Themes

Themes may be thought of as the major concerns that the author explores in the text: the topics or issues that the writer wants to address. Thinking in terms of themes is a useful way to group your thoughts, and you may wish to subdivide a large theme into smaller sub-groups. A literary text, however, is not a unilateral form of communication that seeks to transmit a simple message; theatregoers, reviewers and critics often disagree on exactly what constitutes a play's main concerns. Even the author's views on this may not be fixed. In Friel's 'Sporadic Diary', written in 1979 as *Translations* was taking shape, he wrote that 'the play has to do with language and only language. And if it becomes overwhelmed by [the] political element it is lost' (T. Coult, *About Friel: The Playwright and the Work*, 2003, p. 88). Yet, in an interview in 1980, after the play had been performed, he conceded that 'Of course, it's also concerned with the English presence here' (Delaney, 2000, p. 140), and, in another interview in the same year, he put a slightly different slant on this theme when he said: 'The play is about the absorption of one culture into another; but I hope it goes a bit deeper than that — about the disquiet between two aesthetics' (Delaney, 2000, p. 136).

Accordingly, you will notice that themes are not separate ideas, but are often connected. Part of the playwright's skill is that he can explore several interlinked themes, such as language, identity, Anglo-Irish relations and love, while also telling a great story.

Pause for **Thought**

Friel wrote: 'I don't want to write a play about Irish peasants being suppressed by English sappers.

'I don't want to write a threnody [a lament] on the death of the Irish language, I don't want to write a play about land-surveying.

'Indeed I don't want to write a play about naming places. And yet portions of all these are relevant. Each is part of the atmosphere in which the real play lurks.' (Coult, 2003, p. 88)

To what extent are these elements the themes of *Translations*?

Language

Many see the play as being about the loss of the Irish language. The main action — of the Ordnance Survey changing the place-names — reflects this, as do the discussions of Irish and English and the new national school. Symbolism — mainly through the death of Nellie's baby and the silencing of Sarah — suggests the centrality of the loss of Irish in the play. The play exemplifies this loss, since it is performed in English not Irish. Just as the story of the fall of Carthage, which Hugh quotes in Act Three, is told in the language of its conquerors (Latin), we experience this play about the death of Irish in the language of its conquerors (English).

We are made to believe that the language being spoken by the Irish characters is Gaelic, but what we actually hear is an Irish-accented

Top ten **quotation** ❯

Context

Hiberno-English is the name given to the variety of English spoken in Ireland. There are many examples of Hiberno-English lexical and grammatical features in the play. For example, Jimmy, referring to the instrument used by the surveyors, asks Doalty 'what shape's the yoke?'; 'yoke' in this context means 'thing'.

Context

Friel uses Hugh's words to voice his feelings about how Irish dramatists should use the English language.

He explained that Hugh's words mean that the Irish must make their use of English 'distinctive and unique'. Criticising the production of plays for English approval, he claims that contemporary Irish dramatists should be 'talking to ourselves as we must, and if we are overheard in America, or England, so much the better' (Delaney, 2000, p. 147).

Hiberno-English. By means of this conceit we are given access to the 'language of the tribe'. Declan Kiberd believes that this satirises non-Irish speakers in Irish audiences, who, when they are laughing at the faltering attempts of Yolland to speak 'Irish', are 'also in effect laughing at themselves' (Kiberd, 1996, p. 616). It can be argued that this linguistic lack sparks a yearning for the lost language and helps to strengthen audience identification with Irish characters as well as heighten their enjoyment of Friel's use of Hiberno-English on stage.

Yet the sorrow felt at the loss of Irish in Act Three is not the only factor in the power of Friel's presentation of the language. In the first two acts, Irish — and its surrounding culture — is presented with a palpable sense of joy. Indeed, Irish is given the same status as Latin and Greek. For example, the Irish goddess, Grania, is compared to the Greek goddess, Athene. That Irish culture is equal to the classical cultures is Hugh's point when he tells Yolland 'our own culture and the classical tongues [make] a happier conjugation', and while there is a happy marriage between the classical cultures and Irish, there is a clash with English. In Act One, Lancey replies, 'I do not speak Gaelic, sir' to Jimmy's question, '*Nonne Latine loquitor?*' This flatters the audience's intelligence (many of whom will understand at least the gist of Jimmy's Latin) and encourages them to laugh at the English. Some, however, might find this unconvincing and pandering to Nationalist feelings; surely a British Army officer, who would have been schooled in the Classics, could have distinguished between Irish and Latin?

Friel does not, however, provide simply one view on the Irish language. While what many will take away from a performance of the play is horror at the English extirpation of Irish or the wonder and joy for the language as exemplified by Yolland's enthusiasm, much of what is said about the Irish language is ambiguous. As the hedge-school master, Hugh might be viewed as the custodian of Irish culture, yet his speech is close to that of an educated Englishman: he characteristically uses long, complex sentences with frequent passive constructions, a wide Latinate vocabulary and the fewest number of dialect features of all the Irish characters; in some productions, he even speaks with an English accent.

For all his pronouncements on the richness of the Irish language and his pleasure at the thought of running a national school under hedge-school principles, Hugh is the character (with the exception of Maire) who is most accepting of the Irish language's fate. While Owen discards the Name-Book in Act Three (symbolically rebelling against the English and their language), Hugh takes a broader view of life and language than either of his sons. After the funeral of the baby, which symbolises the

death of the Irish language, Hugh will teach English. Lifting the discarded book, he declares,'We must learn those new names…We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home' (p. 88).

❮ Top ten ***quotation***

Pause for ***Thought***

Language disintegrates at the end of the play, and although the meaning of Hugh's translation of Virgil is easy to miss as the mood darkens and the lights fade, it is possible to think of the ending as heralding resurrection, rather than insurrection. Rather than seeing Ireland as a tragically ruined Carthage, how far do you think it is possible to view the Irish, and their version of English, as the Rome that rises from the ashes of Troy?

Pause for ***Thought***

George Steiner quotes philosopher Martin Heidegger as an epigraph to his book *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. Friel used part of this quotation in the programme notes for the first performance of *Translations*: 'Man acts as if he were the shaper and the master of language, while it is language which remains mistress of man.'

Consider what you think this quotation means and how it relates to the play.

Identity

In Ireland, particularly in Northern Ireland, questions of identity are frequent and fraught with tension. Where a person is from is often used as a means to categorise them on religious and political grounds, as is a person's name. Even a trivial action such as filling in a form can assume the gravity of a political declaration; what should the Northern Irish person write in the box marked 'Nationality': 'Irish' or 'British'? It is hardly surprising that for many of the characters in *Translations* identity is a crucial concern. Manus, for example, sees Yolland as a 'colonist' and the survey as a threat to Irish identity. Hearing Owen talk of new place-names, he reads 'standardised' as a euphemism for being 'changed into English'. Recognising that renaming often accompanies possession, he views the British as conquerors masquerading as cartographers: 'it's a bloody military operation, Owen!' His strong Irish identity also means that he is attuned to the subtle erosion of his brother's Irishness: 'And they call you Roland! They both call you Roland!' (p. 36).

In Ireland… questions of identity are frequent and fraught with tension

An even more committed expression of Irish identity comes from the Donnelly twins, who are prepared to engage in acts of terrorism to defend their Irishness, yet we never see them on stage and thus they make a limited impression on the audience. At the other end of

the spectrum is Captain Lancey, whose spear-like name makes him sound both belligerent and aristocratic (a lance was a weapon used by knights). Of all the characters he appears the most one-dimensional and he helps to represent the British as being aloof, colonial and unattractive. While there is a range of characters representing many aspects of Irish identity, only two on stage represent Britishness and, since Yolland spends so much of his time attempting to forge an Irish identity, it could be argued that Lancey is the only real representation of Britishness in the play. As such it is easy to see why some have considered the play anti-British.

Yet Friel seems most interested in characters whose identities are least fixed. During Act Two, identities are at their most fluid. This is obvious not just in Maire and Yolland's love scene, but also when the Englishman and the Irishman almost swap identities. In addition to having the characters invent new names that blend 'Yolland' and 'Owen', Friel demonstrates the mixing of identities both physically and verbally as the characters 'roll about together' and 'their lines overlap'. As a result of accepting a plurality of identity, the play has attained a joyful mood, but while the atmosphere on stage suggests that Anglo-Irish relations can be harmonious when national identities are relaxed, the plot and structure of the play suggest otherwise.

Pause for ***Thought***

How far do you agree that the moral of Owen's story might be that we should pay closer heed to our given national identity, and that experimenting with other identities will only lead to trouble?

Translations might be viewed as the story of Owen, who assumes numerous identities in the play, including businessman, interpreter, outsider, insider, son, brother, prodigal, friend, apologist, collaborator, traitor and rebel. Indeed, the structure of the play charts the trajectory of his shifting identity. In Act One, like a charming, but cunning politician, he prepares the way for changes in taxation by presenting the survey favourably. His final action in the play is casting the Name-Book aside — a symbolic denunciation of all he has done for the British. When he says 'I know where I live', he aligns himself to his birthplace and repudiates many of his former identities; when he says 'I've got to go. I've got to see Doalty Dan Doalty', he means he is preparing to defend Baile Beag's Irishness and fight against British domination.

Another character who experiments with multiple identities is Hugh. While at first he appears to embody Irish identity — he is, for example, the important community figure who promises to nullify any threat to Irishness posed by the national school by running it himself — by the end of the play he is willing to accept Baile Beag under overt British control by learning the new place-names and beginning to teach English. Many of his most memorable speeches question the wisdom of clinging to an identity that is based on fixed ideas of the past. Unless there is renewal, he seems to suggest, 'we fossilise'. It is tempting to consider

Top ten ***quotation*** ❯

Hugh's position at the end of the play as being similar to Owen's at the play's centre: one that advocates a relaxation of Irish identity and an accommodation with some elements of Britishness. But not everyone would agree. During interviews Friel himself has seemingly expounded more fixed ideas about identity. He has complained about Irish writers being too accommodating to the English, and that 'apart from Synge, all our dramatists have pitched their voice for English acceptance and recognition' (Delaney, 2000, p. 146). He has argued that Irish writers should be 'distinctive and unique'; in particular, they must not simply pander to English tastes; rather, they should offer representations of themselves, their culture and their identity for themselves.

Pause for ***Thought***

'Never trust the teller, trust the tale' is a truism in literary criticism. To what extent might we choose to disregard what Friel has said of his play? Is it fair to give his comments on his work the same status as remarks made by critics?

Love

With all the critical attention on the colonial elements of the play and the extent to which it might be anti-British, it is easy to overlook the fact that at the core of the play is a love story. In some ways this love is generic: there are a great many stories, not least *Romeo and Juliet*, which feature forbidden love between lovers from opposing sides of a conflict. Yet the love story of Yolland and Maire is not simply a sub-plot to *Translations*; it is central to Friel's main plot and thematic concerns. It adds intensity to themes that might have lacked dramatic power had they only been explored by means of 'masculine' theoretical discussions. Engaging for the audience, the relationship builds expectations, provides conflicts and encourages the audience members to care about the characters and hence to form emotional, not just rational, responses to the themes. The success of a play is not determined by the ways in which it addresses academic issues so much as by how it is able to move audiences — by eliciting laughter, gasps and tears.

When Maire meets Yolland, she has already seen Manus kissing Sarah and their first discussion shows her impatience with Manus as well as her interest in the 'sapper fellas' who are going to lend 'a hand' with the harvest. On stage she could be angry with Manus and envious of the attention he was paying Sarah, and the comments about the soldiers could be played to provoke his jealousy in retaliation. Such a reading gains more plausibility when the actress playing Sarah is presented attractively, as she was when played by Morgan Hallet in Garry Hynes's 2006 New York production. Manus and Maire are obviously a couple, but one whose passion seems on the wane. Details such as Manus's paltry prospects and Maire's views on the English language place doubts in the minds of the audience about their compatibility. They appear to be living separate lives and have different plans for the future: there was an

evening of music in Maire's house the night before which Manus did not attend; and while Maire looks forward to emigration and the new world of America, Manus looks backwards to the old Ireland of the islands and the hedge-schools. Indeed, their first interactions on stage — with Maire's sulkiness and sarcasm coupled with Manus's failure to understand her feelings — make them seem like a bickering married couple.

Thus, when Yolland appears, Maire is ripe for infidelity. While there are few lines between the two, an attraction could be shown on stage as the aspirational Irish milkmaid meets the handsome British officer, tall and impressive in his red uniform and standing out amongst the rags of the peasants congregated in the makeshift schoolroom.

It is interesting to note how much of an active role Owen plays in forming the relationship. For example, in Act Two, he encourages Yolland to 'drop in' to Maire's house and, by translating for them, he helps arrange their date at Tobair Vree. While Owen does grow exasperated at having to translate so much, one reading of his character might be to suggest that his role in the survey runs deeper than to translate place-names. Some see him as a traitor, employed to smooth Anglo-Irish relations and make a complete takeover more palatable. Since a typical way of improving relations between warring nations is

Owen introduces Maire and Yolland, in a 1993 production at the Donmar Warehouse, London; note how his cravat matches Yolland's red coat

Photostage

through marriage alliances, perhaps Owen's role in bringing together an attractive, opinionated Irishwoman and a Hibernophile British soldier should not strike us as surprising.

On stage, the love triangle is dramatically effective. Elated at the news of his job success, Manus is eager to have his marriage proposal approved by Maire's mother, but all that interests Maire is Yolland. Dramatic irony arises from Manus's ignorance of what is going on right in front of him, and the arrangements for Maire and Yolland's meeting provoke humour — as Owen is repeatedly called on to translate — and excitement as the arrangements must be made speedily (while Manus is upstairs emptying the milk-can). Friel juxtaposes two forms of communication: the failed and the successful. While Maire is indifferent to Manus's words and Manus seemingly blind to her lack of reaction, there is urgency, enthusiasm and — eventually — comprehension in the exchanges between Maire and Yolland.

As Friel presents love in Act Two, scene two through Maire and Yolland's shifting proximity and their antiphonal exchange, the audience is swept along by optimism. There can be real communication between those of different backgrounds; there is room in Ireland for a plurality of identities to co-exist; ultimately, there is hope for Anglo-Irish relations. It is the scene with the most hope and the most humour, but it is also the pivot on which the mood of the play turns. When Sarah, who loves the teacher who helped her find her voice, shouts 'Manus!' she might as well have signed Yolland's death warrant. The audience's hopes for the exogamous couple have crashed into despair, and hope of harmony between Britain and Ireland is more remote than ever. Yet, apart from this dramatic twist, there are signs that the love was not destined to last. Some might argue that their love is presented in rather generic terms: they are 'trembling' with desire and anticipation, Yolland wants to tell Maire 'how beautiful' she is and Maire even uses the clichéd line 'Take me away with you.' This could, of course, be a deliberate choice on Friel's part; he is showing that their love is clichéd and unrealistic, for each lover desires the loved one for the very aspects of their identity that they are trying to shed. Yolland is in love with the language and culture that Maire is trying to escape; Maire is in love with Yolland's status as a British officer and his potential to offer her a new life elsewhere.

Pause for **Thought**

For some critics, rather than offer hope for Anglo-Irish relations, the play's love scene shows the reverse. As Nicholas Grene argues, the 'pathos in the scene lies in its very brevity, the sense of its ultimate impossibility. Within the colonial context the dream of intermarriage is like the attempt at interpretation, a hopeless hope' (Grene, 1999, p. 43). To what extent do you agree?

Context

Yolland's status as a soldier might be part of his attraction for Maire. Maire can be compared not only to the woman in Seamus Heaney's 'Punishment', but also to Molly Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), who looks back fondly to her time in Gibraltar (under British colonial rule) and recalls her admiration for the redcoats.