

From Sight to Touch: Female Identity in Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney*

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Abstract

Female characters are often foils in Brian Friel's plays. However, Friel's *Molly Sweeney* (1994) focuses on women's central problem—the question of female identity. Although much has been examined regarding national identity, history, religion, emigration, and translation in Friel's works, issues relevant to women and female identity are less addressed. This paper discusses female identity and difference in Friel's *Molly Sweeney* via French feminist theories, exploring the extent to which women can move towards a position outside and beyond the male logocentric logic of A and B, a position of otherness or difference.

Keywords: Irish women, identity, difference, Brian Friel, *Molly Sweeney*

I. Prelude

Although Irish women have been characterized in terms of allegorical mother figures for some time (Innes 1993, pp. 40-41; Nash 1993, p. 47), the image of women and their actual lives began to undergo significant changes in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Eavan Boland's poem "The Women" showcases the way contemporary Irish women better grasp their own identity by removing "woman" from a clear-cut hierarchical dichotomy of man and woman and placing her in the nebulous state of "the in-between" (2005, p. 141). Nonetheless, there are still women who fail to recognize their innate power of feminine identity as difference lapses into an unfathomable darkness, as presented in Friel's Molly in *Molly Sweeney*. Friel gained wide recognition with his earlier play *Philadelphia, Here I Come* (1964) and has since written "the most substantial and impressive body of work in contemporary Irish drama" (Maxwell 1984, p. 201). He is best-known as the playwright of *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, *Translations* (1981), *Making History* (1988), and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) (Jeffares 2014, pp. 147-49). As many critics contend, Friel is one of the few living Irish playwrights whose reputation has been critically acclaimed in world literature (Greene 2010, p. 89; Mahony 1998, p. 125; Roche 1995, p. 72). Born in Omagh, County Tyrone in Northern Ireland, Friel and his plays are inevitably linked to the destruction and construction of Irish national identity. According to Seamus Deane, Friel's northern community features its deep sense of failure, often expressed in violence, emigration, and lovelessness (1994, p. 246). Influenced by the Northern crisis, his plays appear to "coordinate with the poetry of Heaney and Montague in the elaboration of a long analysis of the politics of language, the language of politics and their relationship to the language of poetry and drama" (1994, p. 246). Typical of Friel's works are people's meditation on and elaboration of identity, issues of truth and fiction, and the fallibility of

legitimized means of communication. In his play *Making History*, Friel explicates his contention that history is arbitrarily fabricated by a one-dimensional master narrator, a concept which is similar to that espoused by New Historicists. To help Irish people construct identities for themselves, Friel co-founded the Field Day Theater with Stephen Rea in 1980, aiming to promote the search for "a middle ground between the country's entrenched positions" (Andrew 1995, p. 6). Additionally, *Translations* exposes the violence of naming and the difficulty of cross-cultural understanding. Generally, Friel is committed to uncovering the hegemony of monolithic power and maintaining a certain degree of equilibrium in human life and society.

Molly Sweeney depicts Friel's habitual reflection on the inequality of two main forces—this time not so much the imbalance between nation and nation as between men and women. According to critic George O'Brien, while youthful male protagonists recur in Friel's plays, female characters are comparatively less addressed. However, like his precursors such as John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey, Friel often casts "imaginative sympathy" on his female characters (1990, pp. 122-23). In *Molly Sweeney*, the titular female protagonist suffering from her loss of eyesight in early childhood, is convinced by her husband Frank to have an operation conducted by the passé ophthalmologist Dr. Rice. Torn between the inducement of Frank and the selfish Dr. Rice, Molly is plunged into the border between darkness and light. In the existing literature, some critics compare this play with Friel's previous works, such as *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), and dismiss its artistic value (Mahony 1998, p. 130; Murray 1997, p. 228). Among the discussions on *Molly Sweeney*, very little has been conducted from the perspective of feminism, French feminism in particular. Helen Lojek looks upon *Molly Sweeney* as another Ballybeg tale of "faith and healing" (2004, p. 185). Fintan O'Toole proposes that Molly Sweeney's situation obviously reflects that of Northern Ireland—one that verges on the extraordinary space of exile and borderlands (1994, p. 10). By the same token, F. C. McGrath asserts that Molly's obscure, disturbed sight embodies "Friel's own existence moving back and forth across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland" (1999, p. 278). Additionally, both Karen M. Moloney and Richard Pine approach the play from the perspective of colonial and postcolonial politics (Moloney 2000, pp. 285-310; Pine 1999, p. 288). In short, *Molly Sweeney* seems to be a text corresponding to the *status quo* of the post-colonial condition. Intriguingly, Friel articulates more than once his aversion to writing only about politics (Delaney 2000, p. 201).

Richard Pine maintains that *Molly Sweeney* can be read as a feminist fable, but he does not investigate the text closely from feminist perspectives (1999, p. 288). When evaluated through the lens of French feminism, Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney* is embedded with hierarchical binary oppositions such as man and woman, sight and touch, vision and illusion, power and submission, knowledge and innocence, speech and silence, and rationality and madness. Such hierarchal dichotomies which are structured around men and women are censured in contemporary French feminism. By applying selected theories of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva to a reading of *Molly Sweeney*, it is found that Molly's operation is destined to fail because the discrepancy between a male visual world and a female tactile world can hardly be bridged. My argument is that by presenting *Molly Sweeney*, Friel projects and re-affirms an unorthodox feminine discourse of touch, one which can dismantle traditional patriarchal reasoning. It helps us explore the possibility of re-claiming the repressed, inarticulate female speech of modern Irish women.

II. Exclusion from Male Dominance

Hélène Cixous is famous for her antagonism to all forms of unbalanced binary oppositions and hierarchies, as well as for her support of a feminine writing closely associated with the body. In her essay "Sorties," Cixous specifies a range of hierarchical oppositions which have dominated Western thought for a long period of time. Oppositions such as culture and nature, head and heart, form and matter, speech and writing, and man and woman are prevalent throughout Western civilization (1981, pp. 90-91). Cixous argues that whereas the former categories are always privileged, the latter are always marginalized or excluded from the center. Take the opposition of man and women for example. Within a patriarchal society, women become represented as the "Other," an idea Simon de Beauvoir elaborated in *The Second Sex*. As a consequence, women as the inferior other sex are constantly yoked by patriarchy. In fact, evidence of this inequality between men and women permeates *Molly Sweeney*. The life of protagonist Molly is mostly encompassed and stifled by different male characters, including her father, her husband, and Dr. Rice (Camati 2010, p. 129). The positions of the main characters are meaningfully set at the beginning of the play, which betrays Molly's ambiguous status in the presence of men: "I suggest that each character inhabits his/her own special acting area—Dr. Rice stage left, Molly Sweeney center stage, Frank Sweeney stage right" (Friel 1996, p. 455). Manifestly, Molly is not only physically but mentally trapped between Frank and Mr. Rice. On one hand, Frank takes care of Molly not out of love but out of pity and curiosity, because he takes to devoting himself to good causes. However, instead of helping Molly regain vision and happiness, Frank's insistence on Molly's operation brings her to a point of no return. On the other hand, Molly's life is adversely affected by Mr. Rice, the ophthalmologist who cures Molly of the blindness with a view to redressing his own lost reputation: "The moment I decided I was going to operate on Molly," says Dr. Rice, "I had an impulse—a dizzying, exuberant, overmastering, intoxicating instinct to phone Roger Bloomstein in New York" (Friel 1996, p. 469). Ironically, an outmoded doctor, Mr. Rice considers the operation less an act of charity than a "chance of a lifetime, the one-in-a-thousand opportunity that can rescue a career" (Friel 1996, p. 460). In a nutshell, neither Frank nor Dr. Rice cares about Molly. Instead, they make use of Molly as a tool for their own self-accomplishments. In comparison, constantly internalized as a member of the second sex, Molly's "downfall" derives from her strong desire to please the men surrounding her (DeVinney 1999, p. 113).

In addition to Frank and Dr. Rice, Molly's father is another male obstacle that keeps her from developing her self-identity and self-confidence. In one of her recollections, Molly recounted the way her father had played the role of instructor when she was very young

By the time I was five years of age, my father had taught me the names of dozens of flowers and herbs and shrubs and trees. He was a judge and his work took him all over the country. And every evening, when he got home, after he'd had a few quick drinks, he'd pick me up in his arms and carry me out to the walled garden.

"Tell me now," he'd ask. "Where precisely are we?"

"We're in your garden." (Friel 1996, p. 455)

The dominant power of patriarchy is exemplified in the role of the father. As opposed to the judging father who instructs her to recognize different flowers, Molly is innocently confined to her father's "walled garden" without much hope of escape. The innocent,

trustworthy father-daughter relationship eventually gives way to Molly's disillusionment and painful realization. She used to regard her father as an unfaltering supporter in her confrontation with hardships. However, after years of suffering, Molly gets to know the heart of the matter — her father's miserliness: "The truth of the matter was he was always mean with money; he wouldn't pay the blind school fee" (Friel 1996, p. 509). Molly's over-confidence in and over-reliance on her father, her husband, and Mr. Rice, the trinity of male dominance in the play, tragically brings her to an impasse because none of these male characters close to her cares about her wellbeing. Accordingly, from the interactions between Molly and the other male protagonists, a hierarchical opposition between man and woman is consolidated.

Molly's mother is another female victim who is marginalized in the play. In contrast to her father, who takes the dominant role in her life, Molly's mother is scarcely mentioned. The image of Molly's mother is deliberately distorted because she is described as wild and insane, a marginal character either "away in hospital with her nerves" or shouting at her family members for dinner like a madwoman (Friel 1996, p. 457). The reference to her mother's stay in the hospital is allusive of her mental problem. In comparison with her father as a "judge," Molly's mother is worse than an ordinary person. At best, she is depicted as the housemaid who takes charge of the house chores, and, at worst, a lunatic staying for long periods in the hospital. This demonstrates another hierarchical opposition between reason and madness, added to the existing hierarchal imbalance between man and woman. Notably, while Molly is handicapped in vision, her mother is disordered in mentality. In other words, incomplete either physically or psychologically, both female characters in the play are invariably lacking. Both Molly and her mother deviate from the normality stipulated by males in the male-dominated society.

III. A Sighted World That Does Not Apply to Women

In the play, Molly is often forced to embrace the supremacy of sight and vision. However, her forced identification with "sight" does not bring her pleasure but disaster. Molly's father calls her *Nemophilia*, the scientific name of a genus of flowers commonly known as "Baby Blue Eyes" (Friel 1996, p. 456). In a similar vein, Frank thinks that Molly is supposed to "have to learn to see" (Friel 1996, p. 462). In fact, Molly deteriorates into the object of the male gaze step by step. While her father regards her as a pretty flower to be gazed at, her husband keeps inculcating into her mind the necessity of vision. Molly's monologue by in the following reiterates her role as an object rather than subject:

The morning the bandages were to be removed, a staff nurse spent half-an-hour preparing me for Mr. Rice. It wasn't really her job, she told me; but this was my big day and I had to look my best and she was happy to do it. So she sponged my face and hands. She made me clean my teeth again. She wondered did I use lipstick—maybe just for today? She did the best she could with my hair, God help her. She looked at my fingernails and suggested that a touch of clever varnish would be nice. (Friel 1996, p. 482)

Key words such as "lipstick," "fingernail," "perfume," and "varnish" often relate to female appearance and are altered to please the male gaze. Aided by another female accomplice, the staff nurse, Molly falls victim to the doctor's gaze with little awareness. Pathetically, as a patient undergoing a sight operation, Molly has no alternative but to submit to the medical knowledge of the male Dr. Rice. On the other hand, she is harnessed by a hostile tradition which promotes the myth of female beauty. To conform to this

male-friendly convention, Molly is always alerted to the importance of her appearance under the scrutiny of males. This episode helps demonstrate how Molly as a woman is subjugated in the male-controlled world of medical surgery and the world of sight. Consequently, as critic Anna McMullan argues, Molly Sweeney “stages the performance of male authority on the female body” (2006, p. 145).

Such an emphasis on the male gaze has been criticized by Irigaray, who argues that traditional philosophical discourse based on patriarchy cannot reflect or represent female experience. According to Irigaray, Freud’s theory of sexual difference is based on the visibility of difference. It is I/eye (of males) that distinguishes right from wrong. However, only a male has an obvious sex organ, the penis. As a result, when he looks at women, Freud can see nothing. In the wake of such a bias, female sexual difference is construed as an absence or negation of the male norm. Irigaray censures this “subservience to the specular logic of the same” (Moi 1985, p. 133). In other words, Freud is engrossed in the logic of the same, with males deemed the only legitimate sex dominating and reproducing the “economy of the same” (Whitford 1991, p. 75). Following this logic of the same, Freud’s theory is blind to female subjectivity, casting a little girl as generally the same as a little boy. Accordingly, she is not a little girl but a little man. Failing to perceive the penis but the clitoris, a girl will generate a sense of inferiority or deficiency, which illustrates Freud’s theory of penis envy.

In other words, in Freudian theory, women are invisible to the male gaze, retreating to a vague existence in hysteria and ignorance. This is evidenced by Molly Sweeney and her mother, who are not only invisible to the male gaze but also to their self-reflection. According to Irigaray, sexual difference in patriarchal discourse is mostly based on visibility. For her, females are educated to reason with the logic of the same, to identify with and even intensify patriarchy-driven penis-envy theory. Undoubtedly, women are denied their status because, compared with their male counterparts, females are sexually void and substantially powerless (Irigaray 1985, p. 53). In a similar fashion, Cixous criticizes these biased sexual differences based on “having/not having the phallus” for Freud and the transcendental signifier proposed by Lacan (1981, p. 95). For her, the validity of this transcendental signifier compels women to play an inferior role, while simultaneously they are subject to and get to admire the phallic power. As a consequence, females are construed as negativity or lack of masculinity. They cannot speak freely, let alone become dominant. This fallacious “view theory” can be applied to Molly’s case, in which Molly is forced to gain sight via an operation, only to find that the assumed ideal world of sight is even more nebulous than a sightless world. Frank urges Molly to undergo the operation merely from his naïve, selfish perspective: “Molly was going to see! I knew it! For all his perhaps! Absolutely no doubt about it! A new world—a new life! A new life for both of us!” (Friel 1996, p. 467). Frank’s wholehearted enthusiasm is ironic, since the so-called “new-life” proves miserable in the end. Shortly after the operation, despite its transient “wonder,” “surprise,” and “delight,” Molly experiences an unfamiliar and embarrassing world.

But it was a very foreign world, too. And disquieting; even alarming. Every shape an apparition, a spectre that appeared suddenly from nowhere and challenged you. And all the movement—nothing ever still—everything in motion all the time; and every movement unexpected, somehow threatening. Even the sudden sparrows in the garden, they seemed aggressive, dangerous. (Friel 1996, p. 492)

Accompanied by disillusionment and despair, Molly's realization after the operation mirrors women's anxiety over an idealized sighted world constructed and promoted by males. Instead of regaining vision and delight, Molly only feels discomfort and intimidation before and after the eye operation.

As Cixous and Irigaray contend, the emphasis on sight derives from a patriarchal model, which poses threats to women's identity and development. Nonetheless, male characters in *Molly Sweeney* always evaluate others by watching and seeing something. For instance, from the beginning to the end, Molly is constantly the object of testing, studying, analyzing, and gazing. On one occasion she feels repugnant to others' intrusion to her peaceful life, saying "Tests—tests—tests— tests . . . I must spend months and months being analyzed and answering questions and identifying drawings and making sketches" (Friel 1996, p. 496). Molly suffers from being analyzed and speculated on by the male gaze, which invariably results in her "illusions and distortions" (Friel 1996, p. 496). Crucially, in her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray argues that in Western history, male philosophers such as Plato and Freud always judge female bodies through a distorting speculum. The speculum is originally intended to be "an instrument for dilating cavities of human body for inspection" (1985, p. 183). However, males use it to reflect everything in their own patriarchal images. This prejudice has dominated Western thinking for centuries, which prompts Irigaray to articulate her critique: "But wherever I turn, whether to philosophy, science or religion, I find that this underlying and increasingly insistent question remains silenced" (1991, p. 165).

Apart from Molly, Dr. Rice's ex-wife Maria is also doomed to be watched, to be gazed at by men in the play. When recalling his memory of the funeral for Maria's lover Roger Bloomstein, Dr. Rice remarks:

I watched Maria during the service. Her beauty had always been chameleon. She had an instinctive beauty for every occasion. And today with her drained face and her dazed eyes and that fragile body, today she was utterly vulnerable, and at the same time, within her devastation, wholly intact and untouchable. I had never seen her more beautiful. (Friel 1996, p. 505)

This testifies to the idea that women have often been objects of beauty judged by the male gaze. Dr. Rice anatomizes Molly with a medical speculum to restore her capability of sight. Having the same logic in mind, he inspects Maria as if she were a doll. Dr. Rice gazes at Maria's "dazed eyes" and "fragile body," yet she seems so remote from him, "wholly intact and untouchable" (Friel 1996, p. 505). Dr. Rice cannot access Maria mainly because he is ignorant of the fact that male gazing culture is totally incongruous with female's preference for touch and bodily movement. Notably, before the operation, Molly, a massage therapist by occupation, is happy, satisfied, and comfortable. The movement of her female body brings her pleasure and contentment.

IV. Writing with Her Own Body

Women feel ill at ease in the presence of the patriarchal gaze because they belong to the world of touch rather than the world of sight. According to Irigaray, men's penchant for gaze excludes women, whose main focus is touch, from the center of representation. Women's unique bodily perception is often denounced as a proof of their superficiality and even wantonness. Females are once and for all the objects of beauty and males' gaze (1981, p. 101). Without this realization in mind, males and females cannot deal with

relevant issues. Molly is urged to have an eye operation by her male partner, Frank, and is examined and inspected by Dr. Rice to restore her sight. The experiment is doomed to fail primarily because the female character is never meant to be living in the sighted world, insomuch as Molly feels confounded and terrified in the face of the probable regaining of her eyesight.

Then there was the night I watched her through the bedroom door. She was sitting at her dressing-table, in front of the mirror, trying her hair in different ways. When she would have it in a certain way, she'd lean close to the mirror and peer into it and turn her head from side to side. But you knew she couldn't read her reflection, could scarcely even see it. Then she would try the hair in a different style and she'd lean into the mirror again until her face was almost touching it and again she'd turn first to one side and then the other. And you knew that all she saw was a blur. (Friel 1996, p. 494-95)

Understandably, Molly can see nothing but "a blur" because after the operation, the promising and mythical vision is merely a paradise sketched by males. The mirror she is facing now is only a magic mirror for males and males only. What makes her really delighted is her gesture—"trying her hair in different ways"—but following the masculine gaze logic, she endeavors to detect herself through the mirror, ending up gazing "listlessly at the black mirror" (Friel 1996, p. 495).

A comparative study of Molly's situation with Irigaray's theory of woman's autoeroticism can shed new light on the dilemma. As Irigaray maintains, women have long been subjugated to male phallic power. Women's pleasure is rarely mentioned in terms of sexual relationships. Derogatory terms such as "lack," "atrophy," or "penis envy" are characteristic of conventional female sexuality (1981, p. 100). Terrified and guilty, women have no choice but to embrace and identify with male values. However, for Irigaray, the autoeroticism of women distinguishes them from men. Whereas men depend on outside instruments, such as woman's genitals, for help, women's pleasure relies on the touch of two lips automatically and naturally. This world of touch offers women enormous happiness not because of its attachment to the static male sexual organ but because of its multiple approaches to specific female pleasure (1981, p. 100). For Irigaray, touch plays an important role in fighting against the "male gaze" discourse, simultaneously highlighting the specialty of female sexual difference. This unique bodily movement encompasses "nothing and everything" in the "privacy of this silent, multiple, diffuse tact" (1981, p. 103). According to Irigaray, only via this other sexual difference strategy can women develop their potential for female sexual desire independent of male dominance. To be entirely severed from "male" apron strings, a revolution against male-dominated sexuality is indispensable for Irigaray (1991, p. 166). This consciousness of and resistance to male dominance is badly lacking in Molly. Molly is naturally endowed with the ability to sense and feel things without any intrusion, but pitifully she fails to seize the power to her own advantage most of the time. Molly's eye operation is indicative of her submission to the world of the gaze, which brings her less pleasure than pain. Once in her childhood, when no one can identify the name of some flowers, Molly instantly gave the correct answer (Friel 1996, p. 497). Notwithstanding Molly's blindness, she is particularly sensitive to the world through touch at young age. Even after the failed operation, those tactile engrams, means by which memory traces are stored, are still vivid and tangible. Molly loses touch with this familiar tactile world only after a long period following the operation when finally she becomes insane in the vague, disturbing quasi-sighted world. When asked by Dr. Rice about what she has seen after the operation,

Molly replies, "Nothing, Nothing at all. Then out of the void a blur; a haze; a body of mist; a confusion of light, color, movement. It had no meaning" (Friel 1996, p. 483).

Molly's regression to the hazy, misty, and blurred spot poses an ironic contrast to women's subordinated status as specified in Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*, in which she denounces Plato's misogynist delineation of women's wombs as the source of darkness and therefore ignorance (1985, pp. 243-55). Unlike traditional prejudice imposed on women, Molly is ironically trapped in males' cave with no light, no color, and no change. At first, Molly gets better in the new sighted world: "Her eyes were bright; unnaturally bright; burnished" (Friel 1996, p. 488). However, her brilliant vision shortly after the operation lasts only temporarily. Frank is quite aware that "she wasn't as joyous as she looked" (Friel 1996, p. 488). Even Dr. Rice acknowledges that Molly has been transformed into a less confident, independent, and jubilant woman: "How self-sufficient she had been then—her home, her job, her friends, her swimming; so naturally, so easily experiencing her world with her hands alone" (Friel 1996, p. 500). In Molly's case, the female tactile world, which is composed of her hand gestures and other bodily movements, is in actuality relentlessly replaced and ruined by the male sighted world, one which is never appropriate for women.

Irigaray's idea of female fluidity and multiplicity similarly sheds light on Molly's case. Such fluidity and multiplicity are detached from the sighted world, identifying instead with women's world of touch. As Irigaray argues, the style or writing of women "does not privilege sight; instead, it takes each figure to its source, which is among other things tactile" (1991, p. 126). For her, the women's world is not meant to be static, exclusive and unified. Before the operation, Molly enjoys multiple ways of pleasure from the graceful movement of her body. She is well qualified as a massage therapist in a local health club. Additionally, she feels excited about a range of physical things. For example, Molly expresses her comfort and happiness with bodily movement before the operation:

And how could I have told those other doctors how much pleasure my world offered me? From my work, from the radio, from walking, from music, from cycling. But especially from swimming. I used to think—and I know this sounds silly—but I really did believe I got more pleasure, more delight, from swimming than sighted people can ever get. Just offering yourself to the experience—every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone—sensation that could not have been enhanced by sight—experience that existed only by touch and feel; and moving swiftly and rhythmically through the enfolding world; and the sense of such assurance, such liberation, such concordance with it. (Friel 1996, p. 466)

This excerpt is in line with Irigaray's assertion that bodily fluidity offers women the greatest satisfaction. Notably, Molly's pleasure from massage and swimming is absolutely incomprehensible to the other male doctors, who are accustomed to the sighted world. Her pleasure echoes what Irigaray proclaims to be multiple and indefinite. For Irigaray, women's pleasure is not confined to the either-or choice between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity. She stresses that women's sexuality, "always double, is in fact plural" (1981, p. 102). However, male characters in *Molly Sweeney* keep trying to discourage Molly from inhabiting the cosy tactile world. On several occasions in the play, Molly has to resort to her ability to touch and identify something, while Frank forces her to use "visual engrams" rather than "tactile engrams" to connect with the outside world (Friel 1996, p. 491). Molly's "guessing" through touch as opposed to males' "gaze" through teaching once again testifies to Irigaray's idea of sexual difference. Molly's father, Frank, and Dr. Rice are one and the

same because, despite their individual relationships with Molly, they play the same patriarchal role in diminishing Molly's pleasure from the world of touch. Like Molly's father, Frank and Dr. Rice are both judges who stare at and evaluate the female protagonist's body. Therefore, Molly is deprived of her habitual comfort and pleasure step by step.

Crucially, Molly is a distinguished swimmer and dancer, and the various gestures made for these activities are quite suggestive of a baby's movement inside the female body. Frank regards Molly as a "wonderful swimmer" (Friel 1996, p. 477). On the other hand, dancing for Molly demonstrates "the perfect, the absolutely perfect relaxation" (Friel 1996, p. 478). Molly's dance the night before the operation showcases "a form of expression closely connected with the female element" (Ojrzynska 2011, p. 262). In addition, Kristeva's notion of "the semiotic" is illuminating in explicating this phenomenon. For Kristeva, whereas the symbolic is a system under the law of the Father, the semiotic is the pre-Oedipal phase featuring the space of a mother's body. Incessant flows and movements in the semiotic are gathered up in the chora (the womb), which pulses and vibrates in numerous forms (Kristeva 1984, 26-39). Kristeva's semiotic space is one without certainty and limitation. Besides, this feminine space features energetic rhythms. Molly feels at home within this very space through actions such as swimming and dancing. She once recalled how swimming had brought her great joy, thinking that "the other people in the pool with me, the sighted people, that in some way their pleasure was actually diminished because they could see, because seeing in some way qualified the sensation" (466). She used to be so confident about her tactile life, dispensing and despising the sighted world. By means of swimming, Molly moves back to the mother's body and enjoys "moving swiftly and rhythmically through the enfolding world" (Friel 1996, p. 466). Unlike the world she experiences after the operation, the feminine, motherly, fluid atmosphere in the water grants her "such assurance, such liberation, such concordance" that remind readers of the mother-daughter relations in the pre-Oedipal phase (Friel 1996, p. 466). However, the operation dramatically changes her life for good. Intruded on by the masculine violence of gaze identification, Molly loses contact with the familiar, feminine tactile world, thereby becoming estranged from happiness and comfort.

Molly's identification with her mother comes late, slowly and miserably because only after the failed operation does she understand that both her mother and she are confined within the same "walled garden" of patriarchal power (Friel 1996, p. 455). Near the end of the play, Molly is haunted by her mother's phantom. As she describes,

Mother comes in occasionally; in her pale blue headscarf and muddy wellingtons. Nobody pays much attention to her. She just wanders through the wards. She spent so much time here herself, I suppose she has an affection for the place. She doesn't talk much — she never did. But when she sits uneasily on the edge of my bed, as if she were waiting to be summoned, her face always frozen in that nervous half-smile. I think I know her better than I ever knew her and I begin to love her all over again. (Friel 1996, p. 508)

Molly's mother is like an exiled woman who is dressed in the "pale blue headscarf and muddy wellingtons" all the time. Nervous, uneasy and frigid, this mother figure represents the negative stereotype inscribed on women. At her young age, Molly had a vague impression of her mother's unhappiness; in adulthood, particularly after the eye operation, Molly has a better grip on the problem that women have in their everyday lives. Suffering and age provide her with a better understanding, making her identify with her mother and learn to love her mother again. Unlike the younger Molly who was closer to her father, the "sadder but wiser" Molly re-embraces her mother as her true

partner, as they are both exiled from the patriarchal society. This exile is reinforced when Mr. Rice refers to Molly on one occasion: "She had moved away from us all. She wasn't in her old blind world—she was exiled from that" (Friel 1996, p. 501). Nonetheless, as critic Tony Corbett specifies, ironically Molly's death seems to be impending because she is imprisoned in the same psychiatric hospital that once treated her mother (2008, p. 137). Both women are caged in the end.

Cixous has been committed to the destruction of the patriarchal hierarchy and to the announcement of *écriture féminine*. Dissatisfied with the phallogocentric tradition in suppressing women's voice, she encourages women writers to explore their sexual difference and further construct their individual identity. In "The Laugh of Medusa," Cixous explicates her theory of woman for woman. For her, women get help mainly from other women: "It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was born to her" (1981, p. 252). In *Molly Sweeney*, the female character is aware of this woman-for-woman attachment because of her caring, helpful friend, Rita Cairn. As Molly says, "Rita probably knows me better than anybody" (Friel 1996, p. 471). The following description by Molly demonstrates Rita's role as the considerate, delicate, trustworthy female partner.

As usual Rita was wonderful. She washed my hair, my bloody useless hair—I can do nothing with it—she washed it in this special shampoo she concocted herself. Then she pulled it all away back from my face and piled it up, just here, and held it in place with her mother's silver ornamental comb. (Friel 1996, p. 479)

No males will ever do what Rita does for Molly, things such as washing or combing her hair. Undoubtedly, these actions are relevant to women's bodily features, which is in accordance with the emphasis on women's tactile sensation discussed previously. Notably, the silver ornamental comb of Rita's mother metaphorically renders the rapport among women of different generations possible.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, men judge by sight, whereas women feel by touch. Regrettably, Molly fails to recognize this penchant for touch that is typical of female identity. She spends too much time resorting to outside help from men, such as her father, her husband, and her doctor, but only to find that these male others can never be her real rescuers. They cannot save Molly from blindness mainly because their visual viewpoints are far away from the tactile attributes characteristic of women.

Molly's case demonstrates that over-reliance on men only gives women a blurred vision, the kind of vision that the character of Molly literally represents. On the other hand, the freedom Molly discovers in the power of the movement of her own body suggests one way of approaching women's identity as difference in the Irish context. This possibility of representing a peculiar women's identity also finds powerful support in the way the play is presented, a panoply of monologs by the main characters without real communication, in which a traditionally muzzled female voice is granted equal opportunity for self-articulation. From this perspective, unlike most female figures merely characterized by "limiting, systematically destroying hope, passion, purpose," Friel's *Molly Sweeney* offers significant access for Irish women to self-discovery and self-identity in the ever-changing world (Harris 1997, p. 67). This echoes Hawk Chang's assertion that

contemporary Irish literature such as Eithne Strong's *Flesh: The Greatest Sin* highlights women's attempt to be liberated from age-old traditions of subjugation (2017, pp. 164-67). Notably, near the end of the play, Molly delivers a lengthy speech, which somehow signals Friel's privileging the female character by "valorizing the female voice" (Murray 2014, p. 155). As Seamus Heaney asserts, Friel's writings are "intent upon showing forth the different tensions, transgressions and transfigurations that occur once the line between the realm of actuality and imagination is crossed" (1993, p. 230). The only difference is that in *Molly Sweeney*, Friel demonstrates the tensions between men and women and recommends a potential sexual transgression and transfiguration.

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