

**University of Iceland**

**School of Humanities**

**MA in English**

**Emigration and Identity  
in Contemporary Irish Drama**

**M.A. Essay**

**Maria Rosaria Coda**

**Id#.: 071065-2279**

**Supervisor: Guðrún Björk Guðsteinsdóttir**

**October 2020**

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest sincere gratitude to Prof. Guðrún Björk Guðsteinsdóttir for her endless encouragement and support, her precious and generous advice.

## Abstract

The Irish diaspora has inspired many contemporary playwrights. This essay considers fourteen plays by nine different Irish authors, written and set in the last seventy years, most of which deal with the topic of emigration. These fourteen plays provide a compact overview of the historical and social changes in Ireland since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The first chapter of this essay outlines the most important phases and characteristics of Irish migration, from the first involuntary ones in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century to the voluntary migration waves of the famine years in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and the more recent ones, for both economic, personal and often “hidden” reasons. The second chapter deals with the departure theme by comparing John Millington Synge’s plays to Brian Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and Tom Murphy’s *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant*. The approach to the migration theme in their predecessor’s works is strikingly different from that in Friel’s and Murphy’s two more recent plays. The third chapter of the essay examines five more plays which are about emigrants living abroad: Murphy’s *A Whistle in the Dark*, Enda Walsh’s *The Walworth Farce*, Ann Devlin’s *After Easter*, Dermot Bolger’s *In High Germany* and Colm Clifford’s *Reasons for Staying*. None of them tells much about the host country because the setting in the foreign country is usually an ethnically defined space representing Ireland. The fifth chapter, “The return”, includes four plays: John B. Keane’s *The Field*, Bolger’s *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*, Declan Hughes’ *Shiver* and Murphy’s *The House*. Like the plays in the previous chapter, these works represent Irish identity in a critical way. In addition, they expose the disturbed attitude of the local community towards returning emigrants. The fifth chapter includes three more plays set in Ireland and explores examples of exile at home: Keane’s *Sive*, Murphy’s *Bailegangaire*, Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats...* These three plays tell stories of alienation that sometimes ends tragically, sometimes suggesting positive solutions.

This study shows that far from being simply nostalgic representations of the native country, the selected plays discuss in a critical way the concept of Irishness, witnessing the shift from national to cultural identity and promoting changes that aim at female emancipation, tolerance of diversity, healing past wounds, without giving up the

fight for social and political justice. Either implicitly or overtly, all the plays examined propose a mature relationship with parents and a balanced approach to memories as crucial for the success of life abroad. Starting from the last decades of the twentieth century, dramatic works have progressively addressed and exposed once taboo topics, and have made it clear that, as hard as it may be, leaving home – or returning – is not a shameful, but an enriching and liberating experience. It implies a privileged position for recognising and accepting diversity – which does not blindly copy a given model – and is beneficial to individual and collective happiness.