S*, 9), a setting Keane would utilise frequently throughout his career.