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study guide



My Left Foot

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Introduction

Welcome to the **fii**education *My Left Foot* study guide. Since the addition of film studies to the revised Leaving Cert English curriculum, this Irish film has become one of the favourite choices for teachers and students. Released in 1989, it won two Oscars for Daniel Day-Lewis as Best Actor and Brenda Fricker as Best Supporting Actress. Its worldwide success created a new interest and energy for filmmaking in Ireland and its popularity has endured.

This guide has been devised to facilitate teachers' own training in the teaching of film, but also for classroom use. The three principle sections, Hero, Relationships and the World of the Film include detailed discussion and suggested Key Moments. Explorations for Students are also included to stimulate classroom discussion. These sections can be used independently but ideally combine to make a complete study of the film. Supplementary material is supplied in the Appendices, including sequences for study, a sample key moment analysis and sample Comparative Study questions. Interviews with Brenda Fricker, Hugh O'Conor, and Noel Pearson offer interesting insights into the making of the film.

Thanks are due to Sarah Smith whose text provided the basis for the guide. Also to Ann Ryan and Tony Tracy for editorial contributions and suggestions. We hope that this guide will facilitate you and your students in their study of this classic Irish film.

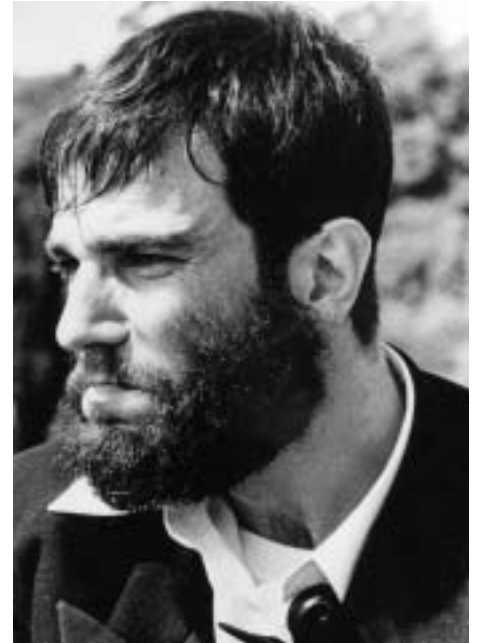
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My Left Foot

Student Pre-Viewing Worksheet



- 1 **What do you already know about this film?**
When was it made?
What's it about?
Who are the stars?
When and where is it set?
- 2 **What do you know about the context of the film?**
Find out what you can about:
 - Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s;
 - Health issues, families, education, social problems;
 - The role of the church during this period.
- 3 The film is about the life of Christy Brown. **Who was he? Why would someone want to make a film about his life? (see interview with Noel Pearson on pgs 19-20)**
- 4 **What is Cerebral Palsy? What are its affects and how are they treated?**
- 5 The director of this film was Jim Sheridan. **Do you know other films he has directed or worked on? Make a list of these, noting the main characters and themes, then compare with *My Left Foot*.**
- 6 The film belongs to a genre of filmmaking described as 'biography.' **What does this mean? Do you know other films that could be placed in the same category? Other books? Make a list using the table below and compare.**

Biography

Film / Book Title	Main Character	Setting (location and era)	Plot Synopsis

Christy Brown; Hero?



Useful for Study of: Hero, General Vision and Viewpoint, Literary genre, Themes: gender, disability, change.



'I saw it as more than a rather grim story of a man in a wheelchair. Christy represented for me a real kind of heroism and I really wanted to try to capture the rage and frustration that led him to paint and write. To show, I suppose, that the trap is not the wheelchair or the afflictions, but our attitude to disabled people'.

Daniel Day-Lewis (Arena Magazine, Summer/Autumn 89)

My Left Foot is an adaptation of Christy Brown's autobiography, *My Left Foot*. It also draws on his other biographical work, *Down all the Days*. Much of the action and events of the film are centred on his character. The story is told in flashback, from the book that Mary, nurse to the adult Christy, is reading. As the central character, Christy is portrayed as a kind of hero.

In the vast majority of mainstream cinema, the plot is driven by the struggle between a central hero and some other, usually darker, force. Following structures and principles established in Greek mythology, heroes are traditionally male, selfless and possess great moral as well as physical courage.

This section examines the character of Christy Brown, particularly from the point of view of his heroic status, both in the context of Hollywood stereotypes and in a broader understanding of the term.

Explorations for students

- 1 What do you understand by the term 'hero/heroine'? What are its origins? Find a dictionary definition and compare it to your own.
- 2 Identify the central character from two other films you have enjoyed. Could these characters be described as 'heroic' in the context of these films? Why? What qualities do typical Hollywood heroes have? Who decides what these qualities should be?
- 3 In what ways is Christy a typical cinematic hero? In what ways is he untypical? Do you think he is a hero? Why/Why not?
- 4 *My Left Foot* is the story of Christy's struggle to be accepted and understood. What are some of the difficulties that he encounters? How do these obstacles help him develop as a person?
- 5 Read Hamlet's speech (Act 3, Scene 1) in Appendix III. Why does Eileen choose this speech in particular? What do you think are the similarities/differences between Christy and Hamlet?

Discussion

In many respects, the character of Christy fulfils the requirements of the typical cinematic hero. He is a self-educated, working class man, who succeeds professionally as an artist and writer, is embraced by the social elite and in the end secures the love of a woman. He is the quintessential 'self-made man', so beloved of Hollywood cinema. Also, like the typical hero (of Hollywood cinema), he embarks upon a personal journey, which in this case involves a struggle to be accepted and understood by his father and society. It also involves a struggle with the desire to express his sexuality in a community that dismisses him as a "cripple." During this journey, Christy succeeds in overcoming many of the difficulties imposed upon him by his cerebral palsy. Despite his physical limitations, he teaches himself to speak and to express himself through painting and writing with the use of his left foot.

Yet, it is precisely his disability, or physical limitation, which marks him as an 'untypical' or unusual hero. The cinematic hero may at times be emotionally distraught, particularly in certain genres such as *film noir*¹, but he is rarely physically disabled. He is the strong, efficient, virile male such as 'Tarzan' or 'Superman' who proves himself, overcomes the obstacles set out for him by the narrative, achieves his goal and (usually) wins the love of a woman, through combat or physical confrontation with another strong male. Christy does not fit into this idea.

While Christy's strength is primarily emotional rather than physical, he does perform a few physical, and therefore classical, acts of heroism:

- As a boy, he alerts the neighbours by banging on the front door with his left foot when his pregnant mother falls down the stairs.
- He scores a goal in a football game with local boys with a powerful kick from his left foot, while lying on his side in the middle of the street.
- Later as a young man he uses all of his weight to push open the pantry door, in an attempt to help his father who is lying unconscious on the floor.
- In the local pub after his father's funeral, Christy starts a brawl to defend his father's honour. He kicks a pint out of the hand of one of the men casting aspersions on his family name.

An Untypical Hero

Other qualities that set Christy apart from our notion of the typical hero of Hollywood cinema, are his occasional outbursts of stubbornness and childishness. At one point in the film, when Eileen comes to visit, she finds him sitting in his room with his head covered by a blanket. It is his way of refusing to communicate. On the other hand, we can see that what is portrayed as childishness in this scene is in fact a symptom of a serious bout of depression which later leads to a suicide attempt. Again this is not the act of an enduring hero. But it is precisely these qualities or these flaws and this suffering that make him a more believable, and ultimately sympathetic, character.

The film also refers to another flawed hero – Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. When Eileen gives Christy the play to read, and asks him to learn Hamlet's famous speech from Act 3 Scene 1 – 'To be or not to be', (see appendix III) there are parallels between them. Hamlet's indecision about whether to take action or die is commented upon by Christy. When he describes Hamlet as 'a cripple who can't act', he is also revealing something about himself. At this point in the film, Christy feels optimistic and hopeful about the future and decides to take action to express himself as an artist.

¹ *Film Noir* is a style of film making popular in America in the 1940s and 1950s in which a central male character is frequently defeated by his own egoism and/or a more cunning female – known as a femme fatale. In these films the male character mistakes himself for the hero only to be outwitted and very often killed. Examples of the genre include *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)

Key Moments

I *Christy alerts neighbours of his mother's fall.* (Sequence 2)

Watch from the point where Mrs. Brown carries Christy up the stairs to where Christy is sitting on the ground outside the house surrounded by neighbours. **Duration: 2mins 55 secs approx.**

II *Christy scores a goal* (Sequence 3)

Watch from the point where the children are playing football on the street to where they are shouting because Christy has scored a goal. **Duration: 1 mins 20 secs approx.**

III *Christy stands up for his father* (Sequence 6)

Watch from the point in the pub at the father's wake to where the fight breaks out. **Duration: 4 mins 18 secs approx.**

IV *Christy's mother goes to Eileen to ask for help*

Watch from the point where Christy's mother is talking to the nurse to where she watches Christy leaving in the ambulance. **Duration: 3 mins 10 secs approx.**

The Hero's Story

In many films the story is told through the eyes of the hero. This is achieved with the following devices:

- 1 the camera remains with the character as much as possible; s/he should be part of the action on screen.
- 2 the use of close-up shots of this character's face.
- 3 the use of the point of view shot.

There are several scenes in this film in which these devices are used. When Christy alerts the neighbours of his mother's fall (Sequence 2), there are examples of all three as follows:

- 1 **The camera remains** on or with Christy for most of the scene. This may seem unremarkable enough until we consider the events that occur. At two very significant moments, the camera stays with Christy instead of showing us the important event taking place. The first time this happens we hear Mrs. Brown calling out and the sound of her falling, but the camera remains fixed on Christy's face. This has a number of effects. We only receive the same information as Christy and witness the look of terror on his face, both of which strengthen our identification with him. But because neither he nor we can see what has happened, suspense is created until help arrives. This confirms the story as being told from Christy's point of view.
- 2 There are two **close-up shots** of Christy in this scene, both of which literally bring us closer to his character and permit us to see his expression, his reaction, and to read the emotion in his face.
- 3 This is followed by the scene's only **point of view shot**. We have seen Christy's expression and now finally see what he is looking at, what he has been struggling to get to see: his mother lying unconscious on the floor. This type of shot brings us closer to the protagonist than any other. For a moment we actually assume his position.

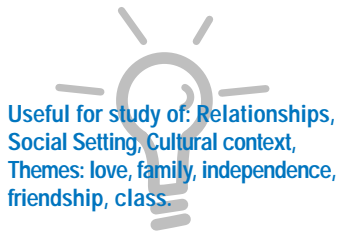
This is a scene of particular significance to the portrayal of Christy as hero. We have witnessed a very brave and heroic act by Christy and the great difficulty with which it is achieved. We identify with Christy's frustration at being misunderstood by the neighbour at the end of the scene (because we know what happened and she doesn't) and so are involved in his subsequent struggle. The scene also positions Christy at the centre of the action – between the private world of his home life and the public life of the outside. This prefigures his own struggle and movement over the course of the film, from an interior world of non-communication to an exterior world and public celebration of his painting and writing.



Christy's mother as heroine

In most mainstream cinema, heroes are male. Although some recent Hollywood films such as *Lara Croft* have shown a female hero, these characters have often just assumed the male role. In this film, while Christy is the central figure, his mother is also very important. She holds the family together and has forsaken her own concerns and needs for theirs. It is her devotion and determination that facilitates Christy's development and emergence as an artist.

Christy's Relationships



My Left Foot follows Christy Brown from childhood through to his meeting with Mary Carr, the woman he will marry soon after the action of the film has finished. In common with other stories in the biographical genre, the story begins with Christy's earliest relationships with his family, before his circle of influences extend beyond his home. Relationships are central to Christy's story as he moves from a position of isolation and dependence to one of self-expression and independence. The film follows this progress. It begins with his mother's unconditional devotion to him and his father's reluctant acceptance of him as a 'normal' individual. As Christy grows older his emotional needs extend beyond the formative relationship with his parents. The film identifies two central personalities, Dr Eileen Cole and Mary Carr, who significantly contribute to his development. In this section we examine Christy's four key relationships. Each relationship contributes significantly to his personal development and each plays an important role in the development of the narrative.

Explorations for students

- 1 What role does Christy's mother play in his life?
- 2 Do you think that Christy's disability has an effect on his relationship with his mother?
- 3 Would you describe Christy's mother as 'exceptional'? Explain.
- 4 Would you describe her as a 'typical Irish mother'? (See Interview with Brenda Fricker, Appendix IV)
- 5 At one point in the film Mrs Brown says 'You can't be sticking to me like a sticking plaster forever Christy'. What does she mean by this? Are her fears justified? What does this comment reveal about her?
- 6 How does the bond between Christy and his mother affect the relationships he subsequently has with other women?
- 7 The text above makes reference to the 'oedipal element' in Christy's relationship with his parents. Use the information contained in Appendix III to explain what this means.

1 Mother and Son

Discussion

The bond between mother and son in *My Left Foot* is arguably the strongest force in the film. The love and encouragement given to Christy by his mother contrasts dramatically with the indifference shown to him by his father. Like many children his first word is 'MOTHER', which he writes on the living room floor, emphasising her centrality to his life. As he lies curled up beside the word, whose curvature echoes that of his body, we are reminded of the foetal position of the child inside the mother's womb. This suggests an enduring physical bond between the two.

Christy spends all of his days as a child in the company of his mother while the other children go to school. During this time she reads to him and talks to him constantly, convinced that he understands every word. But she is also responsible for attending to all of his physical needs: she feeds him, washes him, puts him to bed at night and dresses him in the morning. She saves secretly for years to buy him a wheelchair, sacrificing food and heat for the family. Later she manages to bring him out of a depression by laying the foundations of a room for him in the back yard. She willingly fulfils these needs but is at the same time wary of the dependency on her that this cultivates. In an early scene she tells him crossly "You can't be sticking to me like sticking plaster forever Christy."

Parallels are later drawn between Mrs. Brown and Christy's two love interests. Each of the three women, a mother, a doctor and a nurse, are carers by profession and each can be seen on different occasions in the film, feeding him or helping him to drink. This parallel is emphasised when Mary declares "Don't you think I'm your mother just 'cos I'm looking after you for the evening." Later Christy, angered at Eileen's insistence on Platonic love, tells her "You're not my mother." Mary refuses to play the part of substitute mother to Christy, while Eileen seems to prefer this role to that of lover in his life.

Nevertheless, it is Christy's mother who worries about his romantic relationships with women and voices this concern throughout the film. Realising that he has fallen in love with Eileen, she fears that he may end up with a broken heart and she hesitates when leaving him with Mary after the benefit. Although it may be seen as a

function of every parent to worry about her/his child, the closeness of this relationship is remarkable when compared to that of Mrs. Brown and her other children. In a very moving moment between the two as she begins to dig the foundations of Christy's new room, she tells him that his sadness has broken her heart and goes on to say: "sometimes I think you are my heart." The film not only observes and comments on the stereotyped relationship between Irish mothers and their sons, but also explores what we can describe as the 'oedipal dilemma' – the complex relationship between a son, mother and father inspired by the Greek myth of Oedipus. (See Appendix III)





2 Father and Son

Discussion

The relationship between Christy and his father is an awkward hostile one, which becomes quite competitive at times. Paddy Brown is portrayed as an aggressive, bullying character who resents Christy because of his condition and dismisses him as a "cripple". It is clear from the film's opening scenes (in the hospital and at the pub), that Paddy feels ashamed and undermined for producing a son with a physical disability and makes very little attempt to develop any understanding of him.

Christy frequently challenges his father's authority, his most subversive method being to provoke laughter at his father's expense. Paddy is the only member of the family who cannot understand Christy's speech - a symptom of their lack of communication. Christy makes jokes to diffuse tension created by the father and to undermine his command. We see this particularly in the scene at the dinner table where they are eating porridge. Paddy is at once defied, and excluded from the family.

Although a tension permeates their relationship, Paddy does display love for Christy on a number of occasions. He builds a cart for him so that he can go out and play with the other boys. He proudly carries Christy to the pub to celebrate his achievement in writing the word 'MOTHER', thus, for him, proving his intelligence. Paddy also assumes the task of building Christy's room. On his completion of the room, Mrs. Brown remarks "Well Christy, that's the nearest he'll ever come to saying he loves you."

Despite Christy's obvious bitterness towards his father and disapproval of his boorish ways, he proceeds to emulate many of his father's characteristics. His mother comments in one scene: "You get more like your father every day. All hard on the outside and putty on the inside". Like his father he is quick tempered, fond of alcohol, prone to stubbornness, and has a tendency towards violence. In the scene following his father's funeral, Christy initiates a fight between the Browns and a group of local men in the name of family honour. This recalls an earlier scene when Paddy head-butts a man in the same pub for insulting his 'manhood'.

The most obvious difference between the two is physical; Paddy is a physically strong man who solves his problems with his fists, while Christy's condition confines him to a wheelchair and to fighting his battles with words or images. Yet this physical/intellectual opposition is not enough to distinguish them completely. During the scene in which his father dies, the film draws a very strong parallel between the two as they lie side by side on the floor, heads facing the same direction. The camera frames this composition tightly and it is the closest that these two characters have been positioned in the entire course of the film.



Explorations for students

- 1 How would you describe Christy's father? In what ways are he and Christy similar/different?
- 2 Would you consider Mr Brown a typical 'Irish father figure'?
- 3 In what ways does Christy's relationship with his father change during the film?
- 4 Have notions of masculinity – how men should behave – changed since the period during which the film is set?

Key Moments

I Christy expresses his love for his mother (Sequence 2)

Watch the scene where the other children are doing their homework to the point where the father takes Christy into the pub. **Duration: 4 mins. approx.**

II Christy challenges his father (Sequence 3)

Watch from the moment when Christy's mother is serving up porridge to the point where his father goes upstairs. **Duration: 2 mins 20 secs.**

III Christy and his mother and father express their love for each other (Sequence 6)

Watch from the point where Christy's mother begins to dig the garden to the end of the fight in the pub at his father's wake. **Duration: 4 mins 18 secs.**

Explorations for students

- 1 How is Eileen portrayed in her first encounters with Christy?
- 2 Why do you think Christy first rejects Eileen and then changes dramatically in his emotional response to her?
- 3 What change does Christy's mother notice in him and why does she not respond to it in a positive way?
- 4 What is the difference in response shown by his father? Why?
- 5 Eileen permits a closeness to develop between herself and Christy without defining the boundaries of their relationship. How does she do this? Is Christy 'to blame' for misinterpreting their relationship? Is Eileen?
- 6 Christy obviously suffers pain and humiliation when he discovers his love for Eileen is misplaced. Has the relationship served him any good?

Key Moment

Christy declares his love for Eileen (Sequence 8)

Watch from the aerial shot of the art gallery to the moment in the restaurant where Christy holds the tablecloth in his mouth. **Duration:** 6 mins. 10 secs.

3 Christy and Eileen

The main events of the film are presented to us through Christy's autobiography *My Left Foot*, and the only romantic relationship contained within his story (apart from a teenage crush on a local girl, Rachel) is that of his unrequited love for his doctor, Eileen Cole. It may seem then, that this is the most significant relationship of this kind in Christy's life. However, another much more consequential romance with Mary Carr is revealed, which frames the film and is interwoven with the book's narrative.

Eileen Cole specialises in cerebral palsy and the development of therapies to treat patients afflicted by this condition. She enters Christy's life out of professional interest – she is fascinated by the 19 year-old and proceeds to make a case study of him in order to further her work in the field. He becomes a kind of special project for her and, without considering the damaging effects it may have on him (a concern voiced by his mother as she notices the new "hope" in his voice), she overwhelms him with new and exciting ideas. The pace of their relationship is very hurried and Christy responds rapidly to her influence. She persuades him to attempt physiotherapy, helps him to improve his speech, introduces him to literature (notably Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), encourages him with his painting, organises an exhibition of his work and, in her last contact with him within the film, invites him to be guest of honour at a fundraising benefit for cerebral palsy. The relationship seems to thrive on Christy's performance and 'improvement'.

Despite her importance in Christy's life, Eileen is kept at a distance and treated warily by the camera throughout the film. Obviously her work and relationship with Christy has benefited him enormously (e.g. he learns to speak more clearly and therefore to communicate with everyone), yet there is a sense that she is operating largely out of self-interest. This is strongly implied by the manner in which she revels in the public recognition she receives at the exhibition opening of Christy's paintings and later at the benefit. On these occasions she seems to behave more like a proud teacher than a close friend. She also permits a closeness to develop between them without defining the boundaries of their relationship; she has no intention of becoming romantically involved with him and yet the relationship does not follow the traditional formalities between a doctor and patient.

She and her fiancé Peter are portrayed as smug and ambitious. There is even the suggestion in the film that they use Christy and his achievements to advance their own careers or bring them some sort of public acclaim. The relationship between Christy and Eileen reaches a pivotal moment when he publicly declares his love for her



at dinner following the exhibition opening. The difference between the social background of Christy and the other guests is magnified at this point. Peter, Eileen and the two other dinner guests are shocked by his outburst, but, after a moment's silence, they attempt to return to a discussion about an artist, Mulcahy. Embarrassed by this confrontation, Eileen loses her composure for the first time in the film.



4 Christy and Mary

Explorations for students

- 1 How is Mary portrayed in her first encounter with Christy?
- 2 What does Mary represent for Christy? Why do you think he becomes attracted to her?
- 3 Mary's reading of Christy's book is what frames the film and gives us the story. How important is this to our understanding of the film?
- 4 At the end of the film, we are not surprised by Mary and Christy's closeness. Why is this, do you think?
- 5 What is the significance of Christy's family leaving at the end of the benefit?



Key Moment

Mary makes a Decision

Watch the film from the point where Eileen wheels Christy into the room to the end where Christy and Mary open champagne. **Duration: 2 mins. 57 secs.**

The treatment of the relationship between Christy and Eileen by the film (particularly by the camera) contrasts greatly with its treatment of the relationship between Mary and Christy. The couple meet in the film's first scene which takes place, outside the narrative of Christy's autobiography (from which the flashbacks are taken), at the fundraising benefit at Lord Castlewelland's home. Mary is Christy's appointed nurse for the day.

It is through Mary, and her reading of the book, that we are introduced to the story of Christy's life. It is therefore through her imagination or interpretation of the events that we receive our information. So, rather than Christy's direct point of view, we are receiving an interpreted, or a translated, version. Mary, then, is with us throughout the film, from the opening scene to the closing shot, even when her character is not part of the narrative (i.e. in the flashback sections). She is therefore of crucial importance to our understanding of the film.

Each time her reading is interrupted we are jolted back into what we can refer to as the present (in the film's time). This is the day of the fundraising benefit, where Mary and Christy sit waiting for the moment of his introduction to the crowd. This device allows us to witness the developing relationship between the two. There are six sections in the present including the opening and closing scenes. She gets to know him through the book and the conversation they share that day. So, even though they have only known each other for what amounts to little more than the duration of the film, we are not surprised to witness their closeness (enjoying a romantic view over Dublin) at the film's conclusion.

The pace at which their relationship is depicted contrasts sharply with that of the relationship between Eileen and Christy. There is a sense of calm, of taking time, of nothing actually happening. This, of course is owing to the fact that Eileen's role in Christy's life stretches over a few years and is condensed, along with the other details of his life, in order to tell the story while Mary has only known Christy for a day. But the marked contrast in pace as well as the relationship between the two female characters and the camera, Eileen is critically observed by it or held at a distance. Mary assumes the position of the camera, looking in on Christy's life), serves to reflect the very different degrees of importance, and the different nature, of each relationship. We see a physical closeness between Eileen and Christy, but we witness a greater closeness between Mary and Christy emerging.

Useful for study of: General Vision & Viewpoint, Social Setting, Cultural context, Themes: disability, gender, class, artistic expression.



Stories take place within particular cultures and social settings. Not all stories are as dependent on these contexts as others – some, such as parables, myths and fairy tales require little or no understanding of the era or place in which they take place. The majority of films, novels, and dramas however, require the audience to understand something about the context of the story. This may be the position of women in a particular society, the circumstances of the ‘average’ citizen, the political situation at the time of writing, the significance of references made in the text, the economic environment in which the characters live and so on. Understanding the context or setting of a work enriches our experience of it. It gives greater depth to the characters, helps us understand their motivations and allows us to more readily, perhaps, forgive their failures.

My Left Foot takes place in a very specific context – Dublin in the 1940s and 1950s. Its specificity serves to give the story authenticity and, consequently, perhaps paradoxically, an understanding of human experience in general.

Explorations for students

- 1 How important is social setting to the story of *My Left Foot*?
- 2 What is the status of (a) women, (b) men in this society? How are they supposed to behave?
- 3 What is the attitude shown by society towards disability in the film?
- 4 How does Irish society of the time view Mrs Brown, Mr Brown and Christy Brown? How do each of the characters respond to these expectations?
- 5 Compare and contrast Eileen Cole's social class with that of the Brown family, referring to key moments.
- 6 What is the relevance of the fund-raising benefit, to which we return repeatedly throughout the film, to our understanding of Christy and his family?

Discussion

My Left Foot is set in a working-class community of small terraced houses in Dublin's inner city. It is a close-knit community whose members gather together in different social groupings: men gather in the pub, women stand on the streets chatting, children play in the street and teenage boys and girls play flirtatious games. Within this community, there is a clear segregation in social activities and functions according to gender. The position of the woman is strongly defined by the home in the traditional roles of mother and housewife, while the man performs a number of roles. He is head of the home and the principle earner outside.

The film displays a certain amount of ambivalence towards this society, emphasising Christy's uncomfortable relationship with it. The locals speak ignorantly of his condition, asking Paddy if he'll put him in a home, or use names like “poor unfortunate gobshite” and “moron” to describe him while in his presence.

The church's influence over the community is apparent – families are very large and when Christy's sister Sheila becomes pregnant, she is rushed into marriage. The church is presented as a fearful, unforgiving institution. A priest tells Christy; “Now son, you know that you can never get out of hell. You can get out of purgatory but you can never get out of hell,” implying that the possession of a pornographic magazine is enough to warrant an eternity of suffering.

The family is at times also depicted unfavourably. The Browns are a poor family who struggle to exist. They have no heat and endure a staple diet of porridge when the father loses his job. They are portrayed as the typical large Irish family living in a tiny two-bedroom house. Some of the more disturbing moments in the film are the thoughtful, quiet ones when Christy lies awake at night in the bedroom full of children, listening to his parents in the next room, or watching his sister as she sleeps. A teenage Christy tries to come to terms with his sexuality in Catholic Ireland, in an overcrowded house devoid of any private space.

Yet there also are many moments of great joy and vitality depicted. Life for the Browns is at times filled with laughter. Examples of this include the uproar following the impressive goal that Christy scores in a football game, the teasing he is given by his brothers after he receives a kiss from Rachel, or when Christy and his brothers steal

the coal. The hot colours and fantastical imagery of Halloween celebrations take on new meaning when encountered directly after a long day of soul-saving prayers at the Church. This scene beautifully expresses the simultaneous feelings of wonder and terror experienced by the child when presented with such things as bonfires and the concept of purgatory.

A contrast to this environment is offered by Eileen's introduction to Christy's life. She is the first educated, working woman we encounter. She speaks differently to the other characters in the film and engages with Christy in an intellectual way. She represents a middle-class, culture within which Christy's interest in art and literature is celebrated. There are three scenes in the film that clearly illustrate this: (i) the exhibition of Christy's work (ii) the fund-raising benefit (iii) the dinner afterwards. Christy's attitude towards this society is, however, suspicious and this is revealed by the unsympathetic depiction of characters and the distance maintained by the camera during these scenes.

The fund-raising benefit, to which we return on a number of occasions in the film, provides the sharpest contrast with the inner-city community. (See Sample Key Moment Analysis, Appendix II).

The Browns are shown to be uncomfortable and embarrassed in this setting, yet the mother's pride in her son is apparent. Earlier we had seen Paddy Brown's discomfort at the gallery, barely listening to Peter praising his son's talent. He declines the dinner invitation that follows on the basis that the restaurant probably won't serve pints of stout. The gallery too, which is large, white and somewhat sterile, is in sharp contrast with the clutter and dark tones of the Brown's home. The dinner afterwards is an awkward, stifled affair in which Christy dominates the conversation while the others look on disapprovingly. Christy makes his opinion of Eileen's friends clear, when he threatens to kick one of her dinner guests "in the only part of [his] anatomy that's animated." Adopting Christy's point of view, the camera swings around to reveal the other guests around the table and the diners seated behind them: all dull-looking characters, who stare silently at the cause of the commotion.

In both worlds, Christy's disability is regarded differently. At home, his father would not accept him until he proved that he was able to write, causing him to shout out 'He's a Brown'. The children did their utmost to include Christy in their games while at the same time the teenage girls find him an embarrassment as they grow older. For Dr Cole, Christy becomes her project and it is in this way that he is introduced into her world. When it comes

to the exhibition and the award ceremony, the people of this class regard him with admiration but at the same time they keep their distance from him, not quite knowing how to behave. We see this also in the guests at the dinner party when he starts to shout and in the initial unease shown by Lord Castlewelland.

Each of the cultural spheres identified by the film are both embraced and criticised. Christy needs to negotiate a position that allows a movement between the two. He appears to find this in the closing scene of the film, overlooking Dublin, sipping champagne with Mary and listing the great Irish writers to whom he aspires.

Key Moments

I Opening scene: *The Fund-raising Benefit* (See Appendix II for detailed analysis)

Watch the film from the moment at which the film's title appears on screen up until the shot of Eileen Cole smiling at the benefit audience.

Duration: 3 mins 25 secs. approx.

II *Stealing Coal*

Watch the film from the moment when Christy watches the coal being delivered to the point where the money is found up the chimney.

Duration: 3mins. 53 secs. approx.

III *Christy's exhibition and celebration dinner*

Watch the film from the beginning of the art exhibition to the dinner afterwards. **Duration: 6 mins 10 secs approx.**



APPENDIX I SEQUENCES FOR STUDY

1 *The Present*

- Cars come to collect Christy and his family at home and bring them to Lord Castlewelland's house.
- Christy is introduced to Mary who brings him into the library.

2 *First flashback: Christy as a child*

- Opens in hospital ward. Paddy Brown gets news of Christy's birth at the hospital and goes to the pub.
- Christy at home - the family leaves for the day but he stays with his mother. She carries him upstairs and subsequently collapses.
- Christy alerts the neighbours.
- A neighbour reads the alphabet to Christy.
- The new baby is in the kitchen. The other children are seen doing homework. Christy is seen writing on the ground with chalk held by his foot.
- Christy plays on the street with the other children. They hide a 'girlie' magazine in his cart which his mother finds.
- The priest talks to Christy about hell.
- Christy and his mother visit a church. On the way home they get caught up in Halloween celebrations.
- Christy writes 'Mother' on the floor and is taken by his father to the pub in celebration.

Library: Dr Cole comes in. The nurse Mary is reading while Christy sleeps.

3 *Second flashback: Christy as an adolescent*

- Christy celebrates his 17th birthday.
- Christy is playing football on the street.
- He plays 'spin the bottle' with other friends and gets a kiss from Rachel.
- Christy is shown as someone who cannot express himself the same ways as others – he paints to express himself while his brothers sleep and his sister comes home from a date.
- Paddy Brown loses his job after hitting the foreman.
- Rachel turns down Christy's affections.
- The family eat cold porridge as a result of Paddy's unemployment. There is much tension in the home. Paddy cannot understand Christy's jokes and is provoked while the others laugh.
- Christy and his brothers steal coal. Their mother gives out to them.
- The money box is discovered hidden up the chimney.
- Christy's sister announces she is pregnant. When the father insults her, Christy reacts furiously.

Library: Christy is talking with Mary and drinks whiskey.

4 *Christy meets Eileen*

- Christy meets Dr Eileen Cole.
- He is taken to the clinic. His mother is concerned that he will be disappointed.

5 *Christy develops a relationship with Eileen*

- Christy rejects the clinic and stays at home. Eileen calls to persuade him and gives him a copy of *Hamlet*.
- Christy starts working with her at home and slowly falls in love with her.
- Eileen organises an exhibition of his paintings at her boyfriend Peter's gallery. Christy's mother realises what is happening to Christy and expresses her concern to Paddy.
- At dinner following the opening, Christy gets very drunk and causes a scene after expressing his love for Eileen.
- Christy feels despair. He observes his parents' affection and attempts to cut himself.

Library: Mary and Christy talk about the book

6 *Christy's room*

- Christy's mother begins to build a room for him, which is subsequently completed by his father and brothers.
- Soon after, Paddy is found dead by Christy and his mother.
- The wake in the pub leads to a fistfight. Christy stands up for his father.
- Christy asks his brother to help him write his own story.

Library: Mary still reading

7 *Christy realises his independence*

- Christy gives his mother £800.
- Christy is seen typing his story with his foot. Dr Cole appears and asks him to participate in a benefit.
- Library – Mary finishes reading. Christy asks her to stay with him.
- Mary makes a choice. Christy and she drive up to Killiney Head. Subtitles inform us that they get married in 1972.

APPENDIX II

ANALYSING A KEY MOMENT

In many of the previous sections we have identified a 'key moment' when discussing characters, relationships, the world of the film and particular themes. Referring to a specific or key moment when discussing film is like using a quotation or reference when discussing a play, poem, or novel – it supports and demonstrates a particular line of argument. Teachers may wish to consider the following approach to analysing a key moment:

- Shot Breakdown
- Questions
- Analysis

1 Shot Breakdown – Observation

A shot-by-shot breakdown of an individual scene (key moment) is a useful method with which to begin analysing. It focuses the viewer's attention on many of the details in a shot which are generally taken for granted, and permits future detailed responses which relate directly to the 'text' of the film.

This 'close reading' approach can be as general or as detailed in scope as the teacher wishes. It might include some or all of the following stages:

- Oral/ written summary of scene
- Counting the number of shots which make up a scene
- Listing in detail the content of each shot

When doing **c** above, students should follow an agreed format like the one used below: shot number, indication of interior (int.) or exterior (ext.) location, followed by a description of what is seen on screen *and* heard on the soundtrack.

It is important to remember that the goal of this exercise is **observation**, not analysis.

2 Questions

Every scene is of significance to our understanding of the narrative. Dialogue and action are presented to us in order to tell us more about the characters and to drive the narrative forward. In examining individual moments we need therefore to ask several questions of each. These include:

- How many shots did you count in the sequence?
- What actions or dialogue take place?
- What is the purpose of this scene? How does it contribute to the development of the narrative?
- What do we know at the end of it that we didn't know at the beginning?
- In an opening scene, what do we learn about the characters and the world in which the film is set?
- What does a scene tell us about the film's principal characters? Has our understanding or feelings about these characters changed? Why?
- How do the actors' performances contribute to our response to these characters?
- What elements of film style, (lighting, colour, mise-en-scène, camera, music etc.) does the director use? How and why are they used?

- In the context of the Leaving Cert. English syllabus, how can this scene be considered under one or more of the prescribed comparative headings?

3 Analysis

Use the information obtained in the shot breakdown and your responses to these questions to write an analysis of the sequence.

SAMPLE KEY MOMENT ANALYSIS

Opening Scene (see pg.11)

1 Shot Breakdown – Observation

- Exterior. Two big white cars drive past Trinity College in Dublin's city centre. There is a group of young trees on the left of the frame. Opera music plays on the soundtrack.
- Interior. A foot taps out the beat to the Italian opera music that can be heard on the soundtrack.
- Exterior. The cars drive under the arch of Christchurch cathedral. Two other cars, much darker in colour, pass them by.
- Exterior. A shot of Dublin's Four Courts from a bridge on the river Liffey. A very orderly row of trees lines the river.
- Interior. The foot continues to move in time with the music.
- Exterior. The cars turn onto a narrow, smaller street than the others they had been driving down. Two men, standing with a horse and cart, turn to look at the cars and continue to stare at them as they pass by.
- Interior. A close-up shot of a woman (Mrs. Brown) looking into a mirror and fixing a hat onto her head.
- Exterior. The cars pull into a little street of terraced houses. Children playing on the street follow the cars with their eyes. The camera rests on a house on a corner with a black door. The cars drive slowly past and out of the frame.
- Interior. A young woman sits in front of a mirror dressing the hair of a young girl who smiles, while another young girl looks past them and into the same mirror, fixing her own hair.
- Exterior. Two young men, dressed in formal evening wear, stand in the doorway of the corner house talking to two uniformed chauffeurs.
- Exterior. Children run to the corner to witness the occasion. A man in a wheelchair (Christy) is pushed by the woman we saw in shot seven and towards the cars. The children smile and shout excitedly at them.
- Exterior. The young girl from shot nine sticks her head out of the upstairs window to look at the scene below. A voice from within tells her to "get away from the window."
- Exterior. We look into a car filled with people and see the man in the wheelchair sitting in the back seat. They wave to the people standing on the street who wave back at them as they drive off. A middle-aged woman stands in a doorway with a young boy in her arms. A young girl with a red ribbon in her hair sits on the window ledge of the same house.

- 14** Exterior. A long-shot shows us a huge white house with what could be either a small lake or outdoor swimming pool on the grounds surrounded by neatly trimmed green lawn. There is a bench by the water.
- 15** Exterior. The cars drive up the leafy entrance to the grounds. To the right of the frame, beside the house, we can just make out some sort of climbing frame with children on it.
- 16** Exterior. A close-up shot of an elderly man, very well dressed in a red bow tie and purple neck scarf. He sits on a bench with a group of children watching a Punch and Judy puppet show. A household employee tells him something. He rises from the bench and walks out of frame.
- 17** Exterior. The opera music ends. The man from the previous shot re-enters the frame from the right and walks in front of, and away from, the camera to greet the two white cars that have just arrived. He opens one of the car doors.
- 18** Interior. The group enters the house staring at the luxurious surroundings. The elderly man turns to the man in the wheelchair and says: "Well you're very welcome Christy, very welcome," to which Christy responds "to your humble abode." As the others continue to stare at the grandeur of the interior, Christy looks up at the staircase ahead of him.
- 19** Interior. We see Christy's point of view. A woman dressed in a nurse's uniform descends the stairs.
- 20** Interior. A close-up of Christy looking carefully at the woman.
- 21** Interior. Christy's point of view. She has reached the bottom of the stairs. She introduces herself to Christy as Mary and tells the others that she is taking him into the library.
- 22** Interior. One of the men in the group (Christy's brother Tom) tells Mary to "be careful of that fella." Christy tells him to shut his mouth and Mary responds that she'll be okay. The man walks away with the rest of the group, saying: "I wouldn't be too sure about that."
- 23** Interior. A woman in a long evening dress stands on the stairs with huge stained glass windows in the background.
- 24** Interior. Mary wheels Christy into the library.
- 25** Interior. Christy's point of view as he is wheeled. The camera swings around quickly and takes in details of the room: paintings with ornate frames, books, period furniture and three long windows.
- 26** Interior. Close-up of Christy's face.
- 27** Interior. We see a long white room filled with light and people dressed in formal evening wear, seated and facing the top of the room. White flowers and life-sized statues decorate the space. We hear the elderly man's voice as he greets the guests and introduces Dr. Eileen Cole.
- 28** Interior. Man introducing Eileen.
- 29** Interior. Close-up of Eileen's face. We realise that she is the woman from shot 23.

2 Questions (see page 13)

3 Analysis

This is a scene full of contrasts presenting us with two very different worlds divided by economic situation. It opens with images of two stately white cars driving through some of the more impressive parts of Dublin city. The imposing buildings and streets depicted imply wealth and excess. The cars fit in perfectly with the setting. However when they enter the narrow streets of small houses in the Brown's community, they suddenly seem huge and out of place. Their strangeness is pointed to by the reaction of the two men, standing with the horse and cart, on seeing the cars. The juxtaposition of the two modes of transport further emphasises their strangeness to this environment.

The difference between these two social settings is strongly marked by the two homes introduced in this scene. Our first impressions of the Brown household are created by close-up shots of women, preparing themselves for the occasion. When the cars arrive on the street we see the exterior of the house: a small, grey, two-storey house with two windows in the front and a black wooden door. All of the shots of the house, both interior and exterior, are very close and tightly frame the subjects, effectively inviting us into this world but also indicating a small, cluttered and enclosed space. The scale, dark colours and lack of garden are all thrown into sharp contrast when we arrive at Lord Castlewelland's home. Both the grounds and the house itself are expansive and bright, and our first images of them are dominated by fresh white and green colours. As with the Brown's home, the description of the place is aided by the use of certain technical devices; the sense of space is intensified by the use of long and medium shots to include a great amount of detail. The interior is equally spacious and filled with extravagant objects and furnishings, such as stained glass windows and life-sized statues. The economic inequality between the two settings is blatant.

An interesting contrast between the two places is provided by their positioning and treatment of children. In the Brown's neighbourhood, children make noise and play on the streets in quite an uncontrolled way. They casually mix with the adults and their presence is very much seen and heard. A rather different picture is offered at Lord Castlewelland's home and this is revealed in shot fifteen where a group of children can just about be seen playing on a large climbing frame. They are separated from the adults and their recreation is organised and controlled. By offering us a glimpse of them to one side of the frame, the film comments on their position within this society; they are not central to life here but are designated a very definite place in which they should be silent and unobtrusive. This attitude is repeated moments later in the next shot of Lord Castlewelland among a group of children who sit in well ordered rows, watching Punch and Judy, echoing the orderly rows of trees in the opening shots of the two cars driving through Dublin.

Back inside, both worlds come together with the arrival of the Brown family at the house. We observe the family's awkwardness in the sumptuous surroundings and yet the mother's pride in Christy is apparent. Christy, in contrast, seems at ease in the environment and in the library where he waits with Mary. Surrounded by books, he gives Mary a copy of his own book, symbolic of how his talents have facilitated his acceptance into this world.

APPENDIX III

SPEECH FROM HAMLET AND THE MYTH OF OEDIPUS

HAMLET Act 3 Scene 1

Hamlet

To be, or not to be - that is the question;
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep-
No more - and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep -
To sleep - perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub.
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death, -
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action. Soft you now,
The fair Ophelia. - Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered.

Hamlet, by William Shakespeare
New Penguin Shakespeare
Penguin, London, 1996 p124 -125

The Oedipus Myth

Oedipus, in Greek mythology, king of Thebes, the son of Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes.

The Prophecy

Laius was warned by an oracle that he would be killed by his own son. Determined to avert his fate, he bound together the feet of his newborn child and left him to die on a lonely mountain. The infant was rescued by a shepherd, however, and given to Polybus, king of Corinth. He named the child Oedipus ("Swollen-foot") and raised him as his own son. The boy did not know that he was adopted, and when an oracle proclaimed that he would kill his father, he left Corinth. In the course of his wanderings he met and killed Laius, believing that the king and

his followers were a band of robbers, and thus unwittingly fulfilled the prophecy.

Oedipus the new king

Lonely and homeless, Oedipus arrived at Thebes, which was beset by a dreadful monster called the Sphinx. The frightful creature frequented the roads to the city, killing and devouring all travellers who could not answer the riddle that she put to them. When Oedipus successfully solved her riddle, the Sphinx killed herself. Believing that King Laius had been slain by unknown robbers, and grateful to Oedipus for ridding them of the Sphinx, the Thebans rewarded Oedipus by making him their king and giving him Queen Jocasta as his wife. For many years the couple lived in happiness, not knowing that they were really mother and son.

Tragic Hero

Then a terrible plague descended on the land, and the oracle proclaimed that Laius's murderer must be punished. Oedipus soon discovered that he had unknowingly killed his father. In grief and despair at her incestuous life, Jocasta killed herself, and when Oedipus realised that she was dead and that their children were accursed, he put out his eyes and resigned the throne. He lived in Thebes for several years, but was finally banished. Accompanied by his daughter Antigone, he wandered for many years. He finally arrived at Colonus, a shrine near Athens sacred to the powerful goddesses called the Eumenides. At this shrine for supplicants Oedipus died, after the god Apollo had promised him that the place of his death would remain sacred and would bring great benefit to the city of Athens, which had given shelter to the wanderer.

The Influence of the Myth



This myth has been the inspiration behind many works of literature down through the ages, the earliest being the tragedies of Greek dramatist Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. The story of a young man who is simultaneously close to his mother while having an ambivalent relationship with his father has been taken up by many writers in

a wide variety of contexts. The universality of the theme has been explained by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud as being as a result of the infant boy's desire to assume the role of the father – head of the household and, by implication, society. As part of this drive, the impulse towards power and control, the infant also wishes to possess the mother, partner to the father. Freud named this stage of development – which occurs between the ages of 4 and 6 – the 'Oedipus Complex.' Although Freud's theories have, in recent years, been called into question by many critics, the 'Oedipal dilemma' is nonetheless a theme found across a range of literature and cultures.

Useful for background information to study of: Hero, Cultural Context, Social Setting, Themes: Family, Gender, Love.



APPENDIX IV INTERVIEWS

Suggested Use: Photocopy for students and discuss in relation to key moments. (see pp 5, 6, 10-11)

1 Brenda Fricker (Christy's Mother)

fii Can you tell me how you got the part of Christy's mother?

B Jim Sheridan just phoned me up and said he was sending me a script and I read it. I didn't think I'd be able to do it because it clashed with *Casualty* (Brenda Fricker was playing Megan in the TV series *Casualty*) but they arranged very kindly that I could do both.

fii What particularly attracted you to this role?

B Well, all the obvious things: it's a true story, the Christy Brown story should be told. It was the first film for many of us so it was exciting, in that sense. Noone was out to make a great movie or to go to Hollywood. We were just out to tell a good story and get a good group of people together and do it. It was a lovely part.

fii We have read a lot about Daniel Day Lewis going into character to prepare for his role. Did you do a lot of research for it?

B No I didn't. My argument always is that if the part is really well written, you don't really need to do a lot of research. After all I was playing an Irish mother, there isn't that much research for us to do, whereas Daniel's was much different. It had to come from a much deeper place.

fii What do you think of this film being prescribed for students of the Leaving Cert?

B I was delighted to hear about it on several levels. I didn't realise the Christy Brown story would be put on the curriculum for students. It was the beginning of the film industry in Ireland again. When we were out in Ardmore, there was nobody there and now there are several films being made. It's nice that that got it off the ground. It's nice for students to know that, a small little film started a good business in the country.

fii Students studying *My Left Foot* are asked to consider representation of characters as heroes. Do you think Christy's mother would fall into that category?

B Oh, very much so. There was a lovely moment where I am very pregnant with the next child and I'm carrying Christy

up the stairs to put him to bed. I remember I was panting and puffing going up the stairs, we kept doing it again and again. And Hugh O Conor, although he looks like a bird, he weighs a ton. Jim Sheridan came over and said: 'Look', he said 'the mother loves this son so much that she would never let him know that it was tiring or heavy for her to bring him up the stairs. So when you say at the top of the stairs, 'we're nearly there Christy', stop panting. Just say the line quietly so that you wouldn't disturb him'. That was the best note ever. I've no children so I wouldn't know about that kind of love but that was a key for me. So, yes, she gave birth 22 times and 13 survived on no money, no mod cons, nothing. I met some of her daughters who are still alive and they said 'that's what she was just like, one of those heroines. They are few and far between today.

fii The church has quite a strong influence on her.

B Yes, well in those days, I think it did on most people. I think also there was a genuine relationship between her and the husband. I mean difficult as it was, they did seem to get on very well.

fii There is that one brief moment of affection between them, when they are out on the street?

B On the bicycles? Yes, we just did that as an impromptu thing one day. I think its lovely.

fii Students are asked to consider the world of the film, the social context within which the story is told. How do you think its portrayed?

B We did talk a lot about that. We just went literally by his book and also talking to people of that generation. I think he could have made it even more poor looking, you know, because they were very, very poor. You know, with that number of children.

fii What do you think about the representation of disability in the film?

B I can't really answer that except for myself. Like everything you learn, your own ignorance is corrected, or your own fears are calmed down a bit.

fii The fact that Christy's mother believed in him, in spite of having absolutely no help from the state, it was all entirely her own motivation, wasn't it?

B Yes, I think that's very important. Daniel and myself made an unspoken pact before we started filming (I think Jim was in on it as well) that the mother and son would have absolutely no sentimentality, no hugging, no little soft looks to each other because the love was just too strong, it was much deeper than that. The only time I touched him was to help him on with some of his clothes, when it was physically necessary to touch him. And I think that proved very strong. Particularly when he hands me the box of money. Somebody suggested I hug him or he hug me and Daniel and I just shrank back and said 'No the love is deeper, it doesn't need that'. I think that worked very much in the film.

fii My final question, one that everyone will want to know: where do you keep the Oscar? (*Brenda Fricker won Best Supporting Actress in 1989 for her performance as Christy's Mother*)

B: At this moment in time its down in Oughterard, carefully snuggled up in a linen cupboard belonging to a friend of mine. He went into hibernation for the winter.

fii How did you feel when you were accepting it?

B Ah yes, its your fifteen minutes in the spotlight, its great.

fii Any comment for the students who will watch your film?

B I'm delighted they're doing the film. I'm glad they like it, that's even more important



Brenda Fricker. Born in Dublin, before *My Left Foot* she was best known as Megan Roach in the hospital drama, *Casualty*. She has been in several films, including *The Field*, *Home Alone 2*, *A Time to Kill*. Recently she starred in the RTÉ drama *No Tears*. Although much of her work is outside of Ireland, she loves returning to her house in Dublin.

Explorations for students

- 1 What was the main motivation for Brenda Frickers' moving and powerful portrayal of Christy's Mother?
- 2 How does she suggest she conveyed the strength of love she felt for him?
- 3 How would you describe the love they felt for each other?
- 4 What do you think of her performance? Do you think she should have shown more emotion?
- 5 Do you know any other roles that she has played? Are there similarities with this role? Are there differences? Compare these roles. What can you conclude about your findings?

Useful for background information to study of: Hero, Cultural Context, Social Setting, Themes: Family, Gender, Love.

2 Hugh O'Conor (young Christy)

Suggested Use: Photocopy for students and discuss in relation to key moments. (see pp 4-7, 10)

- fii You were 13 when you made *My Left Foot*. Can you tell me something about getting the part of Christy?
- H **Jim (Sheridan) and Noel (Pearson) had seen this film, *Da*, in New York so I think that's why they asked me to audition. Young Christy was a great part. There was nothing really like it before or since.**
- fii *My Left Foot* is now on the Leaving Cert, along with with five other films. The students are asked to compare any one of the films with two other texts. What do you think about the choice of *My Left Foot* for teenage students?
- H **Well I think its great that its on. It's a good example of an Irish film. Personally I would question some of the other films... Its (*My Left Foot*) about disability and achievement, its an interesting subject.**
- fii One of the things students are asked to do is refer to on key moments. Everyone would recognise that you are in two of the most memorable scenes: when Brenda carries Christy upstairs and when he writes 'Mother' on the ground. Do you remember a lot about making those scenes?
- H **I do, very well. It was great, we were in Ardmore the whole time doing those scenes. It was often late at night and we'd been going all day. They were very memorable scenes and they stick in my mind.**
- fii You know the part where you have to push yourself down the stairs. Was that very hard work?
- H **It was interesting to learn about it. I can't remember his name but there was a guy who helped us in rehearsals a lot. He had no arms and when he was young he used to climb down the stairs that way.**



Hugh O'Conor. Born in Dublin. He has been in several films including *The Boy from Mercury*, *The Poisoner's Handbook* and *Chocolat*. He currently lives in London.

He used to drag himself down by his feet. That was one of the things that I took from that. Anyway, we decided that would be the way he'd (Christy) pull himself down like that. Daniel actually used that later on because we tried to match certain things like our facial movements. So there was a lot of help. Gene Lambert was the technical advisor who was with me for all my stuff and he was brilliant.

- fii What was it like working with people like Brenda Fricker and Daniel Day Lewis?
- H **Well, they were great. I did most of my scenes with Ray (McAnally) and Brenda. I'd obviously no scenes with Daniel. We were rehearsing for a bit beforehand so it was just brilliant. Brenda was great. We met early on and I remember her sending me postcards when she was away. She really got into us getting to know each other well so that when we were on screen, it was more like a relationship that we had. And Ray McAnally was amazing, it was just a great cast. But again we weren't thinking it was going to be a huge movie.**
- fii Has it influenced the roles you have chosen subsequently?
- H **I've got most of my parts from that film, its something that they come back to and really look at. Influence? Well, you just want to keep up the standard.**
- fii What kind of advice would you give to young actors?
- H **I guess that anything is possible, but really just believe in yourself and have other interests apart from just acting. If you are interested in writing for example, because acting isn't going to be your life the whole time. It's been great for me because film is my great passion. I was an assistant director last year. It's just expanding your interests in the camera and storytelling. This also helps when you are acting again or directing because you've got more interests. Keep a wide range of interests and not get downhearted with rejections because everybody gets them.**
- fii Have you got something else lined up?
- H **There's a couple of things maybe happening. I'm not sure about it. This is obviously a good thing to have done for the future but I'm still interested in writing and directing maybe another short film. I've done one already so I'd love to go back to that.**
- fii The interview will go into the study guide which will go to schools around the country.
- H **That's hilarious, after all those years I toiled in school!!!!**

Explorations for students

- 1 What do you think Hugh O'Conor brings to the role of young Christy?
- 2 From what he says, what aspects of this role were most difficult?
- 3 Do you agree with his interpretation of the film, that it is about achievement? How would you describe young Christy?
- 4 In the course of the film, how does young Christy have to change in order to fully realise himself as an artist?
- 5 Do you think young Christy's life would be any different today? How?

Useful for study of: Social setting/Cultural context, hero, genre. Themes: disability, survival, gender.



3 Noel Pearson (producer)

- fii** Why do you think *My Left Foot* was the Irish film chosen for the Leaving Certificate?
- N** I suppose because it's the best Irish film. It still has an impact because it's a story about human endeavour, of triumph. It's a story of Christy not alone beating the physical difficulties but where he came from - working class, thirteen children – there were actually 17 children – and going on to write books and poetry. Just surviving in life as normally as he possibly could. At that time they put these kids into homes. The absolute caring that the family, in particular his mother, but also his brothers and sisters gave him, its astonishing. People relate to that. Not only here, but all over the world.
- fii** Students who see the film today, though they mightn't be familiar with the story, they like the character. Why did you choose to get involved with him?
- N** I tried to make that film twenty years before, though I knew nothing about films. I made it because he was a terrific guy and I knew him really well. I just made it for him, for myself and everyone else but we never dreamt it was going to do anything like it did. Such a small story from such a small section of a small city.
- fii** Did any of his family members see the film?
- N** They were all in it, never mind see it! A lot of them were extras and saw it several times. They loved it.
- fii** How important was the film for Irish cinema?
- N** It changed the whole thing. After that we could make films about ourselves. It destroyed all the perceptions of Hollywood that we were making 'oirish' fillums. And it brought an enormous amount of work as other companies came and made films.
- fii** What about the difficulties in raising the finance?
- N** Everybody thought I should be locked up. A lot of them didn't know who Christy Brown was. People I'd known in business and RTÉ put up some money. Then Granada put up a lot of the money. 50% of the money came from here.
- fii** In terms of actually making the film, other cast members have spoken of their excitement. What do you recall?
- N** Sure noone knew anything about making films. I'd never produced, Jim Sheridan had never directed a film, Frank Conway had never lit a film on his own. Joan Bergin had never designed costumes for a film. But that's what



Noel Pearson. Born in Dublin, Noel Pearson has produced several films including *The Field*, *Dancing at Lughnasa* and directed several plays. One of his most famous productions was *Dancing at Lughnasa* which he brought to Broadway where it won several awards. He lives in Dublin.

made it exciting, we were whistling in the dark. It was the energy and optimism that got everybody through.

- fii** What was it like working with people like Daniel Day Lewis, Ray McAnally and Brenda Fricker?
- N** Well I never knew Daniel Day Lewis before the film but I knew Ray McAnally and Brenda Fricker. We shot that film in 6 weeks and there wasn't a moment's hiccup. Strangely enough it only cost a million and a half and we came in a hundred grand under budget. Extraordinary, because we were innocent. There were no cars, trailers. Everybody shared a trailer. That art gallery scene, that was in my house, there were the cottages in Bray, a lot was shot in Ardmore studios....
- fii** The film was obviously hugely successful for both you and Jim Sheridan (director). Did it have much influence on the projects you worked on subsequently?
- N** Not really, it was ten years ago now. I did *The Field* after that. I'm doing a film on a fictional pope who wants Johann Sebastian Bach canonised. I'm doing a film about Phil Lynnot and his mother – as much about his mother as him, The film business is very much from one film to the next.
- fii** Would you regard the film very fondly?
- N** Yes, it was a great time. It was a great laugh through the production though it was very nervy for me – I didn't have the money when we started. We were shooting for two weeks before we got the balance. But I couldn't stop because we only had seven weeks with Daniel Day Lewis. He was going off to the Argentine to make a film. We took a chance and said we'd go for it and it worked. It could've gone the other way as well but it didn't.

- fii Any advice for students who might consider working in the industry?
- N **They should just go into the bank or insurance or the civil service and get a good steady job. Get that nonsense out of their heads!**
- fii Do you think it's got harder?
- N **Very hard. Its not easy for us any more making films. When you are an independent company, every film is a battle and it's not just here. You know making difficult films like the Phil Lynott film, it's a battle every time. If you want to go to Hollywood and work for a studio, that's a different thing altogether. But we just keep doing it. Because we are masochists!**
- fii But for someone who had the perseverance and drive, could they still do it?
- N **Its very hard. They should go and learn a bit about the theatre first, see how it works. I know it's a contradiction in terms – it's different but some of the basic rules are the same. John Huston used to say all you needed was the script. That was half of the battle, the cast was the other half. The director just kept the cattle on the road and stopped them from going into the ditch. The scripts are everything and that takes sometimes 2 years to develop. And it eats up a lot of money and patience. Oh, I sound like a martyr here. There's no courses for producers, producers are made. It's a lot about instinct. That's why you can get it so right and so wrong.**
- fii Would you prefer theatre or film?
- N **At the moment I prefer film – because that's what I'm working on!**

Explorations for students

- 1 According to Noel Pearson, what is the film about?
- 2 Does this relate to his motivation for making the film?
- 3 How does he describe the experience of producing this and working in the industry in general?
- 4 Can you suggest any similarities between this and the other films that he talks about?
- 5 What impression do his comments and those of Brenda Fricker and Hugh O'Conor give you about the experience of making *My Left Foot*? Does this come across in the film itself?
- 6 From these interviews, do you think *My Left Foot* is a good Irish film to include in the Leaving Certificate?

APPENDIX V

MODELS OF COMPARATIVE STUDY

TITLE	THEME	LITERARY GENRE/ NARRATIVE	CULTURAL CONTEXT	GENERAL VISION / VIEWPOINT	HISTORICAL/ LITERARY PERIOD	RELATIONSHIPS
<i>My Left Foot</i>	Growing up & realising self-expression	FILM	Social Class: rich and poor Women's role	Christy's story: optimism/ Disadvantage	Ireland in 40s & 50s	Christy's relationship with his mother/father with women, with society
<i>Cat's Eye</i>	Growing up in Toronto	NOVEL	Middle class & materialism	Artist's view of life	Canada in 50s – 80s	Friendship
<i>Wheels within Wheels</i>	The journey towards a sense of identity	NOVEL	Women's role within a family	A daughter's point of view	Ireland in the 50s	Relationship between mother/daughter
<i>The Land of Spices</i>	Journey to insight	NOVEL	Hierarchy of parent/child	Life of religious/nationalist	Ireland before Independence	Helen/Anna's friendship
<i>Reading in the Dark</i>	Growing up in Northern Ireland	NOVEL	A world influenced by the past	Child narrator's recollection of the past	Ireland in 40s and 50s	Family
<i>How Many Miles to Babylon?</i>	Loss of Innocence	NOVEL	Class difference and war	Survival and resignation	Ireland in 30s, Europe at War	Family Friendship
<i>Death of a Salesman</i>	Love, loyalty: private and corporate	PLAY	The American Dream; the myth of success	Everyman figure destroyed by system	1940s USA	Husband/wife/son
<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	Love, marriage, loyalty,	NOVEL	Social class; woman's role outside society.	Servant's view of world. doomed life.	19th c. England	Cathy/Heathcliff/ Earnshaw/ young Cathy;
<i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i>	Love, marriage	NOVEL	Influence of fate; rural/urban living; class.	Learning from mistakes	19th c. rural Wessex	Bathsheba & Gabriel/Troy/ Boldwood
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	Social class, love & marriage	NOVEL	Class; women.	Elizabeth's story as single woman in 19th c. society.	19th c. southern England; novels of Jane Austen	Elizabeth and Mr Darcy
<i>Remains of the Day</i>	Love, loyalty, duty	NOVEL	Class; Declining aristocracy; servants' lives in 20th c. England	Life in service.	England during war and post-war	Mr Stevens & Miss Kenton
<i>An Evil Cradling</i>	Loyalty, friendship Survival	AUTOBIOGRAPHY	Middle East conflict Cultural differences	Living in captivity; Struggle for survival.	1980s Lebanon.	Brian Keenan/ John McCarthy Kidnappers & kidnapped
<i>Amongst Women</i>	Friendship, Love	NOVEL	Patriarchal society Women's role	Life in rural Ireland for women.	Ireland in the 1950s	Husband/ wife/friend

APPENDIX VI

COMPARATIVE STUDY QUESTIONS

CHRISTY BROWN; HERO

1 Hero: Christy Brown is the central character in *My Left Foot*. Despite being an unconventional hero, he displays heroic qualities throughout the film. Describe how Christy's heroism is illustrated in two key moments from the film.

2 Theme: Change

Christy changes from a situation of isolation to one of artistic self-expression and independence. How is this theme explored in *My Left Foot* and one other text? Refer to key moments from each text to support your answer.

3 General Vision and Viewpoint

My Left Foot is a story told in flashback from Christy's point of view. Choose another text from your course. Using key moments from both texts, compare and contrast the way each story is told. What kind of vision is offered by each specific form of narration?

4 Literary Genre

Compare the autobiographical genre of the film with the genre of a novel you have studied. How do each tell their stories? Comment on the devices used in the film and novel to convey atmosphere, tension, point-of-view.

CHRISTY'S RELATIONSHIPS

MOTHER AND FATHER

1 Relationships

Compare the mother and son or father and son relationship from one other text with that of *My Left Foot*. In your answer, consider the following:

- How important is the role of the mother/ father to the narrative?
- Is the parent sympathetically or unsympathetically portrayed?
- Comment on the relationship between mother or father and the child.

2 Cultural context

In *My Left Foot*, how much do you think the behaviour of the parent towards the family and central character is influenced by the society of the time? Consider either parent and their role in society in relation to (i) their family (ii) the society in general.

3 Theme: Love

Compare the treatment of parental love in the film and a novel you have studied. Consider both the child's and the parent's experience

CHRISTY'S RELATIONSHIPS

EILEEN AND MARY

1 Relationships

We know from the end of the film that Christy and Mary married. He has reached a stage of self-expression and independence in his life. Compare their relationship with that of another relationship in any of the texts you have studied.

2 Theme: Women

How are the women in the film portrayed? Choose 2 of the female characters and discuss their portraits in detail. Comment on their position in society and their relationships with other people.

3 Genre

The story is told to us through Mary's interpretation of Christy's story. As she progresses through the book given to her at the beginning, so does the story unfold for us, the viewer. Comment on this method of narration. How does it influence the story and our understanding of it?

THE WORLD OF THE FILM

1 Social setting/cultural context

Choose any other text from your course which is set in the same era as *My Left Foot*. Compare and contrast the settings or context of both texts under the following headings: location, social class, the church/religious belief, the role and status of men/women/children, the family, relationships.

2 Theme: Disability

Christy was born with cerebral palsy. How is his disability viewed by (i) his family (ii) society? Choose 2 key moments from the film to illustrate the attitudes shown towards him by individuals and society. How do these attitudes change during the film?

3 Theme: Gender

In the society of *My Left Foot*, men and women have clearly defined roles. How are the male and female characters expected to behave and why? Describe how society affects characters' behaviour in one other text from your course. Refer to two key moments from each text in your answer.

APPENDIX VII
CREDITS

Daniel DAY-LEWIS

Ray McANALLY

Brenda FRICKER

Fiona SHAW

Hugh O'Conor

Cyril CUSACK

Adrian DUNBAR

Kirsten SHERIDAN

Tom HICKEY

Ulick O'CONNOR

Jim SHERIDAN

Noel PEARSON

Christy BROWN

Jim SHERIDAN &
Shane CONNAUGHTON

Elmer BERNSTEIN

Running Time

Christy Brown

Mr. Brown

Mrs. Brown

Dr. Eileen Cole

young Christy

Lord Castlewelland

Peter

younger Sharon

priest

critic

Director

Producer

Original Book

Script

Music Composed
and Conducted

103 mins

