

## DRAMA

**"We recognise the characters in Irish drama as individuals, not stereotypes of a nation." Discuss this statement, showing how the characters in the plays you have studied might be portrayed on the stage.**

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Both *Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* have a depth and complexity of character that allows each individual actor to be recognised as a distinct entity - through not only the construct of the play, but also its portrayal on stage through dramatic elements. While these characters cannot be in anyway classified as stereotypes – as they display a depth and multiplicity as characters far beyond the shallow confines of Irish stereotypes – references to stereotypes and the national identity of Ireland are used as a source of comedic value or embellishment of concepts presented through individual characters.

In *Beauty Queen of Leenane* by Martin McDonagh, even within the opening scene, both Mag and Maureen are immediately established as distinct, individual characters. In stage productions, including the Druid theatre, Chalkdust and Sydney Theatre Company, the play is presented through the style of realism, or, most notably in the STC production, heightened realism. This stylistic choice – which results from the script by McDonagh, and is seen in the director's choices and use of dramatic elements, immediately place the characters, Mag, Maureen, Pato and Ray as individuals – differing to such styles as melodrama, where the one-dimensional, stereotypes or 'roles' are portrayed. In this realist play, neither Mag nor Maureen represent that loud, jolly or boisterous personality that is associated with the Irish culture, nor is there any mention of alcohol - despite the strong drinking culture associated with Ireland and its stereotypes. Mag and Maureen are instead shown in a sad, depressed tone to the whole play - with the single constant set of the small little house, almost claustrophobic in the amount of tension that lies between Mag and Maureen. With such an intimate cast of only four actors, the audience sees the many different facets of the characters, Maureen's violent anger, her shy banter with Pato and her annoyance with Ray – connecting to the audience to universal elements of the human condition, love, hate, disappointment, anger; rather than that of the Irish stereotype. Likewise, Mag's whole interaction with the world is extremely complex, being very much withdrawn from the world and wanting to keep Maureen withdrawn with her – to argue the day away about biscuits, the weather and them ol' yanks. It is these varying emotional responses and the complex motivations that lie behind each character that allows the audience to connect with each actor as an individual character, rather than an embodiment of the Irish stereotype.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel has a greater variety of characters than "*Beauty Queen*" but all are still seen as distinct individuals, reacting off one another; each with a complexity and depth that immediately associates them with being individuals, rather than portraying the one-dimensionality of stereotypes. Dissimilar to *Beauty Queen*, particularly within the Chalkdust theatre production, there is a stronger sense of an ensemble, from the evident number of characters onstage at any one time, as well as the many connections and differing relations between the characters. Even so, there is nothing uniformly or stereotypically Irish about the characters, individually or collectively, and rather the audience, like in *Beauty Queen*, relates to each character by their actions, motivations, emotions, status and circumstance. For example, Kate is shown through her relationships with her sisters to be the head of the family, being the sole bread-winner, allowing the audience to connect with the love and concern she has for her family, as well as the stress and angst that comes with said responsibility. In contrast, Maggie looks after the family in a different manner, serving as the glue holding the family unit together, altering slightly and subtly for each character, speaking firmly back to Kate, calm and kindly to Rose, and on jokingly terms with her favourite nephew Michael. The individuality of each character is most notable in the way they act and react to each other – displaying Rose's simpleness, Kate's authority, Gerry's charm, as well as displaying the depth and complexity of each character – with their emotions, motivations and actions being that through which the audience primarily identifies, the common human experience, rather than to any element that is synonymously Irish.

While both plays show a depth and complexity of character that immediately separates them from the construct of Irish stereotypes, the essence of the stereotypes and the national Irish identity is not completely absent from the plays. As a way of connecting to the audience, the playwrights have used certain aspects of the Irish stereotype and identity to create humour or to emphasise an aspect of the play, through the creative choices of the director, in either embracing or subverting connotations of the Irish stereotype. Within *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the concept of Irish dance, of course synonymous with Irish cultural stereotypes has been subverted to take on a greater meaning; there is of course the frenzied flurry of movement onstage, but beyond the physical connection, it is symbolic of the emotional ties the sisters have, allowing even Kate to show the love and bond that they share through their turmoil. In contrast, within *Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the character of Ray embodies many traits of the Irish stereotype for comedic value, though, like all the other characters of the play, is not solely one dimensional. His larrikin ways are even within the script and should be on stage; in his blunt and hurried speech, his lazing around and moments of energy and passion, and his childlike impatience with both Mag and Maureen. References to elements of Irish culture are used by Ray's character to connect through comedic value, with such lines as "There goes a calf" as a sarcastic side comment during an argument with Mag.

In essence, the characters within *Beauty Queen of Lenanne* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* far excel the one-dimensionality of national Irish stereotypes through their depth and complexity of personality, actions and motivation. Even so, elements of Irish stereotypes are either subverted or embraced by the director and playwrights as a method to connect to the audience – to embellish the concepts presented by the individual characters onstage.