Dancing at Lughnasa
By: Brian Friel

PLOT SUMMARY

Act I

Act I is set “on a warm day in early August, 1936,” in the “home of the Mundy family, two miles outside the village of Ballybeg, County Donegal, Ireland.” The play opens with a monologue by Michael, who introduces the play as a nostalgic memory of the summer when he was seven years old. The family of five sisters who raised him have just acquired their first wireless radio. The sisters, most of them in their thirties, include Kate, Maggie, Rose, Agnes, and Chris (Michael's mother). In addition to the arrival of the radio, Michael's Uncle Jack, who has been a missionary in a leper colony in Uganda for the past twenty-five years, has returned home. Michael explains in this opening monologue that he was a child born out of wedlock, and had only seen his father, Gerry Evans, a few times.

The action of the play opens as the five sisters do chores while occasionally breaking into singing and dancing, inspired by their new radio. Michael, as a boy, discusses with his aunts the kites he is building. Agnes suggests that they all attend the upcoming local harvest dance, to which Maggie, Rose, and Chris respond enthusiastically. But Kate vetoes the idea, saying that they are all too old to attend the dance. The sisters discuss a local boy who is suffering from severe burns that he got while attending the Festival of Lughnasa, a pagan tradition. When the radio, which only works intermittently, is turned on again, the sisters all break into a frenzied dance together, which only ends after the radio breaks down again and the music is cut off. Looking out the window, they see Gerry Evans, Michael's father, who has not paid them a visit for over a year, approaching the house. Despite the disapproval of her sisters, Chris approaches Gerry in the yard, where they both talk and laugh. Gerry tells Chris that he has gotten a job selling gramophones, and that he will soon be joining the military to fight in Spain. Gerry spontaneously takes Chris into his arms and dances with her. Later, Uncle Jack explains rituals and ceremonies in which he participated in Uganda, without regard to his Christian profession. Act I ends with Jack re-enacting a ritual dance and drumbeat from Uganda.

Act II

Act II takes place “in early September, three weeks later.” In the opening scene, Maggie is doing chores in the kitchen, and Michael sits writing what he says is a letter to Santa Claus when Uncle Jack enters, about to take one of his many walks of the day. Jack describes at length a ritual ceremony he participated in Uganda, which included the sacrifice of animals. Jack then leaves for his walk. Chris and Gerry enter, as Gerry explains that he has just signed up for military duty in Spain. Gerry climbs a tree in an attempt to fix the radio by working on the antenna. Agnes returns home, carrying pails of blackberries that she has picked. It is discovered that Rose, who had told Agnes she wasn't feeling well and was going home to rest, is not home. Rose then returns home, and explains that she had arranged to go on a boat ride with Danny Bradley, the married man with whom she is in love.
The adult Michael then provides a long monologue that explains the fate of most of the characters. Agnes and Rose left the family and never returned; twenty-five years later, Michael discovered that they had gone to London, where they became destitute, and eventually died. Michael also learned, after Gerry's death, that his father had maintained a legitimate wife and three children in Wales, which Chris never knew about. Uncle Jack died suddenly of a heart attack within a year of his return to Ireland.

The scene returns to the kitchen in September, 1936, where the women are doing chores and talking amongst themselves. Gerry looks at the completed kites the child Michael has made; each have "a crude, cruel, grinning face, primitively drawn, garishly painted."

The adult Michael ends with a monologue in which he states that, with Agnes and Rose gone, and Uncle Jack dead, "much of the spirit and fun had gone out of their lives; and when my time came to go away, in the selfish way of young men I was happy to escape." Michael goes on to express the significance of music and dance to his nostalgic memories of that summer of 1936."

**CHARACTERS**

**Gerry Evans**

Gerry Evans, thirty-three, is the father of the illegitimate son Michael, whose mother is Chris. Gerry and Chris were never married, and Gerry had abandoned her with their child years earlier. Gerry appears unexpectedly every year or so, and Chris, despite herself, is charmed by him all over again each time. But Gerry is unreliable, and has a new idea for a career path with each visit. He does leave to fight in Spain, where he is injured in a motorbike accident that leaves him with a limp. He continues to visit Chris and Michael every year or so, but disappears around the time of World War II. After Gerry's death, Michael learns that his father had a wife and three children in Wales throughout all those years, unbeknownst to Chris.

**Agnes Mundy**

Agnes, thirty-five, is the middle of the five sisters, and knits mittens to support them. After a local knitting factory makes their home knitting work obsolete, Agnes and her sister Rose eventually leave the family home, never to return. Twenty-five years later, Michael locates Rose and Agnes in London, where Agnes has died, and Rose soon dies in a hospice for the destitute.

**Chris Mundy**

Chris, twenty-six, is the youngest of the five sisters. Her son, Michael, was born out of wedlock, her love child with Gerry Evans. When Gerry returns after more than a year's absence, he charms Chris all over again, despite herself and her sister's disapproval. Gerry jokes with her, makes her laugh, and frequently breaks into a dance with her. Chris is repeatedly taken in by Gerry's unreliable promises, believing him when he says he will return soon, and that he has purchased a bicycle for Michael. Three weeks later, Gerry does return briefly, during which time he and Chris enjoy a rejuvenation of their romance before he leaves for military work in Spain. Chris never learns of Gerry's legitimate family in Wales.
Jack Mundy

Jack, fifty-three, also referred to by Michael as Uncle Jack, is the brother of the five women, and uncle of Michael. He spent twenty-five years as a missionary priest in a leper colony in Uganda, and has recently returned to Ireland, sick with malaria. It turns out that Jack was asked to leave the priesthood for participating in local, non-Christian ceremonies and rituals in Uganda. In Ireland, he seems mentally confused, as well as physically ill. He cannot keep the names of his five sisters straight, and has trouble remembering English words, having spoken mostly Swahili during his years in Uganda. The character of Uncle Jack highlights Friel's theme of paganism, as he frequently refers to local spiritual practices in Uganda, and seems to have strayed far from his Christian faith. Kate helps Uncle Jack to reinvigorate his health with long walks several times a day. Michael explains in a monologue toward the end of the play that Jack died suddenly of a heart attack within a year of returning to Ireland.

Kate Mundy

Kate is the oldest of the five sisters. She is forty years old, and was once a schoolteacher. Kate is the most resistant to the changes taking place around her, and is especially critical of the "pagan" singing and dancing that the radio has brought into her household.

Maggie Mundy

Maggie, thirty-eight, is the second oldest of the five sisters, and works as the cook and housekeeper of their home. Michael describes his Aunt Maggie as "the joker of the family." She is the one who suggests naming the new wireless radio Lugh, after the "old Celtic god of the Harvest.

Michael Mundy

Michael, as a young man, functions as a narrator and describes the action of the play through direct monologue to the audience, in the form of a nostalgic reminiscence of a time of his childhood when he was only seven years old. Michael is the illegitimate child of Chris and Gerry, and only sees his father about once a year. The child Michael in the flashbacks is primarily intent on making and painting a series of kites; only toward the end of the play are his paintings displayed to the audience, when they reveal a series of faces expressing strong emotions.

Rose Mundy

Rose, thirty-two, is the second youngest of the sisters, and works knitting mittens to support the family. Rose is in love with Danny Bradley, a married man with three children, with whom she sneaks off for a boat ride one afternoon.