Each Reaney play is located in an imagined mental landscape, conceived in moral terms, into which eternity is forcing its way with the purpose of revealing infernal power as finally impotent in terms of higher reality, and by this revelation inducing a purgatorial ascent, Reaneyland is not the real world and it is not heaven; it is that condition in which an awareness of heaven makes possible the beginnings of the reconstruction of the so-called real world.

- Alvin Lee
Reaney is considered to be a Frygian scholar who believed that the basic material of all literature is language. Reaney’s poems and plays are an expression of his conviction that Ontario, his home place, is “not just a heap of topsoil, parking lots, mineshafts and stumps, but a sacred place” (qtd. in Atwood 15). Dragland maintains in his article “Afterword: Reaney’s Relevance”, that “Reaney is a teacher of citizenship in Canada and in the country of words” (231).

Reaney is a national poet. In “Local Grains of Sand”, “Reaney seems to exude the sense of a relaxed decentralized person belonging to the Canadian national identity which is frequently confused by Britishers and Americans with a lack of national characters and faceless blur” (20). Reaney’s plays deal with the history and myth of Ontario, in Canada.

In an interview with Catherine Ross, Reaney declares that he “is telling the stories of the nation” (20). His plays deal with the socio-economic and political problems of Canada. Thus we find the existence of the dialectics of history and myth in his plays. He recalls Canadian history and myth as they are the artifice of a social memory. It covers the history of family, life, culture, politics and religion, rich and poor, high and low. Wolfwind (GM) speaks of the history of poverty thus:
The Shady Hill kids haven’t got a chance, lady, I’ve been watching them play at recess – some of them don’t get enough to eat and let’s face it – kids from rural slums just aren’t up to kids from rich homes. (48)

The Blazer Kids (GM) are rich and they feel superior to other. The tale echoes the Indian difference between the rich and the poor when the Blazers abuse the Shady Hill kids as, “empty bottles. Any empty bottles. Rags and bones” (49). Some children were so poor that they collected these things for survival. The Iceberg goddess reveals the Canadian geography through a riddle to the children:

My laughter causes terror
I am a wonderful white lady
Travelling over the waves
Two thirds of me the blue wave hides
My mother is soft and falls from the sky
But I am as hard as a million granite grindstones. (52)

Reaney creates a state of mind or imaginary world or Reaneyland where things are seen in a new, idealized and simplified way and through that the transformative dialectics of history and myth heads its way. Reaney has been busy at work consciously constructing his own peculiar myth of the rebirth of the human soul or, of the building of Jerusalem’s wall in Canada’s vast and not so pleasant land. So far as his own writings are concerned, this missionary activity
involves use of what he calls a "symbolic grammar" or "literary geometry", a language of iconography learned from the Bible, Spenser, Shakespeare, Blake, Yeats, and Northrop Frye. Reaney's writings are seen as part of an ancestral wisdom.

As in Blake and Yeats, large antitheses prevail in the handling of human figures. Kingdoms of darkness and light are locked in a violent conflict. Human life emerges as caught up in a kind of cataclysm or fundamental anatomizing out of which new insight and maturity are meant to emerge. The imaginative world in which this takes place has only an oblique, otherwise a very important, connection with the world of ordinary, waking reality. The state of mind is woven in such a way that the protagonist can perceive the things that block his free movement and the things which he loves most are sometimes found in conflict. Finally the hero undergoes spiritual metamorphoses and it places him in a world of myth, joy, hope and fertility.

The initiate in a Reaney tale has to learn to play at some of the horrifying things real people do to each other. He has to go through a cyclical funhouse – each Reaney play has this – in order to learn what it is to become a completed self. The funhouse is located in an imagined mental landscape, conceived in moral terms, into which eternity is forcing its way with the purpose of revealing infernal powers as finally impotent in terms of a higher reality, and by this revelation inducing a purgatorial ascent. Reaneyland is not the real world and it
is not heaven; it is the condition in which an awareness of heaven makes possible the beginnings of the reconstruction of the so-called real world.

Reaney talks of Carl Jung’s mythic division of the soul into four parts, represented by an old woman, an old man, a young man, and a young girl. The younger two cannot come together or undergo transformation until the young man comes to terms with the older pair. When the union takes place, a new life or human soul is integrated and born. Mrs. Brown (NBC) longs for the arrival and meeting of her daughter who left her years before. One day her granddaughter comes bearing the resemblance of her daughter. The cereus, a rare flower, blooms as a symbol of birth and joy, union and new life. Eli Fay (KD) escapes from his fears and restricted life caused by his cruel and adulteress mother Madam Fay (KD) and his hired man Clifford Hopkins (KD). He finds signs of spring and fertility again. Every Reaney play is centred around the children’s struggle for freedom and new life. In the similar manner Harry (KD) and Rebecca (KD) unite together after swimming against the waves and tides of elders and cruel people.

Andrew Kingbird (SM) is located between the polarities of his wise father and Charlotte Shade (SM) a demonic and immoral woman, and between the anima Susan (SM) and the animus Frank Fall (SM). Bethel Henry (EE) is the cruel stepmother. Dr. Ira Hill (EE) acts as a wise counsellor. Polly (EE) is a symbol of benevolence and charity. Kenneth (EE) is kept as mentally retarded in the attic by Bethel Henry. Finally he regains his former state of sanity and health
with the help of Polly and Dr. Ira Hill. Angela is tortured by her own father Piers Caresfoot \((LW)\). Owen \((LW)\) is harassed by his own mother Mrs. Taylor \((LW)\). Arthur \((LW)\) is united with Angela by divine grace. Throughout the play Owen’s struggle to find a love that will usher him into manhood is underscored by the appearance of the ghost of Lady Eldred or Geraldine’s \((LW)\) baby, looking for its true mother.

The marginalisation of the minority becomes an inevitable theme in certain plays. It occurs in the name of culture, politics, socio-economic and insider (native) outsider (foreign) hostility. William Dale \((Dii)\) professor of Toronto university, is dismissed for claiming his rights in his own land. Freedom of speech and expression are denied to natives. Dale is comforted by his father thus:

Here you are safe and sound at your father’s place where they can’t get at you and where you can finish your history of Rome in between teaching cows Latin and my horses some Greek, but first – the pump’s froze, no amount of tea kettles is going to unfreeze it – take that crowbar and go down to the creek and chop a hole in the ice – when the hole’s big enough, lots of water – wave back at me with your scarf and I’ll let the cattle out of the barn. They’re thirsting out their minds and the silly old pump’s broke. \((39)\)
Reaney belongs to the Methodist Congregational church. Most of his writings express his skepticism about religion. His faith is expressed through Dale, "Ideas are not very plentiful in the ordinary Methodist sermon I believe that the great Epics – if you only grasp their meaning – tell you more of history than any other kind of literature" (39). Reaney’s democratic and socialist principles are echoed thus:

The truth is that between the government and the merchants almost one-half of the labour of the entire country is wrongly, if you will fraudulently, taken by means of law and customs out of the pockets of the producers – Remedy – universal boycotting of store goods. (39)

The students Tucker, Willie King and Greenwood (Dii) stand in support to Dale. Tucker exhorts others to co-operate with the strike, “We hereby pledge ourselves to abstain from all lectures in University college until professor Dale is reinstated and until the investigation demanded by the students is granted” (43). Greenwood, the fellow-student stresses the need for keeping themselves united in the light of their present condition, “But it is us in the Lion’s Den that strikes me for it is the spirit of Daniel in those circumstances – it is the spirit we need today” (43).

Tucker, King and Greenwood are expelled from the college for boycotting classes and supporting Dale. Tucker expresses his state of mind and views about politics, “Yes, politics being the art of the possible. But all the men in classics
are ‘for’ and I’m sick of politics’. Yes, Tom, 200 of Dale’s students still refuse to go back to lectures” (45). It is because of the iron-handed rule wielded by the foreigners that no one has been reinstated.

The Donnelly family (Don) members Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly and their seven sons fight against political and religious oppression. They do not like to make compromise with either group. They stand alone to show their might for the just. Mrs. Johanna Donnelly (Don), the wife of Mr. Donnelly is a heroic and virtuous woman portrayed by Reaney. One instance is quoted to show her heroism and altruism. Tom Cassleigh (Don) comes towards her with his knife, but “her glance forces him to weave out from the wheel, through it, and around the barnyard” (77). “Get back you savage. Have you not killed enough when you got your friend to tap the Englishman over the head at our doorstep on our road” (77). Mrs. Johanna roars further like a lioness and mythic woman of super powers, “Tom give Mr. Donegan back his clothes [. . .] raise him up out of the mud” (77).

Mrs. Johanna Donnelly continues in a touching manner:

Dung, There’s fields of grain to garner with bread for you all and you’d rather be rather thorns to each other. There’s tables of food for you to eat and you won’t come and sit down at them. Well, you won’t sit down at them. Get back to work, you fools. You tribe. (77)
The false medicine show conducted by the showman outrages the modesty and dignity of the Donnellys. It is recalled in a flashback, “Oh all young folks take warning / Never live a life of hate / Of wickedness or violence, lest / You share the Donnellys’ fate” (80).

The Donnelly story now moves backwards and forwards. The entire Donnelly family – mother, father, seven sons and one daughter were up for confirmation in a church called the Roman Line. They were going to be tested for a confirmation in a church called Biddulph. Most of the people liked them. Those with power did not like them. “Their confirmation came up and although they had known their catechism well, they failed (84). They were opposed by power, politics and religion. Jennie (Don) expresses her dismay over their minority position, “Better to be black all over than just to have black feet’ (84). She adds further proudly, “I am proud to be a Donnelly against all the contempt of the world” (93).

Will Donnelly is a cripple. Maggie loves him. People talk ill of marrying a cripple and she conveys this to Will Donnelly. Will’s reply transforms him into a healthy man of mythic powers:

Why that he’s not a cripple when he’s on horseback, nor is he a thing soft when he has a pistol in his hand which makes all men equally tall; fiddle nor am I a cripple when I’m driving or writing or riding I’m – our stage is a bird with wheels for wings and I’m free. (116)
The Donnellys are Grit in politics. They support the Grit Candidate Mr. Colin Satchered. He wins the election by seven votes. The Tory candidate loses by a margin of seven votes. They are the votes of the Donnellys. Now politics and religion join hands to tie the noose around the neck of the Donnellys.

Human maturity is the result of a quest involving body, heart and mind. The goal is a synthesis of all three. Reaney's children cannot obtain these things because they are surrounded and obstructed by witches and demonic powers. A great deal of the emotional tension in The Red Heart arises from the poet's feeling that there is a vast gulf between what he desires and what his mind tells him about reality. In A Suit of Nettles, Branwell fails, on the whole in his spiritual quest, because he cannot find a path between his head and his body. Mopsus, however, through the instructions of Effie, is able to accept the fact that the Lord is:

- Most like a sun for he
- Makes his beholders into suns
- Shadowless and timeless
- Changed snow into grass and gave to all such powers. (51)

The dragon lady stands as a symbol of destructive forces pitted against the child victims. The benevolent female in Reaney's writings is a symbol of the artist's soul, the completely unified self or guardian Angel who appears at the nadir of the protagonist's experience to help him past some insuperable barrier which if not conquered will bring death. Reaney, like Spenser and Yeats, makes
the ideal woman a repository of wisdom and a guide who brings metaphors and images to enable the artist to progress, because women seem to come to a vision of certainly more readily than men do. Mrs. Johanna Donnelly is the most heroic, virtuous, and self-willed woman, mother and wife whose spirit can awake the sleeping cowardly woman into a revolutionary.

Reaney’s artistic consciousness and style is Jungian rather than Freudian. His writings are a movement into what Jung called the collective unconscious or into what Blake found when he passed into the impersonal part of his own mind and discovered all minds. In English literary history he distinguishes two major poetic traditions, one, a popular, English protestant and revolutionary, the other, French-inspired, catholic and conservative. Reaney favours the first tradition. His aim as a writer is not to create a private world, but to launch a frontal attack, as editor, university teacher, playwright and director. The style of his language can be compared with Goethe, Wordsworth, and Browning who considered literature primarily as a criticism and interpretation of life. A Canadian consciousness of belonging to a land sterile and barren, and dominated by foreigners, religious fanatics, petty politicians is the burden of his writings.

Michael Tait who wrote critical views of Colours in the Dark sums up:

Equally unimportant is the difficulty the play has given reviewers and critics. Reaney’s creation is sui generis, a luminous structure that invites but eludes classification. It is lyric in subjective intensity and mood, dramatic in the articulation of larger conflicts;
epic in its breadth of statement. Whatever the mode, the artist's transfiguring eye lights the scene and wrings a design from the ignorant chaos [...]. (144)

Du Barry Campau noted in the *Toronto Sun*, “James Reaney has reexamined the Donnelly saga with an historian’s intent to put the record straight and a poet’s fascination with the tragedies they both suffered themselves and inflicted on others [...].” (2).

The present study, on account of its complexity and paucity of materials does not claim to be exhaustive. So it does not cover the varied aspects of history and myth in the writings of Reaney. The primary focus is directed on how the history of Canada enables Reaney to transform it into myth through drama. The dialectics of history and myth, the transformative dimensions of history into myth through the adoption of various dramatic, epic, lyric and socio-economic problems, and marginalisation could still be further analysed. Reaney’s plays are rich goldmines of wisdom for further excavation and study. The influences of Northrop Frye, Yeats, Spenser, Shakespeare and the Bible on Reaney provide ample scope for further analysis and exploration. The images, symbols, mimes, myth, music, puppetry, marionettes and various literary genres can also be chosen for study.

The study of children’s myth offers interesting scope and hope for further research. Reaney’s vision of the poor, orphans, the sick, the exploited and the
oppressed reveals the white and black difference in any society and in the world. The Canadian history and geography dealt within the children's myth brings to life the leaders of Canadian history and show how the children are guided by Canadian mythic nymphs, gods and goddesses of trees, nature, mountains, glaciers and sea.

Reaney's plays are history of life, drama of life and myth of life. They are about Canada and the whole world. They offer the nice hope of study in the transformation of history into myth and drama. Reaney says in the preface to *Masks of Childhood*, "Plays are like human bodies: they have heads, hearts, bowels, joints, belly, buttons and hair; privates, senses of balance and souls. The onlooker should get the sense of an organism, a pulsating dance in and out of forms" (8).

The function of myth in literature is to provide a background of familiar reference so that the sensibilities of reader and author are oriented and brought together and a profound communication is established between them. Myth provides the base for drama. It is, therefore, certainly not an exaggeration to conclude that through a fine and subtle process of artistic alchemy Reaney creates a myth of his own out of the history of Canada and the history of human life in his plays.