

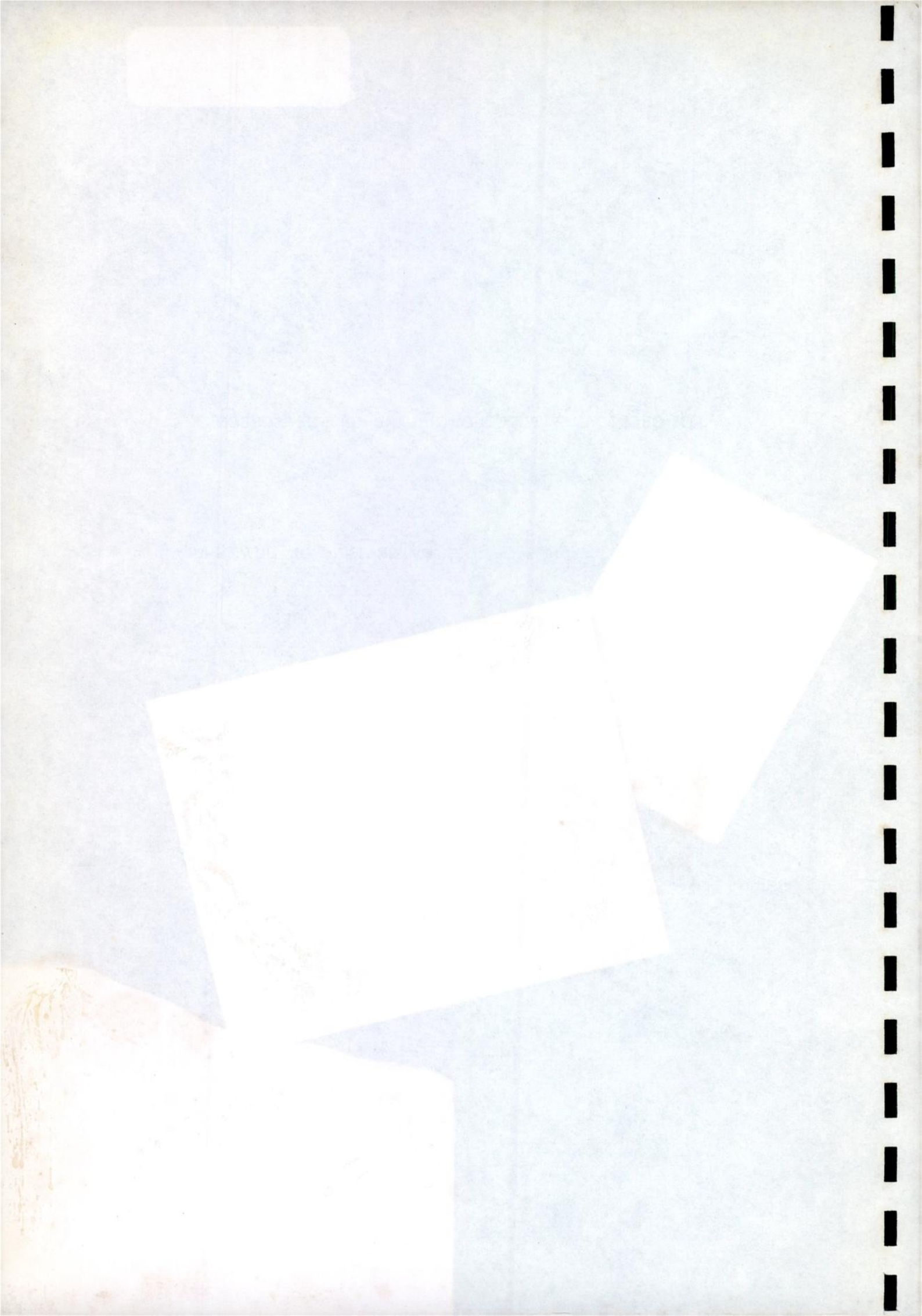
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JIM SHERIDAN - PUTTING IRELAND ON THE SCREEN

by GRAINNE DE BUITLEAR





NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

Visual Communications

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and Complimentary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Page 4 - 6

Chapter 1

Jim Sheridan.

- His history.
- His four films: My Left Foot, The Field, Into the West, In the Name of the Father.
- His influences.

Page 7 - 11

Chapter 2

An overview and analysis of the four films and their content.

Their international appeal.

Page 12 - 31

Chapter 3

The narrative as a form of storytelling.

A close look at the four major themes in his films;

Death, Hardship, Relationship, Religion/Faith.

The development of these motifs.

Page 32 - 52

Chapter 4

Conclusion.

Page 53 - 55

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Page 56

INTRODUCTION

Jim Sheridan's films have brought international glory to the name of Irish film-making. From the humble beginnings of My Left Foot, to the controversial big-budget In the Name of the Father, his films have been acclaimed world-wide and not least by the hardest people to please; those in Hollywood.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

CHAPTER 1

In this Thesis I am going to look at Jim Sheridan, and his four films; My Left Foot, The Field, Into the West, and In the Name of the Father. I will be looking at what has influenced him and in what way these influences have affected his films and his choice of scripts.

CHAPTER 2

The thesis will give a brief overview and analysis of the four films and their content in relation to Ireland and Irish society, and the reactions to them. I will then examine the relationship between their local and global appeal. They are so Irish, in a way that one might think only an Irish person might understand, yet Sheridan sees them as universal stories, stories of human conditions that will appeal internationally.

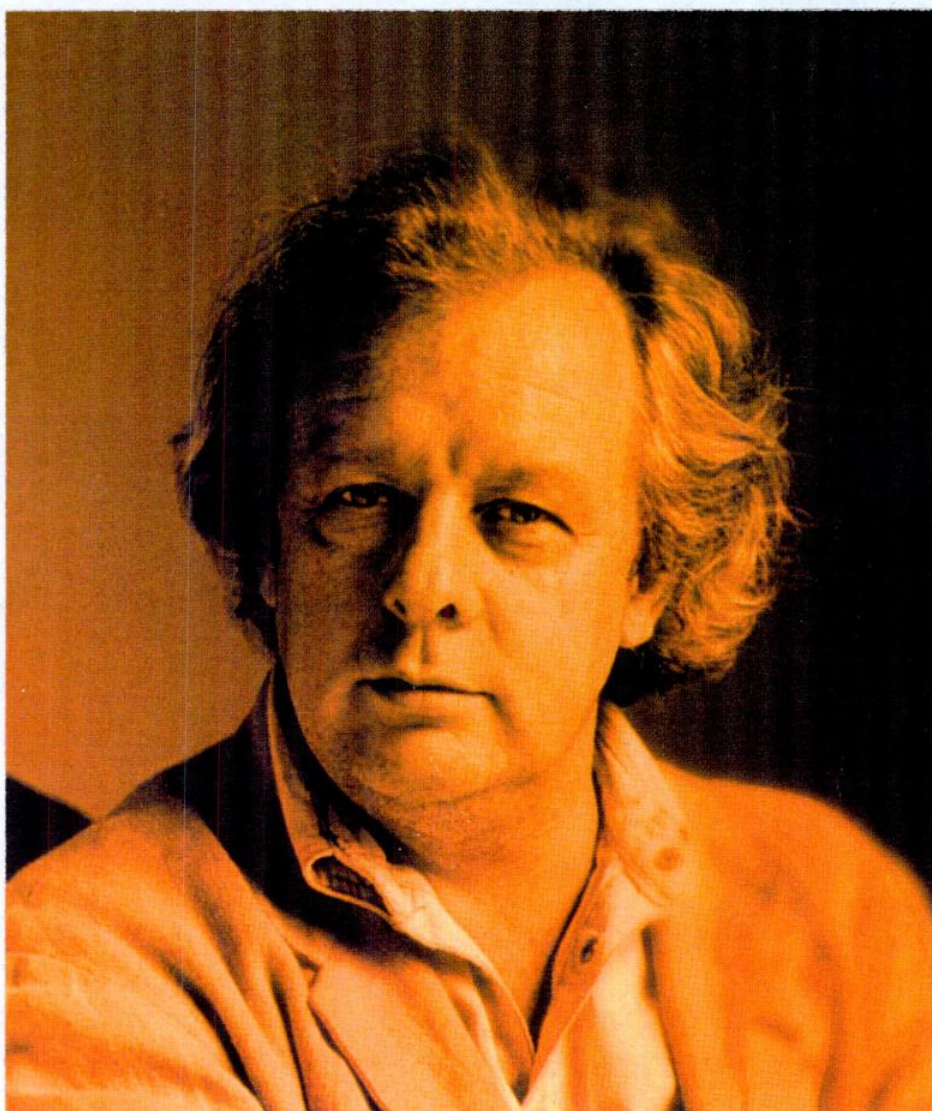
CHAPTER 3

After taking a brief look at the narrative as a form of story telling, I will be discussing and analysing the four films and their content in relation to one another. Although each of Sheridan's films is very original as a film standing on its own, I will attempt to identify underlying themes which may run through them all. Much has been written about Sheridan's particular films, but I will be drawing the four films together in an attempt to demonstrate how closely, but originally, the same themes permeate each film. I will also be going back to Sheridan's childhood to try and discover the source of some of these themes. The major themes I have chosen to examine in depth are hardship/struggling against the odds, death, familial relationships and

religion/faith. I will be giving examples of the development of these motifs in each of his films.

CHAPTER 4

In my conclusion I will be looking at Sheridan's fascination with emotional stories and the way he looks at film as a chance to get away from the format of words and language. I will be giving a brief summary of the previous three chapters, with references and examples from them.



6a



CHAPTER ONE

JIM SHERIDAN'S BACKGROUND

I will begin by giving you a brief look at Jim Sheridan's history, because it is his background that has given him a deep interest in people and had nurtured his mastery of the art of storytelling.

Sheridan grew up in Emerald Street flats in Dublin. His father, a C.I.E. clerk, was a very sociable man and a very important figure in his life. Sheridan was the eldest of seven children and appears to have had an idyllic childhood, being 'particularly spoiled' by his mother. (Wordsworth, 19/3/94)

But when Sheridan was seventeen, his younger brother Frankie, aged eleven, got a brain tumour and died. His death had a traumatic effect on Sheridan, and may have influenced the direction of his career.

After this tragedy, his father began activities to occupy himself and the rest of the family. Getting involved with people seemed a way of coming to terms with the tragedy. He started up a drama group, Slot Players, and got involved with local sports groups, old folks etc., in the neighbourhood as a means of getting out.

It was with this drama group that Sheridan landed his first part acting as Johnny Boyle in O'Casey's

Juno and the Paycock. It was also here that Sheridan began wanting to direct; "maybe I knew I wasn't that good an actor...." (de Buitlear: Dublin, 17/2/95) The drama seemed to work as therapy; it helped to piece the family back together. Jim sees this scenario mirrored in all the films he has done.....'there is a trauma, and afterwards the family comes back together'. (Wordsworth, 19/3/94) This will be further examined later in the thesis.

Earlier rendez-vous with the theatre, however, came long before Sheridan's father's amateur dramatics. One funny incident of when he was about six or seven was recited in The Irish Times,

.....Jim compromised going to the cinema, by going to a Protestant Church Hall's showing of the film Shane because it was two pence cheaper. The projector was installed on a table but you could hear it running which took all the magic away for the impressionable seven year old.

'Then the film broke, and they fixed it with sellotape, and then I knew that the magic was just bits of celluloid stuck together. After the film broke a third time, they said not to go away, they were going to entertain us. Some of the local Protestant men put boot polish on their faces, and you could only see white eyes and white teeth. Everyone who knew them erupted with laughter. They did a sort of vaudeville act, where four of them operated on a fifth man with saws and hammers, and took out his heart, which turned into an alarm clock. He jumped up like he was resurrected from the dead, and everyone was in convulsions of laughter, but the sweat was pouring off my face, because I thought he was the devil.' - Sheridan

The next thing Sheridan knew, he was outside on the pavement and his friend was pleading, Are you alright, Sherro? Jim had

fainted, but what he had seen had fascinated as well as frightened him. If cinema's magic wand was temporarily broken, the power of theatre was awesomely clear. But the disturbing sense that an audience's laughter can be demonic as well as celebratory has never left him.

(Wordsworth, 19/3/94)

THEATRE AND IRELAND

Sheridan went on to study Arts in U.C.D. where he got a degree in English and Philosophy. He then started up a theatre group called the Children's T, which he brought to schools to direct and perform avant garde versions of numerous classics. It was when he moved on to found the Project Arts Centre, however, that he made his first mark on the native cultural scene. At a time when it was dominated by the Abbey Theatre's brilliant but conservative repertoire, Sheridan made the Project the focal point of alternative theatre. It was very successful, but underpaid.

NEW YORK

In 1981, with his wife and two children in tow, Sheridan finally left Ireland, first for Canada and then New York, where he became artistic director of the Irish Arts Center. These were hard times when

Sheridan struggled to survive on less than a \$100 a week. However, these gruelling personal experiences have played a major part in his choice of scripts, themes and portrayals of particular characters.

THE FILM OFFERS

It was while he was in New York that Sheridan was approached by Dublin theatre producer Noel Pearson with the idea for My Left Foot, the film based on Christy Browne's autobiography.

He finally directed it, despite much opposition, and the film went on to scoop no less than five Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay, along with the two it eventually won for Daniel Day-Lewis as Best Actor, and Brenda Fricker as Best Supporting Actress.

In 1990, Sheridan followed up his double Oscar-winning debut by directing The Field, an adaptation of John B. Keane's play - his second joint venture with Pearson after My Left Foot.

Into the West followed The Field as Sheridan's third successive screenplay to hit the cinema. Sheridan himself admitted to feeling closer to this than the previous two because My Left Foot and The Field were "adaptations to an extent," while Into the West was totally original. (Quinn, 22/12/92) The

scripts originality was one of the key reasons Mike Newell agreed to direct the movie at only two weeks notice "....it was like reading Treasure Island....a marvellous adventure with the addition of wonderful jokes." (Quinn, 22/12/92)

The latest, and most controversial of Sheridan's impressive films to reach the screen was In the Name of the Father. Jointly scripted by Terry George and Sheridan, but directed by Sheridan himself, this incredible film tells the story of a miscarriage of justice by the British legal establishment and a powerful father/son relationship, set amidst a troubled Northern Ireland of the 1970's. It was another of Sheridan's films to make it to the Oscars, with a total of seven prestigious nominations.

CHAPTER TWO

OVERVIEW OF MY LEFT FOOT

My Left Foot opens with author Christy Browne, a cerebral palsy sufferer, feeling around with his bare foot for a record, lifting it out of its sleeve with his toes and placing it on the record player.¹ This first scene shows the ambition and determination which Christy will demonstrate throughout the whole film. The record begins and to the sound of opera we see scenes of tenement Dublin in 1959; narrow streets, terraced houses, children hanging around street corners. Everything looks drab, except for the convoy of white limousines which are on their way to collect the Browne Family and bring them to a gala reception in Christy's honour.²

One of twenty two children born to his mother in a Dublin slum, Christy was a spastic who for the first six years of his life could neither walk, talk, nor control any of his limbs, other than his left foot. Encouraged by his mother, he taught himself to write with a pen between his toes, eventually producing the autobiography My Left Foot, on which the film script is based.

Christy's early life is relayed through a conventional flashback structure which darts back and



Fig.1



Fig.2



100-100



100-100

100-100

forth between Mary Carr (a woman who is looking after Christy) at the fund-raising gala where she is reading his autobiography, and the recreated scenes of Christy's youth.

Christy's youth was a mixture of frustrated angst and fun and triumph. Although the film emphasises Christy's success as a painter and a writer, it does not undermine the hard work and effort it took for him to get there, the emotional strain he went through. This film lets us see everything.

Getting the actual production of My Left Foot on the road was a bit of an emotional strain as well, from the problem of transforming the autobiography into film, to the difficulties they had in trying to get financial backing for the project. However, once Daniel Day Lewis was clinched to play the leading role in Sheridan and Shane Connaughton's brilliant adaptation, the film became a bankable operation and Jim Sheridan was on his way to being the first Irish film director to make a breakthrough at Oscar time.

OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

The Field opens with Bull McCabe (Richard Harris) and his son (Sean Bean) standing on top of a cliff looking down at a drowning dead donkey.³ Taghd is looking at his father for expressions of approval.⁴



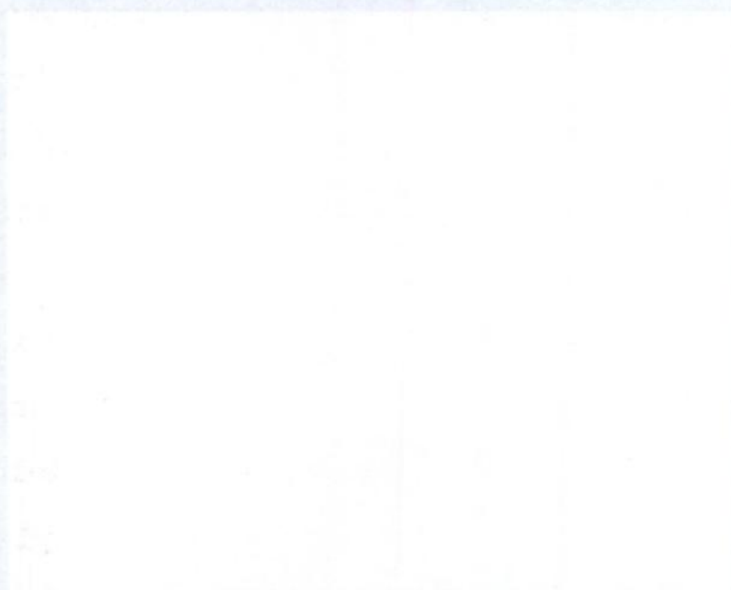
Fig.3



Fig.4



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100-100

100-100

This is the donkey he has killed because it wandered onto this father's land.⁵

Next we see the rugged Irish sea-scape with Bull and Taghd collecting baskets of seaweed to fertilize their field.⁶ Then struggle up rocks and across fields with their heavy loads. To Bull McCabe, the field is his life.

We get a brief look into Bull's house where we immediately sense the tension between husband and wife.⁷ Then from the wonderfully scenic Irish landscape we arrive at the rural village which has been taken over by a ramshackle itinerants' encampment.

Inside the pub, we hear that Bull's field, which he has rented for years is up for auction by a young widow. This is shocking news to Bull who refers to the field as "his child".⁸ "I nursed it, it was a dead thing". This is the field, once barren and rocky, that Bull's bare hands have tended and made into the most luscious of pastures. We are given a brief insight into Irish history as we are told that Bull's mother died slaving on the same field. He reinforces his allegiance to the field saying, "our souls is buried down there".

Then we see the arrival of Tom Berenger as a wealthy American, come to find his roots after the death of his own father. He, too, has his heart set on buying Bull's field. And he has great plans for



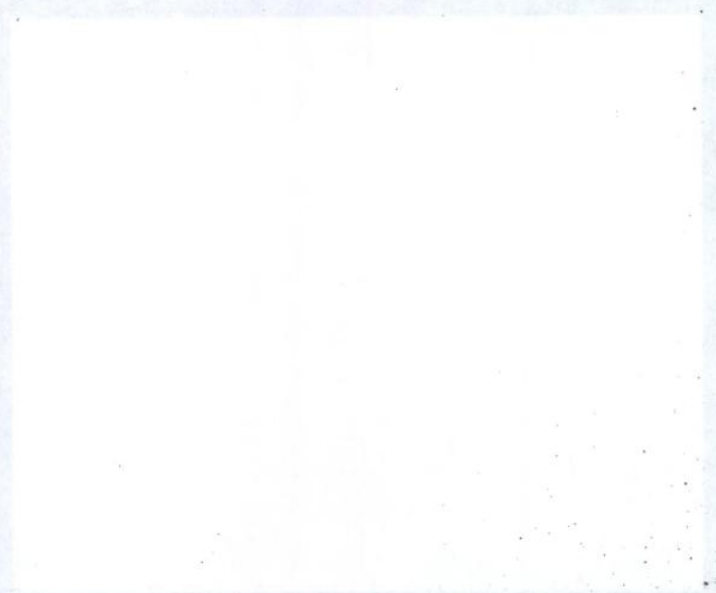
Fig.5



Fig.6



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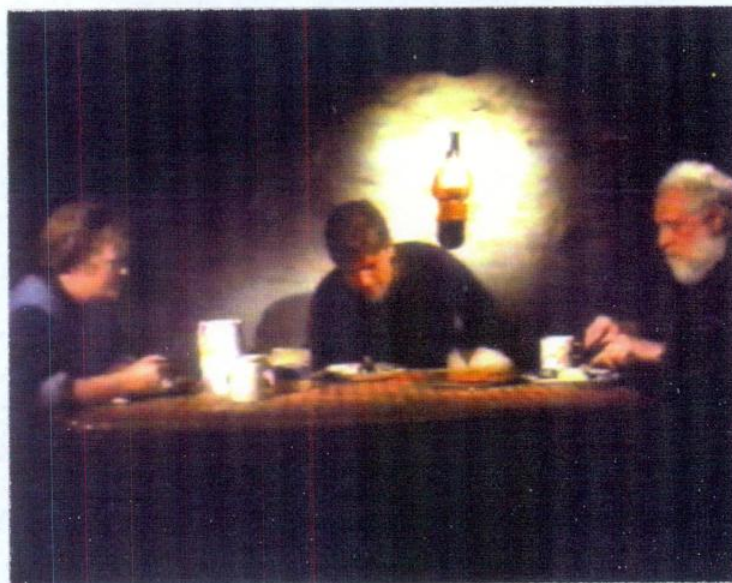


Fig.7



Fig.8



it too....As the local priest shows him around the area , Berenger exclaims, "There's enough limestone up there to build highways all over Ireland"...He refers to the coveted field, saying "I'll cover this place with concrete then I've got access to the whole shootin' match".⁹

There is further aggravation between Bull and the church when he realises that the local priest is giving Berenger help and advice in buying the land.¹⁰

At first the stage seems set for a traditional clash of old and new values: those of the indigenous Irish and their corrupt colonial cousins. Bull has a great distaste for the American from the onset of his arrival. He calls him the 'foreign bastard' and despises him because he is a product of those who abandoned Ireland on the emigrant ships, while his own forefathers stayed on to slave and fight for what belonged to them.

Sheridan refers to The Field as being the most difficult of all his films. He says that although people understand land, he doesn't think that people understand the concept of somebody who rents land believing that it belongs to them. And he thinks this is especially hard for Americans..."they just rob land". (de Buitlear; Dublin, 17/2/95)

The repeated references by Bull to the Great Famine of the 1840's introduce both a historical perspective and a political overtone. He is also at



Fig.9



Fig.10

"Do you see those hands? It was a dead thing, I saw to its every want. My only wealth is that green grass. That lovely green grass. You want to take it away from me, and in the sight of God I can't let you do that."



loggerheads with the church because they would not bury his son Seami on consecrated ground beside his grandfather.¹¹ When Bull gives out, his grudges go back one hundred years: "No priests died at the time of the Famine, only poor people, like us".

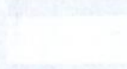
Sheridan eschews broad tragic gestures in favour of a more intimate concern with the fabric of Irish rural life. It is, however, the story of a fight over land which is a global situation.

At first we side with Bull; he has slaved on this land all his life and we witness his determination when he shouts "no collar, uniform or weapon will protect the man that stands in my way". When the American bids for the land against Bull, the stage is set for a fearful confrontation that both men are determined to win. With both the land and their livelihood at stake, Bull and his son attempt to frighten off the American. At this stage we really question Bull's distorted values.

The American's intervention is simply a catalyst for a tragedy which was waiting to happen, one which had its roots in Ireland's terrible past. Everything goes wrong for Bull. After betraying Bull's trust, his only living son is killed in a cattle stampede, and the finale of the film shows the deranged man wading into a carcass-strewn sea, vainly trying to hold back the tide of history.



Fig.11



The final scene in The Field is very different to the ending of My Left Foot. Despite Christy's struggle throughout My Left Foot, his struggle to learn, to be accepted, the depressions he goes through, the emotional torment of un-requited love, the film ends on a high note, with Christy and Mary Carr amidst a beautiful setting bursting open a bottle of champagne.¹² Contrastingly, The Field does not end on a positive note for any of the characters involved.¹³ Sheridan says that despite the hardship and illness in My Left Foot, we are dealing with "upbeat subject matter". On the other hand, in The Field Sheridan feels that "evil penetrates into all the personalities". (Freeze Frame, R.T.E.1, 1990)

OVERVIEW OF INTO THE WEST

Into the West opens with an old man, the grandfather in the film, foraging for shellfish on a beach.¹⁴ He is watched from the dunes by a white horse, which then follows his horse-drawn caravan home. The viewer is lulled into thinking this an Irish pastorate, probably set in some quaint earlier century, when a low flying plane screams over-head.¹⁵ The credits roll and we're in an encampment of itinerants near a bleak modern housing estate, with a leather coated Gabriel Byrne and an attached pair of



Fig.12



Fig.13

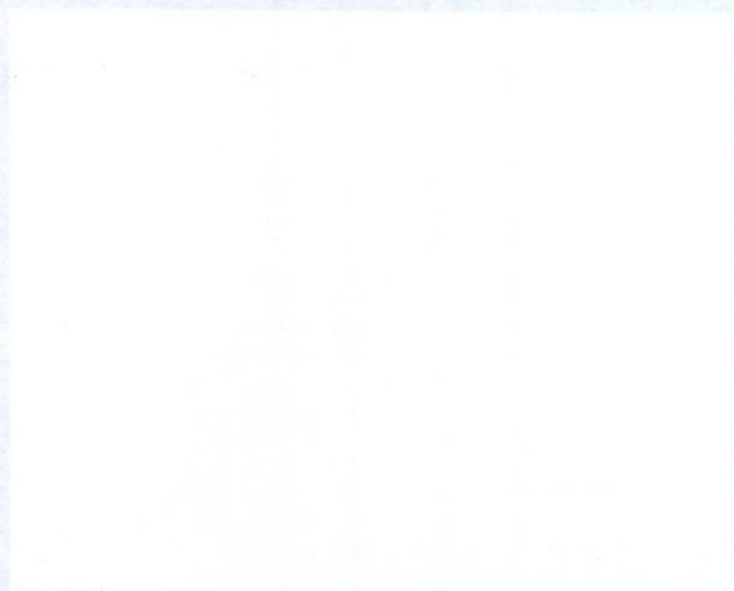




Fig.14



Fig.15



urchins hobbling about looking deprived and neglected.¹⁶

The brooding father in the film is a traveller who has given up the nomadic life to live in a high rise Dublin slum following his wife's death on the birth of their second son. While the father wallows in self pity and booze, his two young scruffs hone their begging techniques and form a mutual attachment to the white horse brought into the area by their grandfather.¹⁷

On the night that the white horse has arrived, all the children from the area gather around a campfire and listen with bated breath as Grandpa Reilly recites the mythical tale of Tir na n'Og.¹⁸ This scene is an example of how Sheridan thinks of film taking us back to when we were all in the caves together, or around fires. "You had your fire and you were very close up to peoples' faces, and you could judge them from every little reaction". (de Buitlear; Dublin, 17/2/95) The wonder and interest is visible in all the faces,¹⁹ and prompts Tito and Ozzie into further realms of thought as they imagine their own "magical horse" helping them escape from the Dublin flats.

With these campfire scenes, Sheridan gets to the heart of the Irish love of mythology, while managing to avoid the twee Irishness that ruins many an attempt at the territory. Its not like watching "Far and



Fig.16



Fig.17



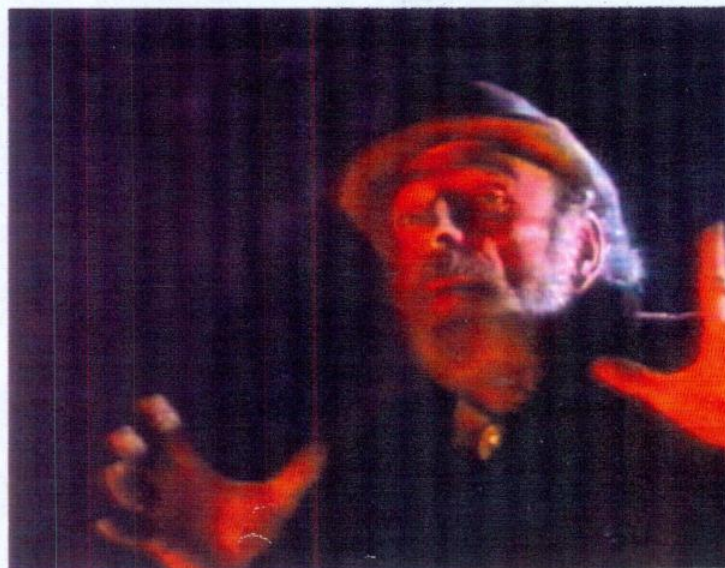
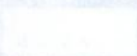


Fig.18



Fig.19



Away" where we end up cringing as Tom Cruise attempts to give us a deeper insight into Irish culture and tradition. Instead, Sheridan uses children as the recipients of the information, and we all know how children love drama and fairy tales. Of course, some of its elements flirt with cliché but then they are also a part of Ireland that few would deny.

The boys pursuit across Ireland on the mystical horse is often hilarious, as they imagine themselves Indians in a western. They sleep rough and take refuge in a rural cinema but unknowingly they are also embarking upon the deeper journey of life celebrated in Celtic literature.

The result is a rollicking adventure that refuses to pull any punches in its portrait of urban deprivation or in exploring the theme of personal loss and reconciliation. The boys escapades finally lead to a wave-lashed climax in the West that brings reconciliation with the great mysteries of death and rebirth.

The film shows itinerants to be victims of community prejudice without denying the reasons they might be deemed to have nuisance value: squalid camps, social security scams, et al. What makes this film seem less of an attack than it might, is its understanding of the reasons for these conditions, along with the films healthy doses of humour.

Once again, this is not just an Irish story; like The Field tells the story of the fight over land, a situation familiar to every country, similarly, Into the West is also an International story. The travellers portrayed here have similarities with many peoples. Take for example, the Australian Aborigines; like the travellers, they are folk suffering from the disappearance of their traditional way of life.

This, however, is not a message film, but rather a piece of assured storytelling with broad audience appeal that manages to be both earthy and magical all at once. Some critics however found it a little too magical; Bob Campbell of the "Star Ledger" felt its blend of social realism and folktale sentimentality didn't entirely jell.

"The film lays on its contrasts a little too thick. The horsebreeder and his allies are icy caricatures,²⁰ while the travellers are presented with the misty reverence that Hollywood accords its Indian shamans."

(Campbell; 17/9/93)

He went on to say that it was a bit much that the boys' mother died in childbirth after being turned away by bigoted hospital workers.

Another critic described sitting through the film as like,

"attending a pretentious seance that's an obvious fake or watching a clumsy magician at a kid's party whose trick cards keep spilling out of both sleeves."

(Medred; 17/9/93)



Fig.20

1. The first part of the report is a general introduction to the subject of the study. It discusses the importance of the study and the objectives of the research. It also provides a brief overview of the methodology used in the study.

2. The second part of the report is a detailed description of the study area. It includes information about the location of the study area, the population of the study area, and the characteristics of the study area. It also discusses the data sources used in the study.

3. The third part of the report is a detailed description of the study results. It includes information about the findings of the study, the conclusions drawn from the study, and the implications of the study. It also discusses the limitations of the study and the need for further research.

4. The fourth part of the report is a conclusion and recommendations. It summarizes the findings of the study and provides recommendations for future research. It also discusses the importance of the study and the need for further research.

1. The first part of the report is a general introduction to the subject of the study. It discusses the importance of the study and the objectives of the research. It also provides a brief overview of the methodology used in the study.

He goes on to describe the film as nearly degenerating into a gaelic version of Mr. Ed before the police confiscate Tir na n'Og, and wonders that this "maudlin mess" could be the product of such fine talents as Jim Sheridan and Mike Newell!

One of the several strengths of this film from Sheridan is its challenge to ready classification. Despite its appeal to younger audiences, it refuses to sit politely in the cute "children's film" genre. It has equal appeal for grown-ups - a magical tale steeped in the traditions of the mythic quest and the resonant symbols of Ireland's pagan past, while simultaneously gritty and humorous in its observation of contemporary urban realities.

Louis Gianetti in his book Understanding Movies believes that there is a principle of universality that can be inferred no matter how unique or strange a given story may be. The example he uses is a scene from Spielberg's masterpiece, when ET and his friend Elliot must say goodbye.^{21, 22}

ET will live forever inside Elliot's mind. Symbolically, the boy will soon outgrow his childhood world of imaginary best friends, scary looking creatures and the vast unknown. But he will never forget the beauty of innocence of that world. Nor will we.

(Gianetti; 1993, p336)

The same parallels can be made with Sheridan's Into the West.^{23, 24} We know it is a fantasy tale, we know that the magical horse cannot stay for ever. But while it is there it brings joy and wonderment



Fig.21



Fig.22



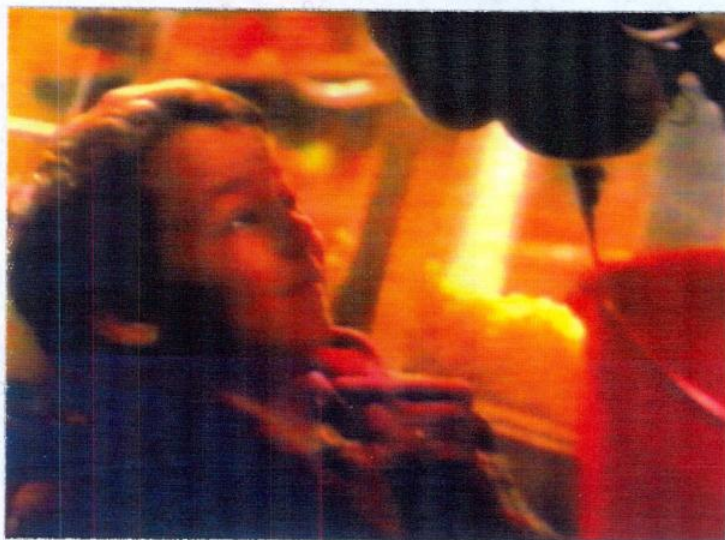


Fig.23



Fig.24



into the lives of the two boys and symbolically allows them to come to terms with the loss of their mother.

OVER VIEW OF IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

In the Name of the Father begins with the exterior of a pub in Guilford, October 5th 1974. The mood is festive as several teenage couples happily enter the front door of the bar. Suddenly there is a massive bomb explosion and the whole place goes up in flames.

Next, in a flash-forward, we are introduced to Gareth Peirce (played by Emma Thomson), the defence lawyer on the Conlon case. She is driving in her car and listening to an audio tape of Gerry Conlon telling his life story.²⁵

Flash-back to Belfast, 1974. Gerry Conlon, remarkably played by Daniel Day-Lewis, is a gangly, teenage, petty thief climbing on roofs and stealing scrape metal.²⁶ A British control mistakes him for a gunman and attempts to shoot him. A dynamic riot scene ensues.²⁷

Our first introduction to Guiseppe Conlon, (acted by Pete Postlethwaite) is his search to find Gerry amidst the riot scene. He runs across the enemy line waving a white handkerchief to signal peace.²⁸ His face shows signs of great anxiety and sadness. We



Fig.25

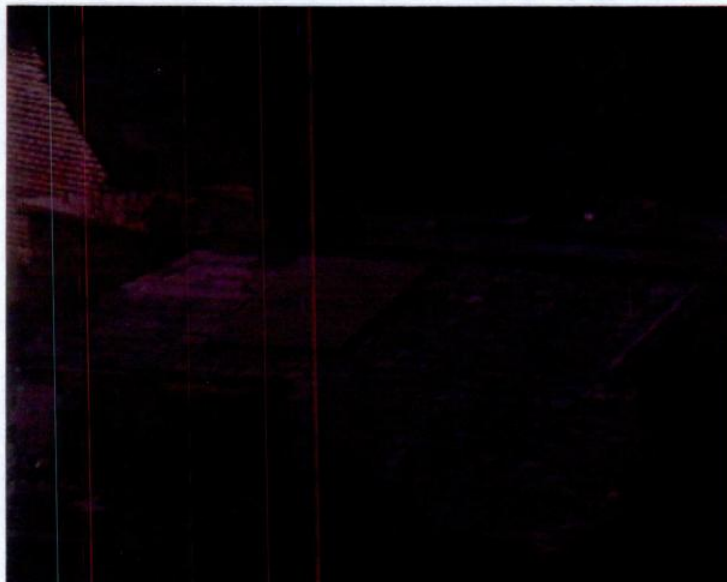


Fig.26

Gerry Conlon, stealing scrap metal from roofs, as seen through the binoculars of a British soldier.





Fig.27



Fig.28



100-
1000

realise immediately that Guiseppe is a man of compassion, living in fear of the violence. He manages to rescue Gerry from the crowd, and as they walk home together we are shown the contempt and lack of respect Gerry has for his father.

Gerry is warned by the I.R.A. that he won't survive in Belfast with his delinquent behaviour. So he decides to escape the depression of Belfast by trying his luck in London, and in a moving scene where Guiseppe accompanies Gerry to the boat for England he says "Go and live, go and live son."²⁹ For a moment we feel that this could be a positive move for Gerry's future.

On the boat Gerry meets up with an old friend, Paul Hill, with whom, on reaching London he goes to a hippy commune, Xzanadu, where Hill has been invited for 'free love'. It is here they make friends with two others; Paddy Armstrong and Carole Richardson. Unbeknownst to them all, they are to become the accused in the horrific I.R.A. bombing of two pubs in Guildford which kills five people and injures another seventy.

After this terrorist attack there was a national out-cry in England. The Guildford bombing was the beginning of the most intense terror campaign in I.R.A. history in which there were nearly fifty bombing and shooting attacks, many deaths, hundreds of



Fig.29



injuries and millions of pounds worth of property destroyed.

Our next scene of Gerry is when he breaks into a prostitute's place and robs her money. Ironically, the last words his father had said before he left for England was "Remember, honest money goes further." With the stolen cash, he and Paul Hill kit themselves out in the most stylish 70's³⁰ fashion and travel back to Belfast to see their families. This incident is important in the storyline because the once-off robbery turns out to be a vital part of the prosecution's evidence much later on in the film.

The scenes from the past are shown with Gerry's voice narrating in the present, via the cassettes being played in Gareth Peirce's car.

The next scene shows us one of the members of the hippy commune informing the police that Gerry Conlon and Paul Hill had suddenly come into a lot of money and were often ranting about Irish liberation, etc. This is a deliberate attempt to get them into trouble.

We briefly see the terror and fear people in Northern Ireland live under when we witness a horrific scene where, during the night the Conlon's house is bombarded by the British Police force. Gerry is wrenched out of bed, guns pointed to his head, as he exclaims "I don't have a clue what this is about..." "I don't know what the fuck you want, but I am not it". He is brutally pulled down the stairs and whisked

Gerry in his flamboyant 70s gear walking home through dreary war torn Belfast.



Fig.30



away in a police van to be held for seven days under the new prevention of terrorism act. We are left with the two younger sisters both crying at the window ledges. At this point in the film no-one is quite sure what has happened - Gerry is completely unaware of what he has done to be arrested. Guiseppe doesn't know if Gerry has committed a crime or not, admitting to his wife that "if he killed three people, I haven't the strength for this."

At the police station Hill and Conlon are being pushed into admitting that they are guilty of the Guildford bombing. There is a brief moment where we see the chief police inspectors debating whether or not they have the genuine bombers. But at the time the British police were under such enormous pressure to find the terrorists and assuage the wave of public disgust and anger which was sweeping the country that it seemed any Irish that they could force to confess would suffice.

One of the officers says he can make Gerry confess. With the threat of shooting Guiseppe,³¹ Gerry gets into a frenzy, which another officer uses as blackmail, making Gerry's anguish seem like hatred he harbours for the British.^{32, 33} Gerry ends up signing and despite the wildly contradictory confessions between Hill's and his own, he is taken away and locked up in a South London remand centre.

"I'm going to shoot your Da".



Fig.31

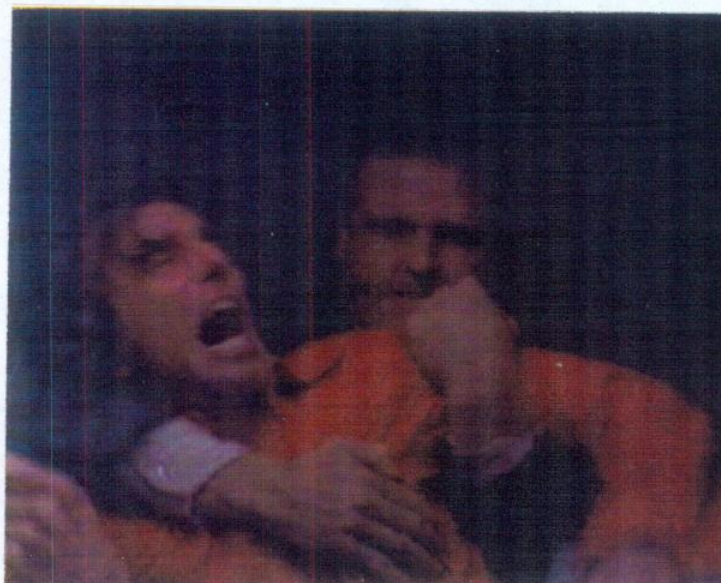


Fig.32

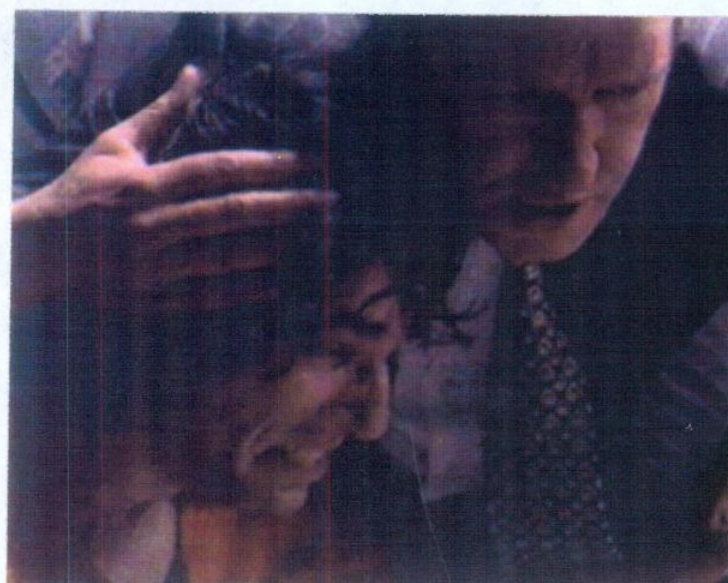
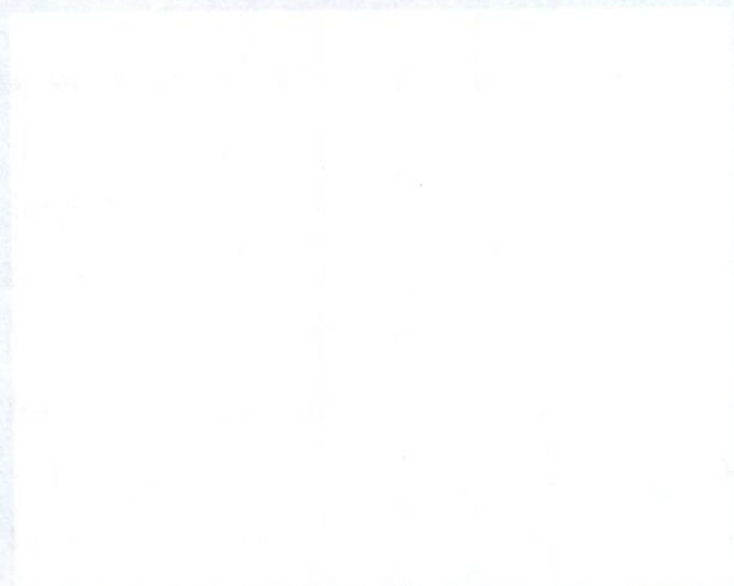


Fig.33

"No one is going to shoot your father. Go on, let it all out. All that hatred you have inside. You hate us enough to kill and maim. Don't you? Go on get all that hatred out, let it all out".



Next, Guiseppe who has travelled to England to try and sort matters out, is arrested and is slapped in jail. Gerry is in total disbelief; his father being billed as a criminal is, for him, the epitome of just how corrupt the British justice system is.

In the film they are put in a cell together which in real life did not actually happen - they had separate cells, but Sheridan's use of poetic licence will be dealt with a little later in this chapter.

Inside the cell a huge argument ensues in which Gerry unleashes all of his cooped-up anger of the last ten years..."Why do you always follow me...Why did you have to be sick all your life..."³⁴ Gerry is in a complete frenzy, screaming abuse at Guiseppe.³⁵ It is a tremendously emotional scene, ending up with them crying in each other's arms.

On to the court hearing where Gerry and his "three accomplices" are charged with the bombing of the Guilford pub and the killing of five people. Gerry's straight-laced Aunt Annie is charged with being a support network for the I.R.A.; storing weapons and being a safe-house. Guiseppe is convicted of possession of explosives and sentenced to twelve years in jail.

When Gerry attempts to tell the court how his testicles were squeezed and his body tortured in order to confess to the bombing, the defendants retaliate saying they were "never harmed in any way". Dixon,



Fig.34



Fig.35



one of the main inquirers, denied ever even speaking to Conlon. Sheridan cleverly uses Dixon's character as a symbol of institutional prejudice, as he tackles the myth of England as a tolerant and unprejudiced society. There are clever subtleties in the film which make a comment on a minor level, as to how haphazardly the case was dealt with. For example, Dixon, by accident, refers to Gerry's Aunt Annie as "Aggie". She is being charged as a major terrorist and he can't even get her simple name right.

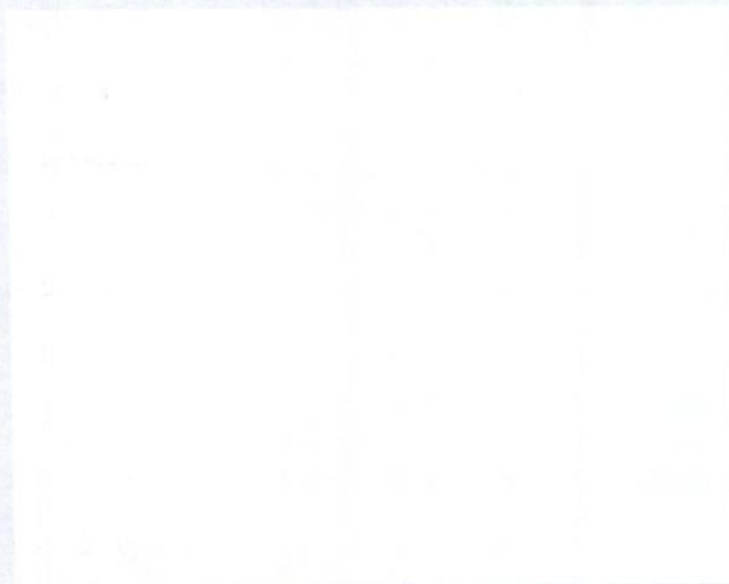
Once the Conlons and the Maguires are convicted the courtroom erupts with elation. These joyous sounds are sharply contrasted by the screams of terror, as the accused are dragged into their prison cells. Guiseppe and Gerry conlon are jailed as category A; the highest security class along with murderers and rapists.

When McAndrew, a genuine I.R.A. terrorist is arrested, and tells the authorities that they have innocent people convicted for the Guildford bombings, we see the inspectors faces turn to stone.³⁶ They know they have the wrong people locked up.

Inside the jail, Gerry and McAndrew strike up a relationship, with McAndrew the hardened criminal, becoming some kind of father figure for Gerry. A father figure which contrasts dramatically with Gerry's own father who he still views as a 'victim'. This relationship is sustained until McAndrew torches



Fig.36



Barker, a chief prison warden, in revenge for bringing in the riot squad to calm down a protest within the jail. The incident absolutely sickens Gerry, and it will be dealt with again later under the theme of 'relationships' because it is after this scene that the film's mood changes.

Disgusted with McAndrew's callous behaviour, Gerry launches himself into his father's campaign for freedom. He realises Guiseppe's health is failing and so his main concern is to get the case re-opened as soon as he can. Their relationship is healed in time,³⁷ and when Guiseppe tragically dies, Gerry takes his place fighting with full force for their wrongful convictions to be overturned.

With the expert investigative work of Gareth Peirce, the campaigning solicitor that Gerry had once accused of giving his father "false hopes", they manage to uncover the outrageous miscarriage of justice that had been sustained by a conspiracy and cover up at the highest levels of the British establishment, and finally overturn the court of appeal convictions.

Unlike the previous three, In the Name of the Father was the first of Sheridan's films to deal with a political story, and although its opening in Ireland set a box office record second only to Jurassic Park, the same success was not mirrored in Great Britain where the film's opening was accompanied by a major

Gerry comes to care and love his father, (here he is preparing vicks and boiling water for his bad chest) before his tragic death.

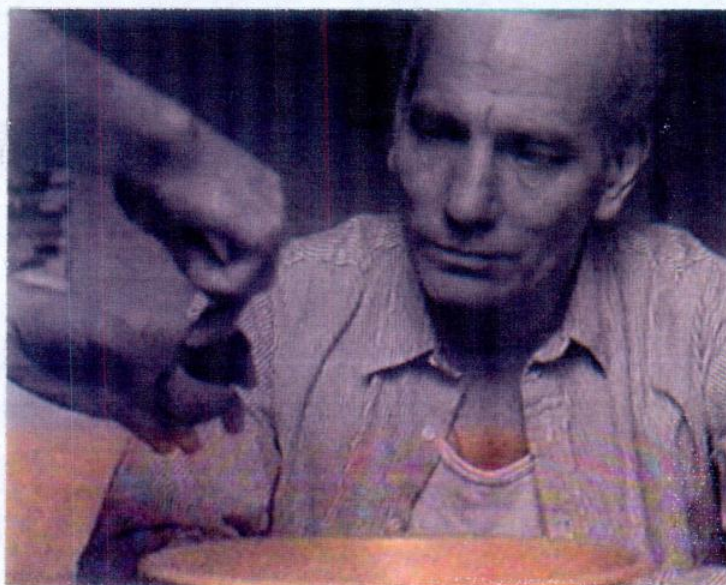


Fig.37



controversy over its portrayal of real people and real events. It tackles the issue that for twenty five years has divided British society like no other - the Irish Problem. This is to be expected when a film touches current political events in which many people are still emotionally involved. Sheridan was accused of telling lies, of changing the truth. Perhaps Gerry didn't bring sausages for Mary Maguire or share the same cell as his father but as Michael Mansfield so aptly put it...

such sacrifices were necessary for a compelling presentation. Fifteen years into two won't go! The alternative, according to Jonathan Miller, would have been to give up the idea of a dramatic film in favour of a recital of real testimony, as in Shoah. But such testimonies have already been heard - for the Guildford Four in Gerry's book Proved Innocent, and in Paul Hill's Stolen Years, and for the Birmingham Six in Hugh Callaghan's Cruel Fate. But the readership of these books is negligible compared to the enormous audience for In the Name of the Father.

(Mansfield; March 1994)

Mike Collins put it clearly, referring to Sheridan's films as "Sheridan-Scope"....

When populist cinema meets recent political and historical events either audience enjoyment or factual accuracy will lose out. The punters win this one. Populist cinema strips drama down to its essentials, relies on strong individual performances rather than mise-en-scene and puts forward a clear line-up of heroes, villains and victims of circumstance. As for truthfulness, well read the books, watch the documentaries. Sheridan-Scope is about some generalised truth and a whole lot of passion.

(Collins; March 1994, issue 39)

In a pre-ceasefire interview in Movie Goer, Sheridan admits to understanding why some people have been damning the film, even in advance of seeing it; "because the situation in Northern Ireland has become so bad that any film like this will be seen as pouring petrol on the flames". This was definitely not his intention. "It is not advocating violence at all". He gets angry when the press refer to it as a propaganda film. (Jackson; *, p20-21)

Michael Dwyer reported that even before the film finished shooting, the British Police Federation, which represents the majority of Britain's police officers below the most senior ranks, were already expressing concern about the film. One of their spokesman said "This is an incident which is in the public eye. Anyone can make a film about a miscarriage of justice. It's a free society. But the film should not be a simple propaganda exercise, which could work to the benefit of terrorists. It should not overlook the horror that led to the police investigation". (Dwyer; 8/5/93, p1) Jim Sheridan's reply was that the film would be handled more carefully than they did their prosecution.... "it's definitely not a film that condones terrorism".

More criticism came from Martin Bright who referred to In the Name of the Father as being like Sheridan's previous features - unashamed Irish myth-making, and considering the sensitivity of the issues

involved, thought it a bit odd that Sheridan would have taken quite such liberties with the truth. He went on to say, "This is after all, a film about a man who spent fourteen years in prison because people made up stories about him." (Bright; *, p41-43)

Bright's point is a valid one, but as I have already mentioned there had to be some leeway taken on Sheridan's behalf in order to keep the film's structure cohesive, and fit it into two hours viewing. Sheridan's interest in the political side of the story was also mainly as it was told through the father figure.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MAJOR THEMES IN SHERIDAN'S FILMS

All of Sheridan's features are narratives, they each tell a story, based on certain themes. The author of *Understanding Movies*, Graeme Turner, describes the narrative as a means of making sense of our social world, and sharing that 'sense' with others. "The narratives universality underlines its intrinsic place in human communication."

I have chosen to investigate four of the major themes that permeate Sheridan's work and show the different ways in which they are portrayed in each of his films. Indeed, each of these themes is a universal one and not just relative to an Irish audience. His stories are far more powerful than that, reaching out to a much larger, global audience.

THEME OF HARDSHIP

Hardship is one of the major themes in Sheridan's films. Each of his films deals with a working class or low-income family struggling against the odds. Many critics feel that this is just a stereo typed image that Sheridan has produced, showing the working class family making it good. But instead Sheridan is

writing about what he knows best. The theme reverts back to Sheridan's own childhood, where they worked together to make ends meet and to survive, as a unit, when the family almost fell apart after the younger brother's death.

The theme of hardship is very prevalent in My Left Foot. It is present as a crippling disease in Christy Brown's case; that of cerebral palsy, an almost totally debilitating illness. Christy can barely talk, let alone move, and initially is perceived as being in a no-hope situation.

The other main source of hardship is the poverty the Browne family are living under - thirteen children, one breadwinner, one cripple, five or six of the children squashed into the same bed at night. To add to an already awful situation, the father gets laid off, and they have no choice but to eat porridge for breakfast, dinner and tea.³⁸ They can't afford coal for the fire so they are living in a freezing house... Almost the perfect scenario for a nightmare, but instead, dealt with delicately by the right director, it is the setting for a tremendous drama of compassion, love, and winning against the odds.

In The Field, the source of hardship here is not an illness but an equally debilitating combination of a festering family secret, stubborn patriarchy, blind

Christy's brother: "What's this? We had porridge for
breakfast and we had it for
dinner. I'm not eating any more."
(He spits it back into the bowl)

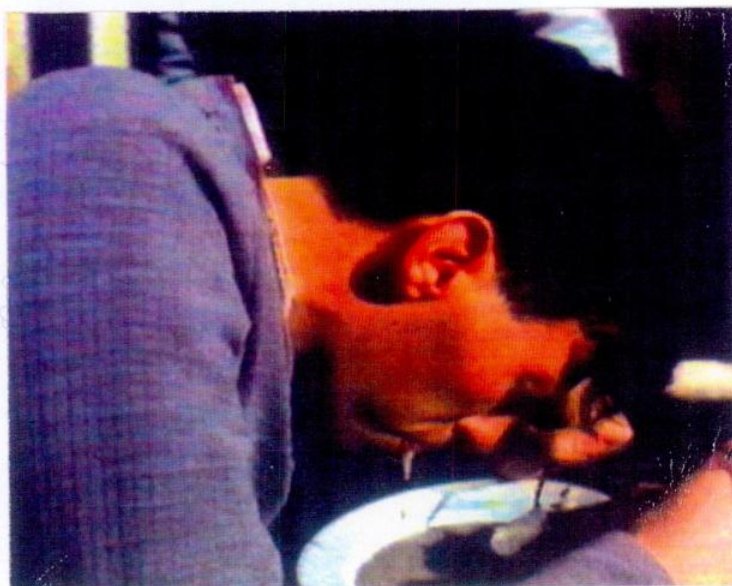


Fig.38

obsession with the land, and cruel history, one which hangs over the entire community like a cold mist.

Once again, as in the previous film, the family are working class; they deserve everything they earn. Bull is a very hard working man: gathering fertilizer, digging turf, fixing his roof,³⁹ come hail, rain or snow. He is out slaving on that field at sunrise, making sure there will be enough to provide for the Winter to come.

We see him counting his pounds and pennies⁴⁰ when he is trying to make up the fifty pounds to buy the field from the widow. He is short three pounds and we see him thinking up schemes to make up the missing money..."if I give the islanders a year's supply of turf..." He is really a hard working individual.

Into the West tells the story of one family's attempt to reject the tradition of the travellers' world and live in the North-Dublin high rise flats where they are the misunderstood victims of the settled people.

Gabriel Byrne plays the alcoholic father of two motherless boys who try to fend for themselves as best they can while their father drinks himself into a stupor. He is still grieving for his wife who died seven years previously.

The theme of hardship in this film is evident in the three main characterisations: the father's grief for the wife's death, with which he has never come to terms; his struggle with alcohol while he tries to



Fig.39



"...and another three shillings is due for milk. Two and sixpence...Two and sixpence for work done...minus the tinker's blood money. I'm short! I'll give them the turf - I'll sell it to the Island men, I'll sell them a year's supply of turf."

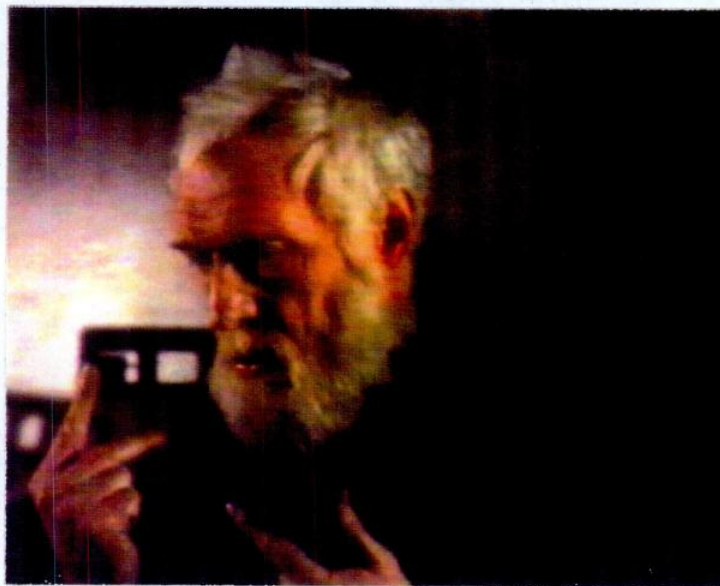


Fig.40

earn some money panel beating; and the guilt he feels for abusing his parental responsibilities and neglecting the boys and their education.

The boys in turn lack the presence of a mother figure, and as if a one parent family was not hard enough to get by in, their father is a drunk so can barely look after them. They also oppose the change from fancy-free travellers to cooped-up, settled people, in the middle of a high-rise slum.

Finally, In the Name of the Father, the theme of hardship is explored through one family, the victims of injustice who are trying to transcend their powerlessness and prove their innocence with the whole of the British legal establishment against them.

Once again, the leading characters come from a working class background. Gerry Conlon has no job and not much ambition in trying to find one, much to the utter dismay of his father, a very honest, hardworking man. The father, Guiseppe, tries to encourage him to get a job, although they appear to be in short supply in the war torn Belfast of the early 1970's. Gerry, envisioning himself as far too good to slave away like his father as a bookie's clerk, gives us the impression that he pities his father having to earn his bread and butter doing something so menial.

Much later on in the film he blames his father's illness on having worked in some paint factory - the

only job he could get. Guiseppe's ill health is clearly identified as a by-product of his class.

When Gerry is shipped off to London to keep him out of trouble and to find a job, his working class roots, along with his Irishness, only serve to boost his confidence as a young rebel. But Gerry's trip, despite his father's honourable intentions, is very much a search for sex, drugs and rock n' roll.

After Gerry is arrested and slapped in jail for the horrific Guilford bombing, his confidence is undermined. Considered a colonial and class underdog, he identifies with the rastafarian prisoners who are "dropping the British Empire" in the form of an L.S.D. soaked jigsaw map.

THEME OF DEATH

Death is another major theme that appears in each of Sheridan's films. It is not as big an issue in My Left Foot as it is in the following three films, but it is a permeating theme, nonetheless. Christy Browne is one of twenty two children, thirteen of whom survive. The focus is more on the mother giving birth, however, than on any of the children dying.

At the end of the film, Christy's father dies. This is quite a stirring scene as it is Christy who breaks the door open and realises that he is dead.⁴¹ The death and the way it happens is very symbolic of



Fig.41

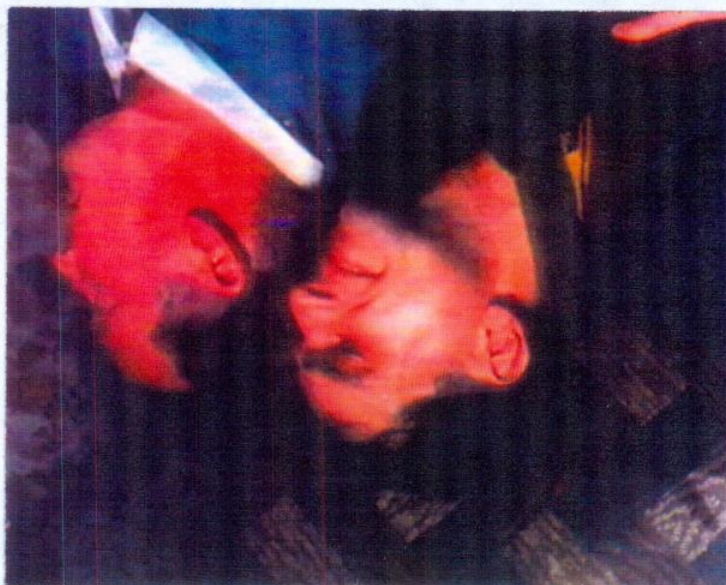


Fig.42

1. The first part of the report is a general introduction to the subject of the study. It discusses the importance of the study and the objectives of the research. It also provides a brief overview of the methodology used in the study.

2. The second part of the report is a detailed description of the study area. It includes information about the location of the study area, the population of the study area, and the characteristics of the study area. It also discusses the data sources used in the study.

3. The third part of the report is a detailed description of the study results. It includes information about the findings of the study, the conclusions drawn from the findings, and the implications of the findings. It also discusses the limitations of the study and the need for further research.

4. The fourth part of the report is a conclusion and recommendations section. It summarizes the findings of the study and provides recommendations for future research and policy.

5. The fifth part of the report is a list of references. It includes a list of all the sources used in the study, including books, articles, and other documents. It also includes a list of all the organizations and individuals who provided assistance in the study.

6. The sixth part of the report is an appendix. It includes a list of all the data and other materials used in the study, including maps, tables, and other documents. It also includes a list of all the questions and answers asked and answered during the study.

7. The seventh part of the report is a list of figures and tables. It includes a list of all the figures and tables used in the study, including maps, tables, and other documents. It also includes a list of all the questions and answers asked and answered during the study.

Christy and his father's relationship in the film, and in a broader sense it is symbolic of many bad father-son relationships. When the father dies Christy puts his head down to him.⁴² "It's like only in death is he united with his father, in a funny way. When the father dies against the door and Christy has to use the strength of his foot to push him off, I thought that was a symbol of what happens in our lives. We have to push the weight of our parents off our backs....not the memory, but the weight." (de Buitlear; Dublin, 17/2/95)

The theme of death is portrayed many times in The Field. Unlike Sheridan's other films where the deaths are naturally occurring, in this film the deaths are sinister and secretive. The Field opens with the murder of a donkey. This is an issue throughout the whole film as Bull constantly tells Taghd that he went "too far", that it shouldn't have been killed. The major theme of death in the film, however, revolves around the youngest son, Sheamie's death. He has committed suicide because he heard his father saying that there wouldn't be enough work on the land for him. Maggie (the mother) hasn't spoken to the father for years because of the death. The memory of the dead son is always there⁴³ and it haunts Bull McCabe, who has blamed himself all the years. This death occurs before the film begins so we do not witness it happening. Nor is there a use of



Fig.43



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100-100-100

flashbacks in order to show us Seami when he was alive. Instead though, through the storyline we gain the understanding of how much he meant to Bull and the tragic after-effects the death has had on him and the rest of the family.

Then there is the unintentional murder of the American near the end of the film. Bull instructs Taghd to "teach him a lesson" but when Bull joins in he goes too far and ends up brutally killing the poor American. We are left with the image of a sinking dead man in the lake,⁴⁴ as disturbing as those of the sinking dead donkey at the beginning of the film.⁴⁵

Finally in a ferocious scene at the end of the film the raging Bull is pictured racing for the cliffs, stampeding his herd of cattle. His reason for this is that Taghd has betrayed him by running away with the Tinker girl. Taghd tries to intervene, but gets pushed over the edge of the cliff by the galloping herd,⁴⁶ falling to his death.

As Taghd lies dead on the beach, amidst the carcasses of all the bloody dead cattle,⁴⁷ Bull wades into the sea beating his stick and screaming in anger.⁴⁸ We imagine this scene will ultimately end in his death.

In Into the West, the father has lost his wife and he struggles to bring up his two sons alone, while trying to come to terms with his spouse's death. It is this grief that has led him to reject the



Fig.44



Fig.45

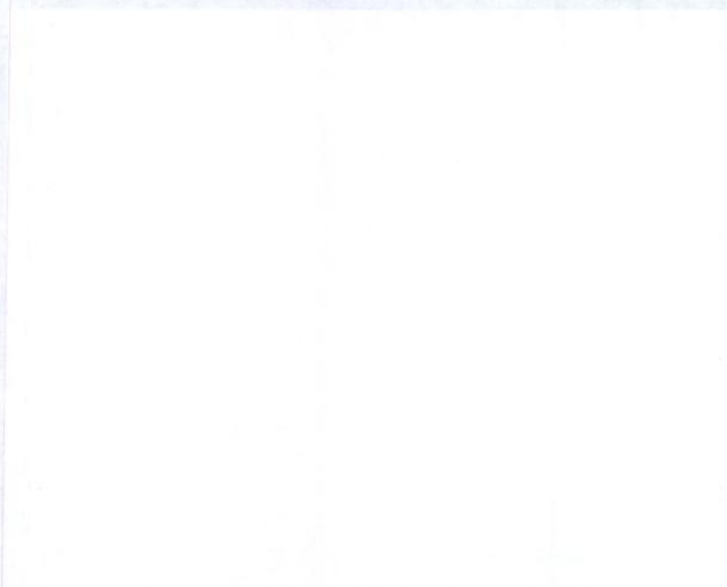


Fig.46





Fig.47



travelling world and flee to the 'settled' world, much to the disgust of his own father and the rest of the travelling community. And so it is this death that shapes the plot for the whole film. We are shown moving scenes where he is reminiscing about her and we realise how hard he is finding it to cope.⁴⁹ The children constantly refer to 'Mama' throughout the film, particularly Ozzie. The youngest one, who knows he never saw her "because there's no pictures of her" in his head⁵⁰ (she actually died during his birth). As in The Field where Seami's death occurred before the film begins, Into the West works in the same way. The mother's death, around which the whole story is based, happens before the narrative begins. We only get to see her through old photographs and then at the very end of the film when the mystical horse, Tir na n'Og, with whom Ozzie has this magical rapport, turns into the mother and we get a dream-like glimpse of her.^{51 52 53}

The death of Guiseppe in In the Name of the Father is probably the saddest death in the whole of the four films because we have really grown to like and respect him up to the point of his death. At the beginning, Gerry and his father have a very uneasy relationship. Guiseppe finds it hard to accept Gerry's laissez-faire attitude and his thieving, but when Guiseppe is arrested for explosives and thrown in prison we eventually see a reconciliation between the

Papa Riley: "Mary, Mary, oh Mary, oh Mary. Why did you leave me behind you? I need your help."



Fig.49



Fig.50

Ozzie: "I never saw Mama, I know I never saw her because there's no pictures in my head."

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Fig.51



Fig.52



Fig.53

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two. The consequences of the English Criminal Justice system's wrongful conviction though are personally disastrous for Guiseppe; after fifteen years in a cell, he dies. The way death is portrayed in the film is really heart-breaking because we have seen the inhumane injustice that Guiseppe has had to suffer. He never gets to see freedom again and it all just seems such a waste of an honourable man's life.⁵⁴

THEME OF FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are another major theme in Sheridan's films, and in a way, they are his speciality. There is a wonderful relationship between mother and son in My Left Foot, even though she admits, she mightn't always understand him. "Mother" is the very first word that Christy ever writes^{55 56} and you can see the tears rolling down her face when she realises that he can write. Christy's mother goes through tremendous hardship and makes many sacrifices to try and save enough money to buy him a wheelchair. There are instances in the film where she knows exactly what he is thinking and says it out loud. Her anguish is evident when she thinks he might get hurt by falling in love with his speech therapist. There is a lot of instinctive understanding between the two - she knows when he is



Fig. 54

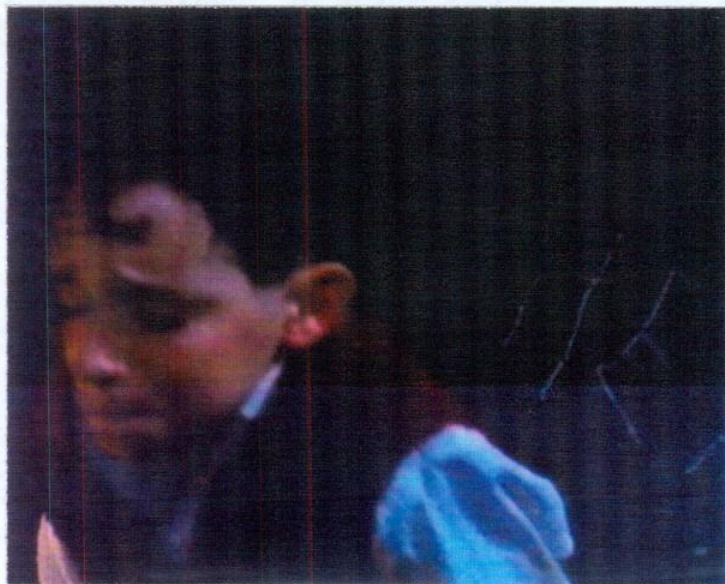


Fig. 55

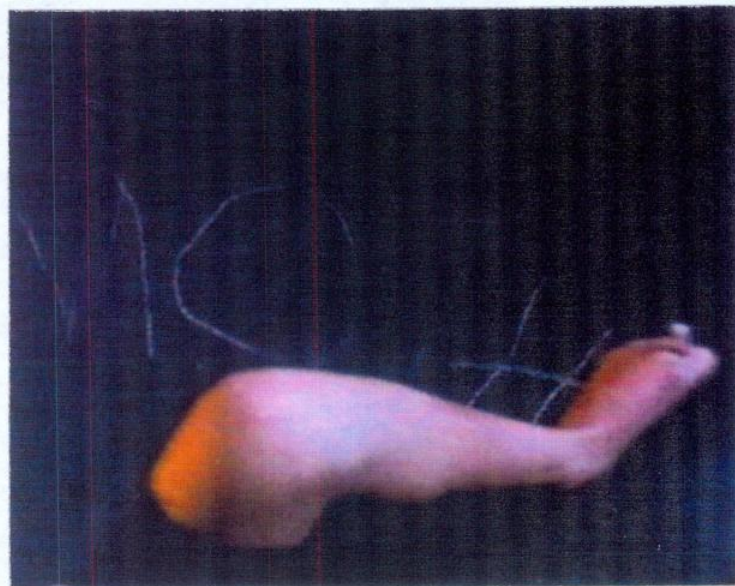


Fig. 56

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upset even if he is putting on a brave face. And it is she who tells him, matter of factly, whilst he is in one of his depressions, that "if you've given up, I haven't!" She then proceeds to go outside and starts to build him a room of his own.

Christy's mother seems to be the only one he will allow to do anything - several times in the film he shouts at people that they are not his mother,⁵⁷ and never to forget that! And yet, despite being closest to his mother than to anyone else in the whole world, it is her heart that he seems to be breaking..."You have me heart broken Christy; sometimes I think you are me heart."⁵⁸

Then there is the relationship between the children in the family. Despite the poverty in which they are living, and the great disability with which Christy is afflicted, there is a great sense of camaraderie between them all: at Halloween;⁵⁹ at the football games on the street⁶⁰ where Christy saves the goal with his head. (The Brownes are such a big family they have their own team of family members); the chasing and pushing Christy around in the wheel-barrow type chair that the Da builds;⁶¹ the raiding of the coal truck orchestrated by Christy; the team effort building Christy's room when the family come home from work.

The other major relationship in My Left Foot is that between the Father and Christy. This is in



Fig.57



Fig.58



Fig.59



Fig.60



Fig.61



sharp contrast to the caring and loving one between mother and son. Da Browne in My Left Foot, just like Bull McCabe in The Field, plays the patriarchal boss in the family, and there is quite an awful relationship between him and his son. Although he admits that he will never put Christy in a home, he is disgusted that his son is a cripple and cannot speak or write.

Almost all civilizations have myths dealing with the rebellion of son against father or vice versa, resulting in son and mother reunited in exclusive love. Freud, the father of psychoanalysis identified one such variant as the oedipus complex which he believed was the paradigm of prepubescent human sexuality. Here, in My Left Foot, we deal with the theme of oedipal rage...(as we will do later in some of the other films). Da Browne plays the violent and brutal father who rules the household. Louis Gianetti cites that in most cases this narrative motif "is submerged beneath the surface details of a story, or sufficiently disguised to appeal primarily to the subconscious." (Gianetti; 1993, p336)

The relationship, however, takes a turn for the better when Christy begins to write, but there is no bond like that between mother and son. The father is not a man that shares his feelings or emotions. This is demonstrated when Christy is watching him building his room with gusto and the mother turns and says,

"Well Christy, that's the nearest he'll ever come to saying he loves you".⁶²

In The Field, the relationships are twisted. Bull McCabe has not spoken to his wife for twenty years. They are both haunted by the death of their youngest son, and the wife, Maggie, has not broken her silence since. Nor have they slept together since they stopped talking. Bull McCabe is on the look-out for a good wife for Taghd but he is scared that if he does not find the right match for him the same kind of thing that happened between Bull and his wife could happen. He refers to women being a curse.

Bull's father/son relationship is not much more enviable than the one he has with his wife. Bull is a stubborn and patriarchal father and blights Taghd's life with his distorted views and blind obsession with the land. In the end he drives Taghd into the arms of the tinker's daughter which ultimately leads to his own downfall.

In talking about his own relationship with his father again, Sheridan told me the difficulties a parent goes through when they lose a child.

When my brother died it was very difficult for my Dad. Any parent that loses a child feels hard done by, and life doesn't make sense. Then they have to make sure that everybody else is o.k., so they can tend to get over-protective in an insane way.

I asked him if this was the same over-protectiveness he portrays in Richard Harris' character for Tadhg, to which he agreed, although he says that Seami was still



Fig.62

Bull's favourite son. "The kid that dies is always going to be the favourite, because they're gone." (de Buitlear; Dublin, 17/2/95)

One of the most poignant points in the whole film is when Bull refers back to the relationship he had with his own parents. We already know of Bull's affinity with the land, but it is perhaps his parents' beliefs, their strong sense of value of having slaved on it, that have been indoctrinated into Bull and contributed to his whole warped personality:

"Curse my mother and my father
For tying me to the Famine Field."

In Into the West, there is a strong bond between the father and the two sons. They love him yet they are scared when they disobey him.⁶³ The father attempts to do his best for the two boys, with the help, albeit, of a bottle and a television. He realises they need a mother figure and he tries to make up for this loss himself.⁶⁴

The relationship between the two boys is very strong. They constantly stick up for each other and like any other boys of their ages, they share a strong sense of bravado....⁶⁵

Ozzie: Tito, were you scared?

Tito: No! Were you?

Ozzie: No.

Then later on in the film...

Ozzie: Are you lonely?

Tito: No. Are you?

Ozzie: "I'll learn to write Papa, please don't let them take Tir na n'Og away, please, please Papa. I'll learn to write and read."



Fig.63



Fig.64

Papa Riley: "Boys, you know what they'll do if you don't go to school. They'll take you away from me. Now learn to read and write".

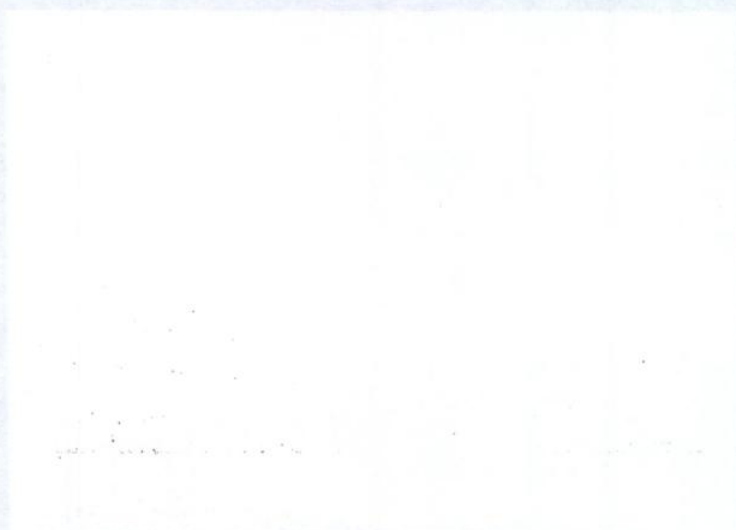
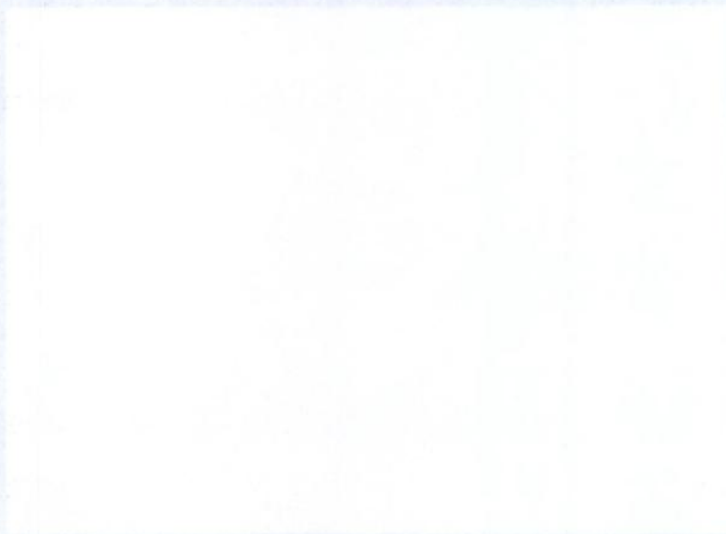




Fig.65



Ozzie: Not much.

They both also feel a great loss, particularly Ozzie, for their mother. The elder of the two, Tito, tries to put the death behind him, whereas Ozzie, never having come to terms with it, is constantly trying to find out more about her.^{66 67}

Like the folk story told by Grandpa Ward at the outset of the film, Into the West lifts us out of the ordinary realities of life, revealing the positive power of human relationships and family love. Tito and Ozzie survive their neglected childhood by mutual support. When Tir na n'Og is stolen by a wealthy business-man the two boys steal him back. Inspired by the Hollywood westerns they endlessly watch on television the boys make a dash for freedom in the West of Ireland. This adventure allows the boys an escape from their own sad memories and the oppressiveness of life among the city dwellers.

In the Name of the Father is not just a film about Gerry Conlon's fight for justice. It is much more concerned with the relationship between Gerry and Guiseppe, the growth of a powerful relationship between father and son. Initially, there is no love there on Gerry's side. His father is more like a heavy weight on his shoulders than someone he respects and can turn to. Gerry has broken his ties from his country, his family, and religion when he emigrates to England, but finds himself trapped again. His father

Tito: "You're not a real traveller like me, because you were never on the road."

Ozzie: "Why was I never on the road?"

Tito: "Because Mammy died, Papa didn't want to be on the road without her."

Ozzie: "How did Mammy die...?"



Fig.66



Fig.67

Ozzie: "What did Mammy look like...?" What colour was her hair...?"

Tito: "Look, I'm not answering any more questions. Go to sleep."

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is the man he wanted to get away from but ends up becoming the one he comes to fight in the name of.

By far the most emotional scenes in the film are the head to heads between Gerry and Guiseppe. Their confinement together allows Gerry to unburden himself of all his feelings of hatred and embarrassment. He tells of the time his father told him off for cheating in a game of football.⁶⁸ Furious with Guiseppe, he drew his father's name in the sand and urinated on it. This recited incident really gives you an insight into the genuine emotions Gerry felt for his father, even as a child.

While Guiseppe starts a campaign to prove their innocence, Gerry sinks into the prison's drug culture and befriends a fellow Northern-Irish man, a callous and emotionless Joe McAndrew, one of the I.R.A. gang that really planted the Guilford bomb. McAndrew leads the prisoners in a protest about conditions in the jail. The head prison officer, Barker, calls in the riot squad. McAndrew later takes revenge on Barker with a make-shift flame-thrower. Horrified by the incident, Gerry distances himself from McAndrew and throws himself into the campaign to prove his and his father's innocence.

This is a turning point in the father/son relationship because up to this Gerry feels his father is wasting his time writing letters to the authorities and the campaigners - we still feel that his father is



Fig.68



a grey cloud over his head. Suddenly Gerry seems to leave behind his immature rebelliousness and finally begins to accept his father's love and compassion which he has shut out all these years. and it is in this union that we see Gerry growing to recognize the genuine moral strength of his father.

Guiseppe Conlon is the vehicle for the message of injustice. For him, though, there is no pardon; no opportunity to hear his conviction quashed; no walking free. The tension between father and son is a microcosm of the larger canvas of confrontation between generations, between communities, within the church, within the State.

The father/son relationship in In the Name of the Father was one of the main reasons Sheridan wanted to make the film. In his previous three films the father figures were all stereo-typical violent drunk types and according to Sheridan this didn't equate at all with his own father, who was essentially gentle. "I kept thinking, there's another father in my head, who's not ^{my} by real father, why am I doing this?" (Wordsworth; 19/3/94)

So when Sheridan was looking at scripts and ideas for his fourth film he particularly wanted one with a gentle, loving father, and when he was shown In the Name of the Father, Guiseppe Conlon fitted the bill perfectly. Guiseppe was a gentle father, but Sheridan feels that no matter how good the

relationship is there is always some "fight" there between a father and a son.

THEME OF FAITH/RELIGION

The final theme that I have chosen to illustrate in my thesis is that of faith. There is a very strong sense of faith in all the leading characters in Sheridan's four films. Sometimes it is related to religion, other times it is just this overwhelming innate personal power and belief.

This theme is clearly demonstrated in the mother's character in My Left Foot. She never gives up hope in Christy despite the no-win situation we perceive him to be in. Mentally (and incidentally physically) she is a very strong woman and has an incredibly positive outlook on life. If it were not for this, Christy probably never could have enjoyed the quality of life that he did.

His speech therapist has great belief in him as well. During the times when he is going through his "blue periods" of depression, she never slacks in her effort and encouragement.⁶⁹ It is this faith that pushes Christy to succeed the way he does.

There are constant references to religion throughout the whole film, like on "All Souls Night"⁷⁰ when the mother and Christy are lighting candles in



Fig.69

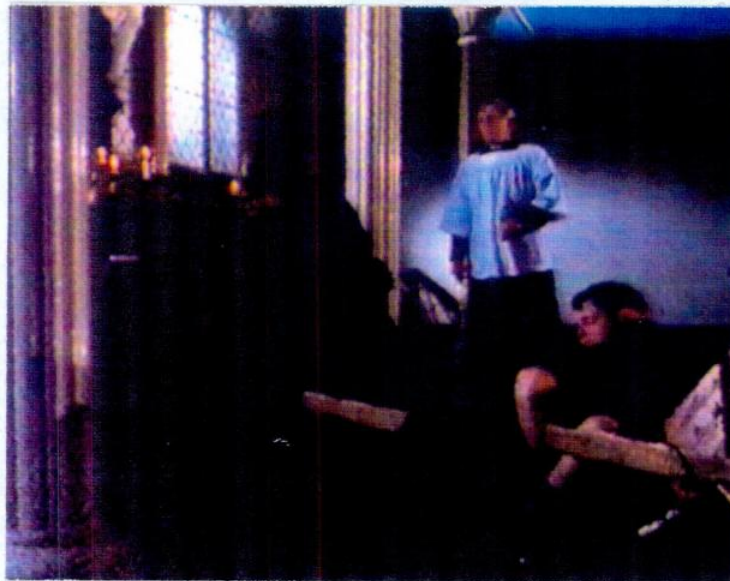


Fig.70



the church and the mother turns to Christy and says "Even if we can't understand you Christy, God can". Or when the mother finds a pornographic magazine hidden by the other lads in Christy's chariot-contraption she calls the local priest to the house that same day to try and rid Christy of his sins!⁷¹ The priest gives Christy fifteen prayers of penance so that his soul will go up to heaven. And when Christy and his brothers rob the coal from the truck because they can't afford to buy any, the mother refuses to sit in the room with the fire because they have committed a sin in stealing it.⁷²

In the Field, Bull's beliefs are not necessarily a positive point but he really believes that he is right and will fight to the death till he gets what he deserves. He is at his own private war with the church because of the argument over Seami's burial ground and at the end of the film he finally enters the church for the first time in eighteen years. When he does so the priest is ranting and raving about a murderer in the village. Everyone knows it is Bull. The priest refers to his land as a "field of blood, and those who profit by it will be damned".⁷³ Finally Bull is castigated and the gates of the church are locked.⁷⁴

Bull refers to praying when his mother died out on the field. He refers several times to the act of contrition he said into her ear. And when he

Priest: "Say five Hail Mary's, five Our Father's and five Glory Be's."

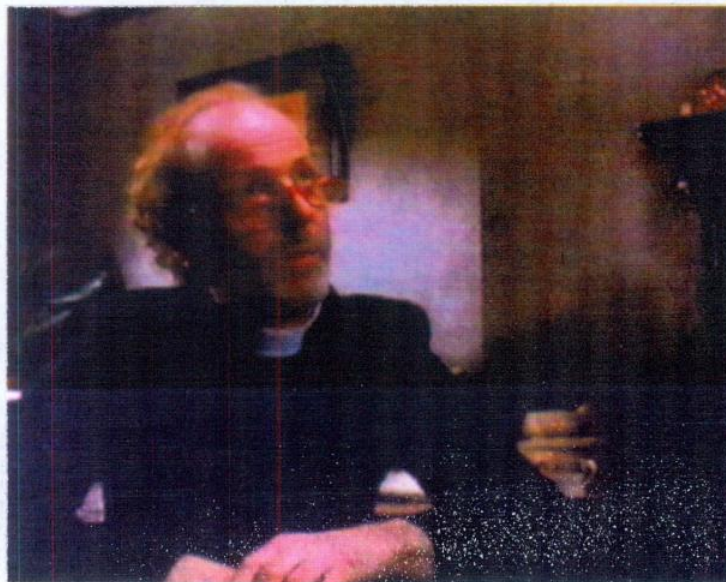


Fig.71

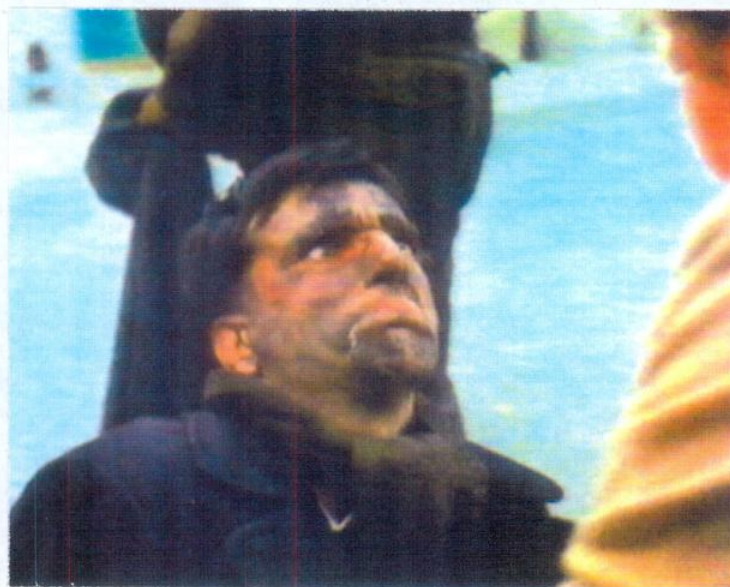


Fig.72

It's a sin to steal. You know God is watching you.
That coal isn't coming inside this house."



"You are all murderers".

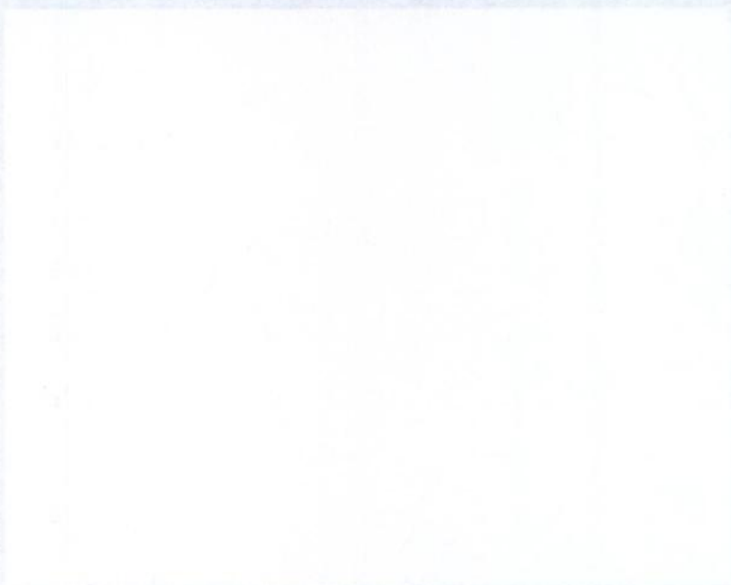


Fig.73



Fig.74

"Go on Father. Lock the gates to God's house. Sure they were locked at the time of the Famine too".



realises that he has actually killed the American down by the waterfall, he prays and prays to God.⁷⁵ He prays all through the night and till the sun comes up. He detests his sins and promises to amend his life. It seems he is really in fear of God. It was this brutal act that inspired him to enter the church again for the first time in years.

In Into the West the two boys are blessed with a positive outlook which I suppose is not unnatural for two adventurous children, but they have this sense that they can do anything. Part of it is probably sheer naivety, but it all makes for a delightful fantasy story.

Despite the fact that their father is a drunk, they never stop believing in him and they know that he will come to the rescue in the end.

Ozzie is the one that brings religion into the story regularly. At one stage he is walking along the road with his eyes closed, when he bumps into a woman. Tito indignantly yells at him...."What are ye doin'?" "I was prayin'" replies Ozzie!

Later on he gives evidence of his prayers working when he talks to his long lost horse that they have miraculously found after weeks of searching...."I said a prayer, and then you appeared on television." Coincidence or not, Ozzie really believes that this praying lark works!

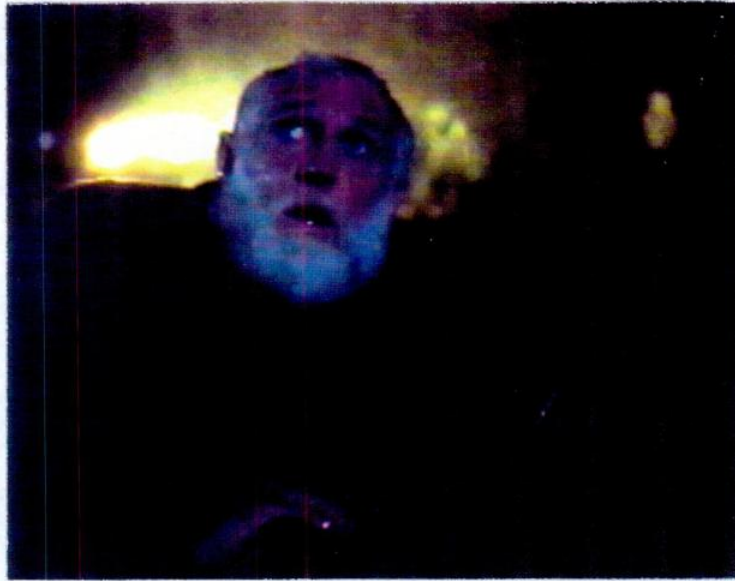


Fig.75



21

1978

When Tir na n'Og takes them to a gravestone on a hill in the middle of nowhere, Tito wonders why... "Maybe he wants us to say a prayer".^{76 77}

I asked Sheridan about Ozzie being so religious. I wondered if it was because Ozzie hadn't come to terms with his mother's death and he was searching for something all the time. He agreed and described it as two sides of the same personality: one that has a childish belief and one with an adult belief. It is quite different to the religious faith of Christy, in My Left Foot. With Christy, it is always his mother who brings up God, and religion and sinning, so we don't know if his convictions are voluntary or not. Whereas in Into the West, there is no mother figure present, yet Ozzie brings up the subject of his own accord the whole time.

Our final look at the theme of religion and belief is in In the Name of the Father where there is the whole Northern Irish religious question looming in the background. Guiseppe himself is a Northern Catholic and an incredibly caring and spiritual man.

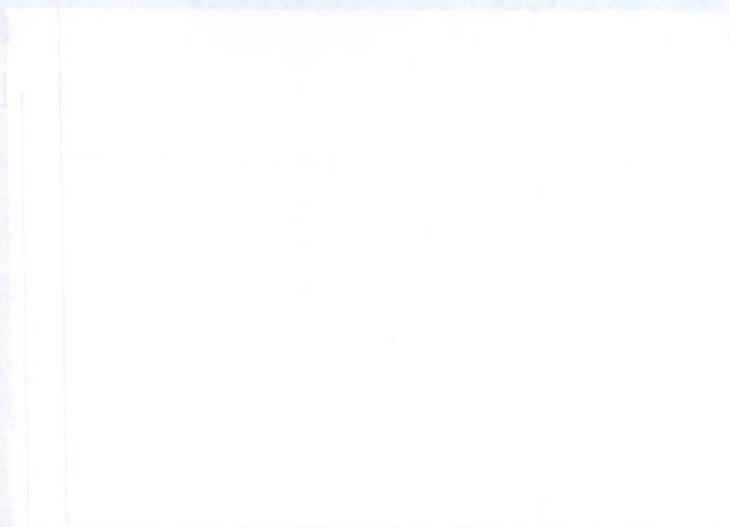
Guiseppe kneels down and prays the rosary every night in jail. His belief sustains him through the awful injustice he has to suffer. The fact that Gerry is not a believer and blatantly jeers his father about praying is almost enough to break poor Guiseppe's heart.⁷⁸ This both parallels and contrasts religion in My Left Foot. Guiseppe, like Ma Browne,



Fig.76



Fig.77



is passionately religious. But the contrasts are in the sons; Christy accepts his mother's religion placidly, even when he robs the coal, he takes the blame and listens to the priest. Gerry on the other hand does his best to make a mockery of Guiseppe. There is no thought of Guiseppe's feelings.

Over a period of time, Gerry grows to recognise the genuine moral strength of his father. This even takes on something of a religious dimension as Guiseppe becomes a messianic figure towards the end of the film.

Gerry: "Are you praying for the 7th Cavalry?"

Guiseppe: "It's not funny, Gerry...Hail Mary, Mother of God..."



Fig.78



CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In chapter one of this thesis, I have given a brief summary of Jim Sheridan's history, so that in the following chapter, depicting the major themes in the films, it would be possible to identify the source of his influences and ideas. I have also given in sequential order an outline of each of the film offers which he adapted/wrote, co-wrote, and/or directed.

In chapter two, I have given a brief overview and analysis of each of the four films, so that in delving more deeply into the themes in chapter three, the whole atmosphere and story line would already have been explained, thus making the depiction of certain themes more understandable.

The differences in the endings of the four films also deserves scrutiny. Although My Left Foot and The Field were both stories dealing with awkward family relationships, hardship, struggles, My Left Foot ended on an upbeat note, whereas The Field ended disastrously for everyone. Into the West's finale on the beach led to reconciliation with the great mystery of death, and In the Name of the Father ended with the whole British legal systems convictions being overturned.

In this chapter, I have tried to describe how certain parts of the films which are particularly

Irish are of tremendous interest not just to viewers with Irish connections, but to the whole world. Despite the fact that Sheridan deals with Irish situations, he tells them on such a human level that people, globally, are able to relate to them.

This approach works because Sheridan's view of film as medium differs from other film makers. When asked about cinema, Sheridan constantly refers to story telling. Good cinema he believes, always has an emotional story to tell, which mustn't let the visuals or the script get in the way. Sheridan, unlike many other Irish writers, is in love with drama and psychological truth, not with words. He characterises Irish writing by a power and a love of speech unequalled in the world. (Sheridan; April/May 1989, p10-13)

Finally I have looked at some of the criticism that Sheridan received, particularly for the controversial In the Name of the Father and his reactions and reasons for the poetic licence he allowed himself avail of.

In chapter three, I have given a brief look at the narrative as a form of story telling, and then I have tried to identify clearly, the four major themes that permeate through Sheridan's films. The themes have been discussed individually as they manifest themselves in each film, and then the aim has been to show where they correspond and contrast with each

other under the same headings...death,
hardship/struggle, relationships and faith. I have
attempted to draw the four films together in a
coherent and cohesive manner, in order to demonstrate
just how closely but with what originality the same
themes permeate the films.

It was necessary to keep referring back to
Sheridan's past to try and demonstrate how his
personal experiences have been such a major source of
material for his work. By doing this, a more
coherent understanding should be gained of the way in
which he structures his films around the emotive
themes that he uses.

One of the most exciting things about watching
Sheridan's films, is that because he is Irish, we can
understand where he is coming from. Unlike watching
the movies of an American director for example, we can
recognise the types of characters his films are
depicting, we can comprehend the kinds of places he is
illustrating. I hope that in this thesis a clearer
knowledge of the source of Sheridan's ideas and what
has influenced him has been given. On this level,
the great privilege of being able to empathise with
Sheridan's wonderful films can be shared.

"It's good seeing yourself up there, isn't
it. It's great to feel our story is being
told." - Jim Sheridan.

(de Buitlear; Dublin, 17/2/95)

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