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Critical introductions to pioneering works of social realism from the early Abbey Theatre

John C Kerrigan
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTIONS TO PIONEERING WORKS OF
SOCIAL REALISM FROM THE EARLY ABBEY THEATRE

by

John C. Kerrigan

Bachelor of Arts
Dickinson College
1993

Master of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1995

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Doctor of Philosophy Degree
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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The Dissertation prepared by

John C. Kerrigan

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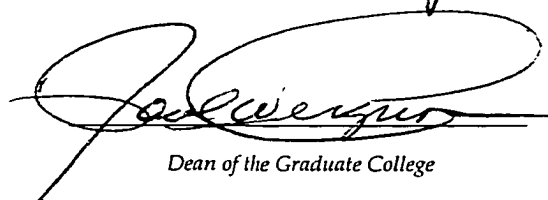
Critical Introductions to Pioneering Works of Social Realism

From the Early Abbey Theatre

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English


Examination Committee Chair


Dean of the Graduate College


Examination Committee Member


Examination Committee Member


Graduate College Faculty Representative

ABSTRACT

Critical Introductions to Pioneering Works of Social Realism from the Early Abbey Theatre

by

John C. Kerrigan

Dr. Richard Harp, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This dissertation presents a critical study of five dramatic works first performed at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in the early twentieth century. The plays considered here have often been called masterpieces by critics, yet they have received little serious scholarly attention and today are forgotten relics of the Abbey's past. Nonetheless, these plays--Padraic Colum's *Thomas Muskerry* (1910), St. John Ervine's *John Ferguson* (1915), T. C. Murray's *Autumn Fire* (1924), Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* (1926), and Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche* (1936)--formed a backbone for the fledgling national theater. They were successful because they attracted and engaged their audiences, but furthermore they challenged conventional notions (sometimes creating alternate notions) of gender, class, nationality, and social status. As serious dramatic works, these plays represented probably the most successful achievement of Yeats's vision for the theater as "a mirror showing the nation a true image of its mind and features." Thus, the plays helped to "invent Ireland" (in the words of Declan Kiberd's important study of Irish literature), and they contributed significantly to the Abbey's establishment as one of the world's great repertory theaters. This dissertation, then, redresses critical neglect of the five plays in an attempt to initiate deeper ways of understanding and interpreting them through social, political, and economic contexts, textual backgrounds, and critical, publication, and stage histories.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On December 27, 1904, a 536-seat theater on Lower Abbey Street in Dublin was secured by twenty members of the fledgling Irish National Theatre Society, quite literally setting the stage for the long and storied history of Ireland's national theater. The Abbey Theatre, which would develop into one of the world's most well-known repertory theaters, emerged amidst a complex set of circumstances, all of which signaled a drastic break from the traditions of the past. In the realm of the theater, modern drama was born and burgeoning throughout late nineteenth century Europe with the work of playwrights Ibsen, Chekhov, and Shaw, and the theatrical innovations of directors like Antoine in France and Stanislavsky in Russia. Primarily in response to the melodramatic artificiality that had predominated European stages, with its stock characters, contrived plots, and simple-minded, moralistic themes, Ibsen and other innovators sought to produce a new, "modern" way of looking at the world via the theater. Thus was born *realism*--"the practice of creating or attempting to create illusions of real life on the stage."¹

Realism's rise brought considerable innovations to the very ways in which theater was to be conceived and enacted. Previously, overblown melodramatic styles of acting had stressed exaggeration to the point of caricature, to emphatically demonstrate the good and the evil; the new realist approaches to acting brought more subtle emphases, following Stanislavsky, which would attempt to portray lifelike appearances and behaviors by developing characterization through psychological insight. Sets, previously two-dimensional and painted, moved closer to exact reproductions of existing three-dimensional spaces, most commonly domestic interiors. The box-set stage became the norm, with the stage curtain serving as a fourth wall, to provide the audience with the illusion of peeking in on a real situation actually taking place onstage. Careful attention was paid to details, and

attempts were made to perfect the illusion of reality in all outward aspects--props, costume, and dialogue.

Even while the realist style of modern drama was emerging in the final decades of the nineteenth century as the predominant mode of stage expression, various responses to realism provoked countermovements such as symbolism, expressionism, and surrealism, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century. These countermovements stemmed from the desire for the theater to access and express inner psychological realities since realism, its opponents held, could adequately address only outward appearances. In fact, continued and continuing reactions against and refinements of realism seem inevitable even today, since dramatic realism continues to provide "the fundamental idiom for the theater in the West."²

In Ireland, the realist aspects of modern drama provided a significant opportunity for the founding of a new mode of cultural expression. Since the whole of Ireland was until 1922 still a colony of Great Britain, theater in Ireland was exclusively a satellite extension of the British theater, which presented, of course, British characters and situations. Ireland's aspiring playwrights headed to London to seek their fame, and thus some of the most well-known names in British drama were, in fact, born and raised in Ireland--Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde, and Shaw, among them. Nevertheless, when Irish characters appeared on British stages, they were portrayed exclusively as stereotypes--lazy, drunken, temperamental, foolish, and wildly and irredeemably lost in imagination--by the melodramatic convention of the *stage Irishman*.

When the idea for an Irish national theater was first conceived, seven years previous to its actual founding date, during an 1897 meeting between William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and Edward Martyn,³ one of the primary motivations of the founders was to counteract the artificial and prejudicial image of the stage Irishman. The founders thus publicly declared their intention to create a theater which would "show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and easy sentiment, as it has been represented."⁴ Realism therefore provided a dramatic vehicle by which Irish playwrights could present images of Ireland and the Irish that were more serious and closer to actual observations of life in their country.

The Irish theater movement emerged in conjunction within a more general trend toward establishing an identity for Irish people that was distinct from British law and custom. Cultural and political nationalist movements to this effect flourished in the late nineteenth century. Today, these movements collectively are known as the Celtic Revival or Irish Renaissance. Groups of Irish people consciously sought to reestablish distinctly Irish traditions in sports, language, dress, education, mythology, and literature, among other avenues as an outgrowth of a political movement to establish an autonomous Irish identity, and in some cases apart from politics altogether. Since British rule in Ireland had lasted for several hundred years and had tremendously fragmented and replaced the previously-existing culture, the ability to “reclaim” an Irish Celtic past seemed doubtful at that time to many residents of Ireland. For example, the language of ancient Ireland had given way, irretrievably, to English, the language of the colonizer. In spite of the fact that attempts to revive the Irish language were fraught with difficulties, idealism prevailed and a very marginally successful linguistic revival occurred. On the whole, the cultural revival met with some degree of success in bringing about change, though political events (particularly the 1916 Easter Rising) more quickly and drastically turned the tide of Irish public opinion in support of the nationalists’ call for political autonomy, achieved with the creation of an Irish Free State in 1922.

The Abbey Theatre emerged, obviously, in the context of these changes. Though any direct influence of the theater on political and cultural transformation is questionable, the role of the theater as an agent which represented, confronted, and produced conflicts central to Irish experience is undeniable. In fact, the overtly declared intentions of the theater’s founders demonstrate that they clearly embraced such a role. W. B. Yeats’s idea of the theater, at this early stage and throughout the Abbey’s history, has provided an enduring vision: he projected the national theater as a mirror that would “reflect the life of Ireland.”⁵

Again and again in the past century, writers and critics have returned to Yeats’s image of an artistic or theatrical mirror reflecting images of the new nation.⁶ Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, for example, in *Ulysses* famously declared “the cracked looking-glass of a servant” to be “a symbol of Irish art.”⁷ More recently, the image of the Irish theater as a

mirror has been elaborated as a *theory* by Christopher Murray in his 1997 critical study, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation*.⁸

Although Murray's *theory* is logically articulated and applied, his book considers only the "major" twentieth century dramatists; the book is thereby limited in its discussion of the national images the Abbey reflected, for from the early years of the theater he treats only the plays of Yeats, Gregory, and John Millington Synge.⁹ Murray not only neglects the work of other significant and proficient playwrights from the first twenty-five years of Abbey's existence, but also his discussion severely reduces the complex challenges that attempts to "reflect" Ireland necessarily presented in that period.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Murray's is typical of Irish dramatic criticism in its focus on the work of a few "major" figures to the neglect of other important plays and issues from the early national theater.¹¹

There would seem to be a significant irony here, for although the work of numerous individuals helped the Abbey to establish and maintain an international status as one of the world's most acclaimed national theaters, virtually all that remains of the early theater--in the popular *and* critical consciousness--are the names of Yeats, Synge, and Gregory. The names of scores of other playwrights from the early days of the national theater are, one hundred years after its inception, completely forgotten--even in cases where their work continues to be relevant, vital, and deserving of scholarly attention. To give one example: Christopher Murray's introduction singles out Padraic Colum's work and his play *The Land* in particular, as "a paradigm of modern Irish drama,"¹² yet Colum's work is not mentioned at all in the rest of Murray's study, except in two brief asides.

This claim for "paradigmatic" nature of Colum's drama, nonetheless, should not be overlooked, for such early works as Colum's *The Land* and T. C. Murray's *Birthright* established the peasant play--a new genre that in subsequent years pervaded the Abbey stage. Realistic plays depicting rural Irish life ultimately became the most identifiable feature of the Abbey throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the peasant play has often been declared responsible for gaining the Abbey Theatre its international reputation.¹³

Even so, the work of Colum and others who wrote peasant plays and a variety of

drama for the early theater (aside from Yeats, Gregory, and Synge), when it is mentioned at all by critics, has tended to be labeled as “memorable” or “noteworthy”¹⁴--suggesting that it is worthy of being noted, but not necessarily of being explored further. Presumably, the work of *lesser* playwrights of the early Abbey lacks the international or cosmopolitan scope of the plays of the *great* Irish dramatists. One cannot deny, however, that Yeats, Synge, and Gregory often chose rural and specifically Irish subjects. So, the critical argument follows, the work of great artists is able to “transcend” the national through their artistic depth: in the manner by which they present Irish subject matter. In this sense, what seems to set Yeats, Gregory and Synge apart from other early playwrights is *how* they use the theatrical mirror to reflect Ireland. Do these writers, then, merit serious critical attention because they avoid writing of Irish life in too realistic a style?

Yeats’s vision, whatever claims he made for the *national* theater, was without doubt intentionally literary,¹⁵ grounded in aesthetics rather than politics or popular concerns. Yeats, moreover, focused on his own projections of what Ireland *might be* rather than reflections of what it *is* or *was*. With minimally-drawn sets and characters which functioned more as symbols than as concrete entities, he shaped a theater which intentionally avoided showing life “as it is” by following poetic impulses and applying in abstract ways techniques of Japanese Noh drama and material from Celtic mythology (among other influences). Even his most political and socially-concerned plays demand interpretation of allegorical symbols, needed to fill gaps in the surface level of the play: in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, for example, the old wandering woman’s luring young men away from their families makes sense primarily because she is a symbol of Irish nationalism, driving young men toward rebellion. Placing rigorous intellectual demands on audiences, Yeats’s plays were never popular (and seldom understood) among early Abbey audiences, but for precisely these reasons critics have found rich material for further analysis.

To be sure, John Synge and Lady Gregory were more “realistic” writers than was Yeats. In this sense, their work was, in contrast to Yeats’s abstract visions, a more purposeful attempt to capture and reflect the speech and actions of rural Ireland. Yeats famously recounted that he sent Synge to the West of Ireland to capture the poetic language of the peasants; in turn, Synge himself famously declared in a preface to his plays that

In writing *The Playboy of the Western World*, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland. . . I got more aid [in writing plays] than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen.¹⁶

Synge here fashions himself as a writer *merely* recording observations rather than writing plays, though as the preface continues, his selectivity becomes clear:

On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy. . .
In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut
or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who
works among people who have shut their lips on poetry.¹⁷

Synge's dramatic focus, and the aspect of his work that critics have largely seized upon, was to be found in his manipulation of the poetic language of the Irish peasant. In his most famous play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge cleverly derives comedy from illustrating how peasants get carried away by the appeal of a story--even an apparently horrific story of parricide. Those who listen to Christy Mahon describing his father's "murder"--including the audience members themselves--become so caught up in the telling that their minds are removed from the reality of murder. Synge's play deflates this effect later, when the "murdered" father actually appears onstage. *Playboy* concludes by tempering the comic with irony (Pegeen Mike forced to carry on after Christy has gone, as if nothing has changed), and Synge's work on the whole explores the tension between seizing freedom and bearing what life leaves us. This latter element, borne from a tragic sense bordering on fatalism (as in *Riders to the Sea*), is continually tempered by language so poetic that it constantly has the potential to carry its listeners away.

Unlike Synge and Yeats, Lady Gregory has almost always been read as having a much more straightforward goal as a dramatist. She sought primarily to use the theater as a vehicle to bring dignity to Ireland, to "show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and easy sentiment, as it has been represented."¹⁸ Thus, with a keen ear for dialogue and a great appreciation of the people of the West of Ireland, Gregory shaped dramatic images out of Irish mythology and history and her own observations in folk plays which sought to give voices to the "souls" of common Irish people.¹⁹ Even when she seized upon an ancient myth or historical incident, Gregory's dramatization gave her plays a life that was rooted in

ordinary rural Irish experience. The subject of Gregory's most popular plays often calls attention to the power of myth-making itself, as in the rumors which predominate in *Spreading the News* or the subtle political commentary embedded in the comical deceptions of *The Rising of the Moon* or *The Canavans*. Although Gregory's work spans a range of conventional genres, including tragedy and romance, chiefly her brief light comedies distinguish her work for the early Abbey; as Christopher Murray has commented, Gregory's "gift was to look on life and find it amusing."²⁰

The early drama of the Abbey Theatre, reflected in Gregory and Synge just as much as Yeats, thus drew largely on elements of unreality. As playwright T. C. Murray has commented,

while the work of Yeats and Synge and Lady Gregory charmed my imagination, I could never recognise the characters that moved on their stage as counterparts of the countryfolk of South Munster, to which I belonged. They created, these three, a peasant world of their own. . .and we accepted their drama as an adventure in makebelieve.²¹

For Murray, what the Irish stage needed most was not the poetry of Synge or the comic sensibility of Gregory or the abstract symbolism of Yeats, but to treat in more serious terms the range of life in Ireland. He found what he was looking for in the plays of Padraic Colum and especially Lennox Robinson, who

revealed to us that in th[e] very traffic of every day life. . .there was potential comedy and tragedy as merry as *Twelfth Night*, as profoundly moving as *Hamlet* or *Lear*. In their way of thought, their speech, their accent, the people that [Robinson] created were the people I knew.²²

Thus, at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, a new school of Irish realists emerged in response to the need for a more broad and inclusive application of Yeats's "mirror." Colum took in a different direction Yeats's insistence on intellectualism—"the Abbey as a vehicle for 'national thought and ideals.'"²³ But rather than to Yeats, Colum looked to Ibsen's blend of nationalism and realism for a model. As he wrote in an article entitled, "Ibsen and National Drama":

Henrik Ibsen should be interesting to us in Ireland if only as the great representative of a minor nationality. . .[I]t was Ibsen who turned the attention of Europe to the literature and culture of the smaller nations. . .The characters in [his] social dramas do

not seem to be distinctively national. . . Yet Ibsen has given a strong impulse to national drama. First of all he has brought seriousness back into drama. . . Of course the Norwegian drama imposed a new formula, but a dramatist with sincerity and individuality soon breaks [it] up.²⁴

Colum's debt to Ibsen has been called imitation, but he vehemently disputed such charges, declaring that Ibsen was not an influence on his plays or their technique:

Thomas Muskerry is not an imitation of any of Ibsen's plays. . . Were Ibsen an influence with me I could have constructed a play that would have no soliloquies and no casual characters, the action of which would be complete in a definite time and without change of scene. I have written a play, each act of which is an episode having its own milieu.²⁵

What Colum took from studying Ibsen, rather than a technique for play writing, was the conception of a national theater distinct from Yeats's. Yeats's chief failing, Colum argued, was in its uncompromising view that to be *literary* meant to rise above not only *popularity* but also *the people*—the Abbey's audience, itself:

The theatre with which Mr. Yeats is associated has not achieved popularity, but it has attained astonishing maturity; its mere educative effect must be reckoned with as a powerful asset. . . Yet the idea of "Ireland's Theatre" has not been formulated. "Ireland's Theatre" must not be an attempt to meet people half way, it should arise out of the people, at least the people must be made feel that it is something to them. . . As we progress towards nationality we will become more and more self-conscious, we must come more and more into contact with European thought. The shock of entering the European movement may provide us with the best dramatic material, it will bring us to plays of ideas, to plays of self-conscious life.²⁶

Colum envisioned a theater which would reach a wider audience and would realize in broader the "mirror" of Yeats, a national theater which would define and criticize Irish life, which would, moreover, encourage Irish people to take themselves seriously.

As the new school of Irish realists grew, Yeats himself acknowledged that the images projected by the national theater were necessarily multiple and varied. In 1910, referring specifically to Padraic Colum and *Thomas Muskerry*, Yeats said:

That part of our movement represented by Lady Gregory, Synge and myself, is individualistic. We aim at expressing ourselves, they in dialect, myself in verse. But there is a new movement arising that is representative of the social life and the economic conditions of Ireland.²⁷

Even in Yeats, who indubitably advocated an aesthetic (opposing it to a nationalistic) agenda for his art and for the theater, one sees a profound awareness not only of the cultural transformation taking place around him (e.g., in the “Easter 1916” refrain, “all changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born”), but also of his own participation in such transformation (perhaps most notably in “Man and the Echo”: “Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?”).

Colum and those who followed him made such awareness a conscious aspect of art. In fact, the most fundamental implication of Colum’s idea of the theater is expressed in one of the most famous lines of twentieth century literature: when Joyce declared Stephen Dedalus’s intention to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race,” he was suggesting the ability of literature to have some transformative effect on the life of Ireland.²⁸ Following these self-conscious motives, the new realism of the Abbey Theatre participated in the wider cultural transformation of the Irish Renaissance by forging images of Ireland that arose out of and helped to challenge the consciousness of the developing nation--to “invent Ireland,” as Declan Kiberd’s recent postcolonial study has expressed it.²⁹ Thus, the Abbey Theatre did in fact become something of a mirror, reflecting perceived images of Ireland that were projected upon its audiences as illusions of real life.

While the social realism initiated by Colum aspired to the intellect of Ibsen’s theater, it also depended upon stirring a range of emotional impressions in order to appeal to audiences. Here, the Abbey’s social realism departed from some earlier forms of realism: the stoic Ibsen, the social reformer Shaw, and other early realists had commonly (though not always) eschewed emotion, desiring to avoid appearing melodramatic. Thus, social realism in Ireland blended some elements of the Ibsen and Shaw problem play, but in other ways flexibly incorporated the tragic and comic--as well as pity, laughter, anger, fear, content, and so on--in so far as these too were elements of daily life. In his 1910 preface to *Thomas Muskerry*, Colum expressed his awareness of the role emotion could play in profoundly impacting the dramatic:

A beggar woman crouched on the street begs an alms from us.
We hardly notice her face, her attitude or her gesture. But let
someone impersonate the beggar on the stage and our eye-sight
will become adjusted: the peaks and lines on her face, the stiffly-

held mendicant hand are significant, we recognize them as movements of the spirit that is in us all. . . The dramatist is concerned not primarily with the creation of character, but with the creation of situations. . . His main effort is always towards the creation of situations that will produce a powerful impression on an audience, for it is situation that makes the strongest appeal to our sympathies.³⁰

Having worked as an actor himself--unlike Yeats, Gregory, or Synge--Colum was keenly aware of the potential impact of emotional realism, the identification of the audience with the character on the stage. Particularly, he and those who followed him saw in the tragic the ability to ennoble or dignify while provoking thought and debate as a deliberate strategy. For this reason, these realistic plays offered a popular appeal. This is not to say that the plays proved to *be* popular (that is, well-received or well-attended), but instead that the plays generated an atmosphere which appealed to the popular: without having to come to terms with the artifice of Yeats's abstract symbolism or to adjust to Synge's stylized, poetic (but stilted) language, theatergoers could engage the play on a superficial level, perhaps without even consciously realizing that it offered something more.

Nonetheless, the primary reason that so few people have heard of early Abbey Theatre dramatists such as Colum or Lennox Robinson seems to be that critics themselves failed to see "something more"; for, apart from Yeats and Synge, most early Abbey writers' techniques are seen as *merely* realistic. Lady Gregory's critical reputation is a case in point. Because past critics have tended to view Gregory as *merely* embracing and expounding provincial Irish values and images straightforwardly,³¹ Christopher Murray felt compelled to begin a chapter about Gregory's work with a sentence that can best be described as defensive posturing: "Lady Gregory is entitled to be assessed as a writer on her own merits."³² Critics, Murray's statement assumes, are apt to dismiss plays (like Gregory's) which *merely* present characters in a realistic fashion, since they do so in such a straightforward way as to be not particularly interesting or deserving of attention.

However, the work of Lady Gregory achieves significantly more than mere straightforward presentation, as Murray's book goes on to note: Gregory's oeuvre has undergone in recent years a significant reevaluation, primarily attributable to critics who have called attention to the ways in which she *uses* or *adapts* rather than *presents* or

embraces her material.³³ Still, the work of other equally adept realistic Irish dramatists whose sophistication is equal to Gregory's has yet to undergo reevaluation.

In an effort to argue that twentieth century Irish drama ought to be identified with more than the names of its greatest writers, then, this dissertation presents critical introductions to five plays--Colum's *Thomas Muskerry*, St. John Ervine's *John Ferguson*, T. C. Murray's *Autumn Fire*, Lennox Robinson's *The Big House*, and Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche*--representing the best work of the Irish social realists. These are plays which verge on greatness, though in the final analysis it would be overreaching to call them great. Criticism to this effect abounds:

Synge and O'Casey are our dramatic giants in this century. But there is the distinguished class of those who are only less than great. I believe that Teresa Deevy should be counted among that select band.³⁴

Ervine [is] an important playwright. He is not great, but he is very good.³⁵

[*Autumn Fire* is] among the finest plays written since the founding of the Abbey Theatre. . . [T. C. Murray's] workmanship and technique seem almost faultless. But Mr. Murray just lacks that touch of genius which makes fine workmanship great.³⁶

[Lennox Robinson is] the major-minor figure of the Anglo-Irish theatre in the first half of [the twentieth] century.³⁷

Padraic Colum was a major figure in Ireland's Literary Renaissance both because he was the first to deal realistically with the Irish peasant farmer and because of the influence his plays had on the playwrights who followed him.³⁸

As has been suggested above, the qualified praise with which each of these playwrights has been met derives to a significant extent from the realistic "school of drama" (for lack of a better term) from which they emerged. It seems easy and expedient enough to group these writers together with all those who wrote in the genre of the peasant play,³⁹ and to thereby refer to all of them collectively as "realists." However, if one's evaluation of all of these playwrights is to be fair, a question necessarily arises: is the term "realist" sufficient not only to *label* but also to *judge* the work of these authors *en masse*?

First of all, to use the label "realist" by itself is inadequate to describe writers as diverse in form and subject matter as Gregory, Murray, Colum, Robinson, Ervine, and

Deevy. In fact, the whole of Irish drama originates from the broadly-defined term “theatrical realism”--even, for example, when Yeats rebels against realist techniques. Furthermore, as Robert Hogan has posited, “the house of realism has many mansions”;⁴⁰ Hogan attempts to remedy the general inadequacy of the term by delineating several more specific forms of realism: photographic, prosaic, satiric, comic, and poetic.⁴¹

However, few critics would acknowledge that such distinctions can be made, much less that they are important. Most view realism, instead, as being monolithically opposed to experimentalism in its various forms, in this sense, considering realism as an attempt to depict life just “as it is,” without particular concern for form. Indeed, the opening paragraphs of this introduction put forth just such a definition.

Without any qualification, though, the basic definition of realism can be fraught with difficulties when the term is applied. Is Synge a realist? Is Colum? Not the least troublesome is that realism can be wrongly interchanged with its more narrow derivative, naturalism. Naturalism, however, is realism taken to its most extreme form, where theater is aimed at banishing artifice and mirroring life with the utmost directness through minute, even scientific, observation. Having grown out of realism in the late nineteenth century, particularly in Antoine’s Theatre Libre in France, naturalism in drama had a particularly significant effect on staging and acting techniques: every aspect of the set, the costuming, and the performance was intended to mirror life as closely as possible. While naturalism exerted a serious influence on the performative aspects of plays, most naturalist playwrights (August Strindberg, for example) soon abandoned it in favor of greater experimentation--expressionism, symbolism, and their descendants. In the realm of the actual writing of plays, naturalism fueled more narrow conceptions of realism--in essence, stigmatizing it, for by association with naturalism, realism assumes derogatory connotations.

However, competent realistic play writing involves something more than pure naturalism, for plays practicing the most extreme realism would amount to what Robert Hogan terms “photographic realism”--practiced by a writer who would attempt to record, word-for-word, the details of a real conversation she had heard, whether it be witty or droll, clever or stupid. The “photographic” realist is not involved in creative decision-making; she simply walks down the street recording conversations as she hears them and includes

these in her plays.

However, even if “photographic” attempts at play writing have ever been successfully staged, it seems impossible to deny that such a narrow brand of realism is essentially not dramatic. As Sean O’Casey has written in an essay entitled, “The Green Goddess of Realism,” if a playwright were to

take people off the street or carry them out of a drawing-room, plonk them on the stage and make them speak as they speak in real, real life, . . . you [would] have the dullest thing imaginable. I suppose the critics will be shocked to hear that no real character can be put in a play unless some of the reality is taken out of him through the heightening, widening, and deepening of the character by the dramatist who creates him.⁴²

In whatever mode a dramatist chooses to write, some grounding in the real is to be expected: if realism means expressing life “as it is,” then all plays are realistic in some sense—even when they overtly try not to be. Experimentalism implies attempting something new, and in modern drama this means diverging from realism. But even “realism” itself is not reality but a projection of reality. Even the realist who most closely approximates the “photographic” must be selective if he is to discover the necessary ingredients of drama—particularly conflict. Perhaps a “naturalist” or “photographic” approach to play writing most especially can be applied to the mimicking of “real” speech. Still, as St. John Ervine instructed in a book entitled, *How to Write a Play*, the ways in which characters speak

must be selected and shapely, and yet seem to be broken and unshapely as actual speech is; and it must be strong enough to bear the burden of the play, for the dialogue has not only to be interesting in itself and to reveal the nature of the person who speaks it, but to carry on and develop the theme.⁴³

In spite of Ervine’s argument for selectivity here, he has on occasion been accused of being a “photographic” realist. Elizabeth Buckmaster, for example, writes that, “Ervine does not alter his material so that it appears to be anything other than what it essentially is—newspaper [i.e. photographic] realism.”⁴⁴

Ervine’s example highlights an important distinction: the degree and type of a writer’s “realism” depends to a very large extent on the critic’s perspective. In the case of Ervine’s *John Ferguson*, many of the critics who have commented on the play have expressed ideas about its realism which are quite different than and divergent from

Buckmaster's. Some critics have complained that the play is not real enough: "Jacques," who reviewed the play's first production in 1915, for example, declared that its "atmosphere of morbidity and sanctimoniousness and callousness all made for unreality that would make anyone sick."⁴⁵ In a slightly different manner, in 1950 Denis Ireland accused Ervine of distorting reality by exaggeration:

John Ferguson is granite, all right, but it's just a bit too granitic--granite in a theatrical tradition which hovers on the verge of caricaturing Ulster country life, as if Mr. Ervine had managed to mix Thomas Hardy, the Abbey Theatre, and a tradition of Bible-reading Ulster farmers in proportions that take all the truth out of the result.⁴⁶

Other critics, meanwhile, have registered the opinion that *John Ferguson* is not only realistic, but also representative. Andrew E. Malone, the most respected dramatic critic of Ireland in the early days of the Abbey Theatre, considered John Ferguson representative of "the best and the worst of the Ulster Protestant character,"⁴⁷ declaring furthermore that "in the old man is embodied all for which Ulster stands, all that gives Ulster its distinction, all that makes Ulster fascinating."⁴⁸ Robert Hogan in 1967 described *John Ferguson* as a "solidly structured, eminently convincing piece of realism" which is also

the prototypical Irish play. By that. . . [I mean] that in its theme and characters it is the most typical. It is about the most popular Irish themes of land, money and the arranged marriage. Like *Juno*, it is a family tragedy; that is, its larger social concerns are mirrored in the fortunes of a particular family.⁴⁹

D. E. S. Maxwell wrote of Ervine in 1984 as

the cartographer of his province, County Down [Northern Ireland]. He knew its vernacular and was accustomed to its convivialities as well as its 'dull angers and ancient rages.' Ervine satisfied the current understanding of originality, which was taken to mean a choice of controversial subjects and their treatment in a dramatic speech figured upon popular idiom.⁵⁰

Each of the three previously mentioned critics value the realism of *John Ferguson* in terms of its representation of Irish life. However, whereas Malone focuses on realism at the level of character, Hogan emphasizes thematics, and Maxwell's concern is language.

From a different perspective, the critic's own nationality and time period influences his judgment of how "real" the play is. Andrew Malone's perception of Ferguson as a

representative figure for Northern Ireland is based on his own understanding as a Dubliner, obviously quite different from that of the 1915 reviewer “Jacques.” Denis Ireland, in the 1950s, resents the fact that Ervine chooses to portray “the kinds of things that might be uppermost in the minds of the prosperous Protestant inhabitants” of suburban Belfast instead of the “real” tensions underneath; for him, the “real” means political and religious strife.⁵¹ Furthermore, it seems notable that the greatest outsider, the American critic Robert Hogan, makes great claims for the representativeness of the play.

Ultimately, the labels perhaps reveal more about the critics than about the plays or playwrights. As the Ervine example and Robert Hogan’s previously mentioned qualifications of “realism” suggest, the term can be so inclusive and pervasively applied that its application is often vague, and the judgments it engenders seem therefore potentially problematic and even, at times, misguided. While a more specific system of classification, such as Hogan’s, would seem logical, the biggest problem is that such labeling is generally still insufficient to characterize an author’s work. Synge, for example, is by turns poetic, comic, satiric, and even tragic as a realist. Even Hogan himself notes this obstacle: “although hack writers always write in the same way, good writers write in different manners, modes and intentions from play to play.”⁵² At its worst, realism has the potential to diminish theater by merely substituting art for life. But at its best, realistic drama can open up experience, both in an inward and an outward sense, penetrating the psychological or representing the social. Furthermore, no matter what biases toward or preferences for realism one brings to a play, it is necessary to acknowledge that even today the most noted contemporary dramatists still work in general within a realist vein.⁵³

At the risk of rendering even more obscure the work of writers whose plays are already overlooked and even forgotten, with all of the reservations about terminology noted above, this dissertation endorses a more specific form of the term *realism*--that is, *social realism*--to refer to the work of Colum, Murray, Robinson, Ervine, and Deevy, as well as that which followed from it. As has been asserted above, the five plays treated in this dissertation, as works of Irish social realism, took as a specific impetus to conjure and confront on the stage in a serious way certain national images and issues of their day.

The school of drama which concerned itself with Irish social realism, whether in its most dull and commonplace or most challenging and interesting examples, cannot be ignored, for, again, Padraic Colum's work, in its social realism, offers a more sufficient paradigm for the development of the most typical drama of the early Abbey Theatre than does that of Yeats, Synge, or Gregory. A more substantial place in the history of the early theater therefore must be found for the work of the social realists. Moreover, a critical reevaluation of the work of Deevy, Robinson, Colum, Murray, and Ervine seems deserved, for however "realistically" these plays may seem to encourage the audience to identify with their characters, still the relationship between audience, play, and performance is far from straightforward.

On a basic level, audience members *would* be likely to appreciate the technical proficiency of both playwright and performance. As a group, these plays with tight construction introduce situations of compelling, sustained conflict, ultimately moving toward the tragic or tragicomic, but combining, as well, the social concern of Ibsen. Furthermore, although (or perhaps because) the play's main characters are almost without exception of relatively low station in life, they are drawn to be poignant, memorable, and significant.

Thomas Muskerry, a man of passionate intensity, stands alone in the world of a play in which even those he holds dearest lack all conviction.⁵⁴ Muskerry embodies the last vestiges of the values of an age that has passed. Although his character has a representative appeal, he is at the same time shown to be a flawed, fragile man. Inflexible of will and desirous to maintain his status and position, he is reduced finally by the human frailties of age and the conniving plots of his heirs to a mere resident of the workhouse. With a poignant concluding irony, he receives sympathy and comfort only from the workhouse residents themselves.

John Ferguson similarly presents a title role in which is contained a memorable character whose tragedy arises from both unbending elements within himself--his intensely strict adherence to Christian precepts--and circumstances beyond the scope of his control--the rape of his daughter and his son's vengeful response. Particularly impressive in this play is the Biblical framework for a drama of ideas overlaid on an emotionally powerful story.

Autumn Fire is meticulously paced and plotted. Owen is particularly memorable as a man of great vitality who is, nonetheless, trying vainly throughout to retain a youthful veneer. Ultimately, though, none of the characters in the play predominate. Instead, Murray balances them with clever juxtaposition: Nance and Ellen, Owen and Michael. These characters are lured into a tragic situation so subtle that the conclusion arrives, progressively but delicately fashioned, swiftly, seemingly inevitably, as in the great dramas of ancient Greece.

The title role in *Katie Roche* is drawn with such strong characterization that the lead actress dominates the words and actions of the play. This is actually to the play's benefit, though, for the vibrant, inconsistent Katie is completely original as a character on the Irish stage. The predicament of Katie at the end of the play is somewhat akin to that of Pegeen Mike at the conclusion of Synge's *Playboy*--both come to understand that they are trapped in a man's world that is beyond their control. While Pegeen's situation provides an ironic epilogue for Synge, Deevy's more fully realized character leaves the stage with an even more provocative ambivalence. As well, *Katie Roche* manifests a significant linguistic achievement, for it is an early attempt to portray inarticulacy in literal and symbolic ways.

The Big House moves along seamlessly for a drama that relies so significantly on a historical backdrop for the framework of its scenes. Political and personal turmoil are interwoven with great effectiveness. Furthermore, the lead female role in this play, like Katie Roche, embodies feminine characteristics rarely seen onstage. At the end of the play, Kate Alcock bears her family's tragedy with admirable courage. She manifests the overwhelmingly positive image of an independent femininity that is uncompromising, practical, and forward-thinking.

Along with the merits, of course, the audience would be apt to note some defects in each of the plays. For example, *The Big House* may seem to suffer from too much abstract argument for the sake of its author's political commentary, and the play's aesthetic value may be somewhat compromised by its historically-driven structure. *Autumn Fire* ultimately seems more pitiful than tragic, and perhaps the play pulls its characters too seamlessly toward its "inevitable" conclusion, as if they lack the ability to notice and to even try to prevent the tragedy. Perhaps *Thomas Muskerry* too is more pitiful and tragic--one wonders

whether Muskerry could have done anything else to resist his fate, which also derives in part from coincidental and melodramatic elements. *John Ferguson* too contains melodramatic touches, particularly in the character who is not only harsh and miserly but who rapes Ferguson's daughter, Hannah. Katie Roche, meanwhile, is so substantially drawn that other characters in the play are relegated to limited roles. The play thus seems unbalanced--perhaps experimental, in a sense, for its plot is driven by the lead character's whimsical actions.

More importantly, however, by consciously departing from the generic conventions of the peasant play, the five plays of Ervine, Robinson, Murray, Deevy, and Colum offered audiences characters and plots the like of which had not been seen previously on the Abbey stage. In a general way, spanning a wide range of Irish experience, these plays and the whole of Irish social realism offered the potential to inspire wonder by taking audiences into uncharted territory. Broadly, typically, social realism did establish a genre, the peasant play, which at first provided city-dwellers--Dubliners--something new, remote, and wonderful: a glimpse at the rural life of Ireland's West.⁵⁵

Subsequent variations of social realism, in these five plays especially, defied the conventional peasant play by reconfiguring the territory of Irish experience that could be explored onstage. These plays first relocated dramatic settings, moving them away from the familiar territory of the rural peasant's modest farmhouse--to a Big House, the ancestral home of the landed gentry; to the Workhouse, dwelling-place of the destitute; to a time-worn country cottage; to a comfortable, decent, two-story Irish homestead. Likewise, the stage set, which typically featured the humble kitchens of the peasant play, could be transformed into a living room or drawing room, or even an infirmary. These varied interiors suggest the preoccupations of other social classes apart from the peasantry, so it is no surprise that characters in these plays include not only low- and middle-class farm workers but also servants, members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, and even the displaced homeless. Peasant plays typically featured Catholic characters, but in these plays, Catholic and Protestant alike could be depicted onstage, and the characters even represented a range of belief, from the religious zealot to the firm believer to the skeptic.

While it may seem that realistic depictions of a range of Irish experience serve

mainly to illustrate local color, in fact these five plays' collective inclusiveness makes a serious, intentional, and not-so-subtle statement to audiences about what it means to be Irish. In fact, the drama of social realism suggested that Irish experience, even in its most ordinary facets, could be both profound and inclusive. Even stripped of the poetic language of the rural fisher or farmer of the West, which Synge inflated and exploited for the purposes of his drama, Irish drama could portray peasant life from other parts of the country--Murray's Cork, Deevy's Waterford, Ervine's County Down--as a worthy and valuable subject.

As has been suggested, this drama of social realism could not only usher in but also challenge the peasant play, which in a sense limited representations of the Irish to rural, farming life. In this vein, Padraic Colum's *Thomas Muskerry* in 1910 shifted the dramatic concern of the Abbey stage to the working poor of the Irish midlands, with penetrating insights into social changes taking place in Irish society. In *John Ferguson* (1915), meanwhile, St. John Ervine brought to the Abbey stage for the first time a serious drama of the character and concerns of Northern Ireland. T. C. Murray's *Autumn Fire* (1924) demonstrated that material for profound tragedy could be found even in the mundane lives of rural peasants. *The Big House* (1926), by Lennox Robinson, was the first play to chronicle the turbulent years of the struggle for independence; moreover, its chronicle came from the perspective of unique set of characters for the Abbey Theatre of its day--an Anglo-Irish Protestant family. Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche* (1936) was the first important play written by an Irish woman to deal honestly, realistically, with the challenges of marriage and womanhood in the new Catholic Ireland.

The drama of social realism could also be subtle and symbolic, particularly as it addressed the cultural contexts of its day outside the theater walls. Each of the five plays considered here appeared at a crucial time in the emergence of Ireland. For example, by depicting the tragedy of an Anglo-Irish Protestant family in *The Big House* at a time when the Irish Free State had recently been achieved, Lennox Robinson used drama to question the tolerance of the Abbey's nationalist audience, and to force onlookers to question the role of the Anglo-Irish in the new nation. Furthermore, on another level, considering these plays collectively, it is more than coincidental that each grapples thematically with a conflict

between youth and age--for, in the wider historical and political context, this was an age when a timeworn colony was in the process of becoming a fledgling nation.

The two earliest plays considered in this dissertation, *Thomas Muskerry* and *John Ferguson*, are tragedies of old age. Writing in an age of heightened national consciousness, when the British imperialism which had long held Ireland in check was beginning to give way, the playwrights may or may not have been aware of the political ramifications of their choice of dramatic subjects: in each of the tragedies, an impotent old order collapses. Muskerry and Ferguson are pathetic figures who, in their tragic circumstances, gain the sympathies of the audience. However, the tragedy of Ervine's old man, who stands for the old order of Ulster Unionism, seems to work on an overtly political level in a way in which Colum's play does not. Nevertheless, Colum felt compelled to write an article responding to his critics in order to diffuse ideas about his political intentions:

The tragedy of the play is due to the impotence of old age. As a matter of fact the central character is not inert; he is moving towards something, he is struggling against what thwarts his purpose. . . I say boldly that Crofton Crilly and Albert Crilly are common types. You will find father and son in every Irish town. Then say you "England is largely justified in keeping Ireland under her iron rule." I am concerned with human facts not with political inferences.⁵⁶

Even in dissociating himself from "political inferences," Colum could not avoid the underlying fact of their existence through interpretation.

The third play under examination, T. C. Murray's *Autumn Fire*, is in many ways transitional. It introduces the theme of the May-December marriage, though like *Muskerry* and *Ferguson* it is a tragedy of age and impotence. In Murray's drama, however, there are no villains. Each character shares some burden of responsibility for what happens, but no one is ultimately to blame. Youth overtakes age, but in the end they both suffer. Thus, the passing of an age is seemingly deemed inevitable. Nevertheless, the parochialism and narrow-mindedness which Ellen Keegan represents perhaps suggests a vision of the constrictions associated with the new, emerging Catholic Ireland.

In the last two plays, youth ambivalently succeeds age in plays which are inherently concerned about the kind of place the new Ireland will be. *The Big House*, though it is a tragedy, is also a celebration of the young Kate Alcock's defiant will to endure and to

reconstruct her place in the new nation. *Katie Roche* is the tragedy of a young girl who enters into a marriage within a comic plot construction; more fundamentally, the play is about the societal strictures faced by Irish women, the difficulties of marriage, and the limits of communication.

In a basic sense, this dissertation is an attempt to reintroduce students and scholars alike to the dramatic achievements of some inconspicuous playwrights from the early Abbey Theatre by presenting critical introductions to several of their pioneering dramatic works. Alongside the great dramatists of the early theater, Yeats, Synge, and Gregory, *should* stand the names of those who approached greatness--social realists such as Padraic Colum, St. John Ervine, T. C. Murray, Lennox Robinson, and Teresa Deevy. Nonetheless, if any of the latter are known at all today, it is for their accomplishments rather than their play writing--for, as one important drama critic has argued, "in Ireland [writers] continue to be judged as personalities" more than as artists.⁵⁷ Although it is not the specific focus of this dissertation, the list of achievements of these five playwrights certainly is in itself impressive and, as a final note, bears mentioning.

Padraic Colum (1881-1972), the founder of Irish social realism in drama, began as an actor for the incipient National Theatre Society and participated in the founding of the Abbey Theatre. His three plays written for the Abbey in the first decade of the century, *Broken Soil*,⁵⁸ *The Land*, and *Thomas Muskerry*, were among the Abbey's first to receive popular acclaim. Nonetheless, for economic as much as philosophical reasons, Colum left Ireland in 1914 and lived, like his intimate friend James Joyce, as an expatriate for much of his life. Colum was a prolific, popular, and successful writer: he wrote twenty-three plays, and although it has been said that he "never ceased to think of himself as a dramatist,"⁵⁹ he was a poet, biographer, novelist, short story writer, essayist, folklorist, and writer of children's stories who published sixty-one books and hundreds of essays, articles, and introductions. His later life was to include teaching stints at Columbia, Wisconsin, and Miami Universities, the City College of New York, and Rollins College. He served as president of the James Joyce Society and for several years as president of the Poetry

Society of America, as well as editor of numerous periodicals. Elected to the Irish Academy of Letters, he earned honorary doctorates from Columbia University and Trinity College.

Thomas Cornelius Murray (1873-1959), known to most only by his first two initials, was primarily a teacher in his native Cork and was, from 1915 to 1932, headmaster of the Inchicore Model Schools in Dublin. He was also a family man, with five children, and, having come to writing plays at age thirty-seven, he became one of the most important and popular playwrights of the early Abbey Theatre. With the first production of *Birthright* at the Abbey in 1910, Murray became recognized as “the first dramatist to write of rural life from the inside.”⁶⁰ His role in the evolution of the Irish national theater is substantial, for he is considered the greatest writer of “the realistic drama of peasant life that won for the Abbey Theatre its international recognition.”⁶¹ His plays have been seen on stages worldwide, as well as on American television, and have been translated into German, Spanish, Welsh, Breton, and Japanese, as well as printed in Braille. Among the many accomplishments of his literary career, Murray was a founding member and Vice President of the Irish Academy of Letters, president of the Irish Playwrights’ Association, and director of the Author’s Guild of Ireland. He was, in 1949, awarded an honorary Doctorate of Letters from the National University of Ireland. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Murray’s distinguished career lies in the celebrated conclusion of his most acclaimed work, *Autumn Fire*, which has held many an audience breathlessly on the edge of their seats, in stunned silence, after the utterance of the final words, among “the best known in Irish drama.”⁶²

Esme Stuart Lennox Robinson (1886-1958) was associated with the Irish National Theatre Society for nearly fifty years, making him in many ways the figure with the most significant sustained influence on the direction of the early Abbey Theatre.⁶³ Robinson was the writer of twenty-two plays performed at the Abbey, most of them comedies. He was influenced greatly by Bernard Shaw, under whom he studied in London before his promotion to manager of the Abbey; perhaps as a result of Shaw’s influence, Robinson “wrote smoother and subtler dialogue than any Irishman of his time,”⁶⁴ and was considered “the finest stage craftsman of the Irish drama.”⁶⁵ In 1910, Yeats termed Robinson, T. C.

Murray, and R. J. Ray, “the Cork realists,” but in comparison with these writers, Robinson’s work was much more varied and experimental, ranging from realism to expressionism, from problem plays to social comedy. The most highly praised of Robinson’s skills as a playwright were a “penetrating wit edged with enough malice to nick the unwary, a sureness of dialogue, and a gift for characterization.”⁶⁶ In his long association with the Abbey, Robinson served as manager from 1908-1914, as director-producer from 1923-1935, and as member of the Board of Directors from 1923-1958. In addition to drama, he wrote fiction, biography, autobiography, essays, and an important history of the Abbey. He was a founding member of the Irish Academy of Letters and received an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Trinity College in 1948.

Teresa Deevy (1894-1963), one of the most popular and acclaimed Abbey playwrights of her day, is widely considered, after Lady Gregory, to be the “second lady” of the Abbey Theatre.⁶⁷ Deevy’s achievement is all the more remarkable considering that she suffered from Meniere’s Disease, a condition of the inner ear, which rendered her deaf from the time of her years as an undergraduate at University College, Dublin. While studying lip-reading in London, she became interested in drama and resolved upon becoming a playwright by 1919. After ten unsuccessful years of submitting manuscripts to the Abbey, in 1930, Deevy’s three-act play *Reapers* initiated a six-year run of successful Abbey productions which culminated in her acknowledged masterpiece, 1936’s *Katie Roche*. In much of the work of her later years she turned to writing plays for radio rather than the stage, but from 1930 to 1958, Deevy wrote at least twenty-five plays, as well as short stories, children’s stories, reviews, and even a ballet. In spite of or perhaps because of her deafness, Deevy was particularly attuned to silence; she filled her plays with directions for pauses and silence, demonstrating how the unspoken could be used for effect, and even as a weapon, anticipating the work of Harold Pinter.⁶⁸ Shortly after she was elected to the Irish Academy of Letters in 1954, John Jordan wrote that “no other Irish dramatist of the last quarter century has been more concerned with probing realistically the vagaries of human nature.”⁶⁹

St. John Greer Ervine (1883-1971) established a name for himself as a realistic

playwright who presented the Abbey Theatre with “the Northern Irish peasant as he had never before been presented to the world.”⁷⁰ The singling out of Ervine as an important writer of the early Abbey Theatre may seem odd, since he regarded the Abbey more as a regional theater of Great Britain than a national theater of Ireland. Nonetheless, from the time of his first-produced play, *Mixed Marriage*, at the Abbey in 1911 until he left for the war in 1916, Ervine wrote his best and most serious drama, and at the invitation of W. B. Yeats, he served briefly as manager of the Abbey in 1915-16. Furthermore, of Ervine’s twenty-four plays, two with Irish settings and characters, *Jane Clegg* and *John Ferguson*, are considered his finest. A war injury in 1918 necessitated the amputation of his leg. Thereafter, he returned to England, where he had previously met and made a lifelong friend of Bernard Shaw. In London, three plays, each of them topical comedies of manners--*The First Mrs. Fraser*, *Anthony and Anna*, and *Robert’s Wife*--had runs of two years. Ervine at this point established another significant aspect of his dramatic career, as a critic with a reputation for forthrightness and acerbity, for the *Observer* from 1919 until 1939 and, briefly, for the *New York World* in 1928-9. One of his several non-fictional works related to drama, *How to Write a Play*, reveals his primary dramatic concerns with realism, characterization, and economy, unity, and simplicity of construction. He also wrote several novels and opinionated biographies, including *Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends*. Ervine served as president of the League of British Dramatists, was a member of the Irish Academy, and was awarded honorary doctorates from St. Andrew’s University and Queen’s University, Belfast.

To provide a basic overview of what is to come, each of the chapters which follow presents a critical analysis of one of the five plays, arranged chronologically by date of first production. The analysis within each chapter is divided into seven subsections.

The first of these subsections, *Contexts*, considers the play in light of the social, political, biographical, and literary environments within which it was constructed. The five plays examined in this dissertation have often been cited for their contextual value (for demonstrating the social atmosphere of their age, for example), yet never have such citations led to serious critical exploration. Such attention within the chapters of this dissertation,

then, is intended to flesh out in greater detail ways in which the play arises from and responds to its contexts.

The second subsection, *Interpretation*, introduces and discusses the play's themes, often suggesting ways of reading beyond obvious or literal meanings, both in terms of and apart from its contexts. Because of the social concern of these plays, the highly politicized environment in which they appeared, and the heightened social awareness of early Abbey Theatre audiences, the implications of Irish nationalism especially enter into discussions of interpretation, even when they are not overtly intertwined with the play's themes.

Subsequently, information on professional performances of the play at the Abbey and elsewhere (particularly in England and the United States) is presented in a subsection entitled *Stage History*. This subsection, along with the one which follows it, provides some sense of the play's popularity; as well, a lack of performances in certain periods or within certain locales is, in some cases, as interesting as the details of the productions--particularly for plays like *Thomas Muskerry* and *The Big House* which have been performed rarely, if at all, since their first production. Largely, the focus of the *Stage History* subsection is on performances at the Abbey Theatre; although performances outside Ireland are also considered, such performances were, with few exceptions, the product of tours by the Abbey Theatre players.

It is important to note here that when a play opened at the Abbey, it was performed for a single week, on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, with an additional matinee on Saturday. The program changed every week and performances missed would not be seen again for some time. Theater policy dictated that revivals would not occur until several months after the original production. The Abbey directors, who decided on the plays to be performed as well as the policies followed, finally broke with precedent in March 1924, allowing Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* to become the first play ever to run for two weeks at the Abbey.⁷¹

If a play was not revived within twelve months, the Abbey lost sole rights on it--and generally such plays tended to recede into oblivion. A play could, on the other hand, secure a privileged and lasting status within the Abbey repertory if the directors selected it for publication by Maunsel & Co. in the "Abbey Theatre series."⁷² Plays were also accorded

such status by inclusion in the repertoire of the Abbey's touring company, which performed not only throughout Ireland, but also in England and America, and eventually worldwide.

The fourth subsection, *Critical Reception*, provides background on assessments of the play from performance reviews and from literary and dramatic criticism. In a general way, this subsection establishes the great praise and significant estimates of the five plays by a range of critics from the time of the first productions through recent critical attention in critical histories of Irish drama--in spite of the fact that the plays are largely forgotten and neglected today. This section also is of interest because it allows for a view of the critical climate which was responsible for evaluating these plays. One finds that critical expectations--and evaluations--of an Irish play could vary widely, particularly depending on which set of critics, Irish, English, or American, was judging it. Within Ireland, the criticism shows, in many cases, the ways in which these plays could initiate debate and discussion. As well, it often provides a measure of critical and popular tastes and potential reasons for the neglect of certain plays.

Next, a complete list of printings of the play texts is presented in the *Publication History* subsection. As mentioned above, records of publication provide a relative measure of a play's success since only a privileged number of Abbey plays were chosen by the directors for publication or for inclusion on tours. The history of a play's publication also suggests, in some cases, that a play can become endowed with a *literary* significance even if its *dramatic* significance diminishes through lack of performance.

A subsection entitled *Texts* discusses how manuscripts and previously published texts or editions of a play may contribute to one's overall understanding of the literary work. Devoting such attention to drafts of the plays is important because it often shows how conscious decisions and revisions on the part of the playwrights under consideration can alter a play's effect most significantly. In the case of two of the five plays, *John Ferguson* and *Katie Roche*, manuscripts were not available and, it seems, no longer exist. In fact, it seems fortunate that extensive manuscript materials exist for three of the five plays, considering the not infrequent fate of such materials: in Dublin, stories abound of manuscripts burned by their author or lost over the years.⁷³

In cases in which drafts of these plays exist and are accessible, one of the most

consistent changes is that lofty lyricism quite frequently found in the drafts of plays is toned down before final publication. Sometimes, the drafts of the play merely show the playwright refining the dialogue, but more often than not, in *Thomas Muskerry*, *Autumn Fire*, and *The Big House*, one sees the playwright, as he constructs, coming to terms with the ideas of his play in addition to finding the means of expressing them.

Each chapter concludes with a bibliography for those interested in studying the play or playwright further. After the final chapter, a general bibliography of twentieth century Irish drama, for further reference, is also included.

CHAPTER 2

THOMAS MUSKERRY

A Play in Four Acts

by Padraic Colum

Contexts

Similarities have often been noted and comparisons drawn by Irish critics between the plot and theme of Colum's *Thomas Muskerry*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and Balzac's *Pere Goriot*. While the theme of the cruelty to the older generation by the younger is shared by these works, and although this theme has often been called universal, at a closer glance, Colum's dramatic preoccupations are rooted more firmly in Ibsen and in the immediacy of social circumstances in Ireland than in Shakespeare, Balzac, or human nature "in general."

Colum was the first serious Irish realist in the dramatic genre, "a formative influence in the development of a native school of Irish playwrights."¹ In this vein, Colum brought to the Abbey stage a version of the problem play, the serious dramatic form in which Bernard Shaw excelled on the English stage, following Ibsen. The Abbey in its earliest years had made a strong name for itself by producing a heavy diet of peasant comedy, most notably in the plays of Lady Augusta Gregory and John Millington Synge; at that time, peasant comedy so dominated the stage that it was offset only by the verse drama of W. B. Yeats, until Colum's work and that which followed it added new layers of depth to the Abbey repertoire.

As a problem play, *Muskerry* originated from a social situation which its author knew well from personal experience. Padraic Colum² was born in 1881 in the Longford workhouse, where his father served as master. Eventually, Padraic's father fell into debt and

was forced to resign. Nevertheless, during the years in which the Colum family lived comfortably in the workhouse, with their father in a privileged position as master, Padraic's early life and memory would be inundated with the images and banter of the indigents of the workhouse.

The subsequent years of Colum's life were rather unstable, and as the eldest, by necessity, he grew up quickly. The family moved in with their grandmother, while their father went his own way, seeking work in the West of America. Upon the father's return, he gained employment on the rail lines in Dublin, and young Padraic was enrolled in a nearby national school. Plagued by alcoholism especially in his Dublin years, Padraic's father did work his way up to stationmaster and secured for young Padraic a post as a railway delivery boy. However, Padraic's mother died in 1897 and, eventually, Padraic's father again lost his job. Some of the eight children were dispersed among various relatives, and the rest were provided and cared for by their eldest brother, Padraic. It is not surprising, then, that two of the primary preoccupations of Colum's early work, in *Thomas Muskerry* and elsewhere, were the burdens of responsibility and a yearning for the freedom of the open road.³

Nonetheless, young Padraic benefited from his Dublin surroundings in many ways in the first decade of the 1900s. At the time, Dublin was the center of nationalist movements to revive Irish culture, and Padraic participated with fervor. He began to use the Gaelic form of his name at this time, and he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret, illegal military group committed to the cause of Irish independence. Meanwhile, feeding his intellectual and artistic nature, Padraic frequented the National Library of Ireland, where he befriended James Joyce. Colum began publishing poetry in Irish nationalist newspapers in 1902, and soon thereafter he became part of the established Dublin literary circle when he gained the recognition and acceptance of William Butler Yeats and George Russell (AE). Colum joined the emerging theatrical movement in Dublin as an actor and writer, and after the Abbey Theatre was opened in December 1904, Colum's *The Land*, in June 1905, proved to be the theater's first popular success.⁴

Colum's early drama was well-received and generally successful, at least in part

because the playwright himself was so in touch with the people about whom he was writing. As an Irish Catholic reared in a workhouse and on his relatives' farms, Colum was very much attuned to the life of the rural peasant. One ironic example of Colum's proximity to the Irish peasant is that his father was one of those arrested in the violent riots which erupted from protests against *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907. In terms of his inherent understanding of what it meant to be lower-class and Catholic in Ireland, Colum had no rival among his fellow early Abbey playwrights. While Synge and Lady Gregory, as Protestant, upper-class outsiders, drew on secondhand observations of Irish peasants' actions and speech, Colum could rely on personal background and memory. Moreover, what Colum observed, noted, and created in his characters differed significantly from the preoccupations of the other Abbey dramatists. Yeats's dramatic ideals refused to allow for the fact that Colum was writing drama from his *experience* of the "real" life of a peasant. Yeats was not wholeheartedly hostile toward Colum's attempts to push the Abbey in the direction of the realist movement; in fact, he praised and encouraged Colum's new direction as adding diversity to the national theater.⁵ However, wrongheadedly fueled by an abstract notion of the unchanging, "eternal Celt," Yeats complained that "the people [Colum writes] of are not the true folk. . . They are the peasant as he is being transformed by modern life."⁶ Philosophical differences between the two would remain a bone of contention for Colum, ultimately contributing to his decision to leave Ireland several years later.

Nonetheless, in the first decade of the new century, Dublin was good to Padraic Colum on several levels. Beyond his theatrical successes, in 1909 he met Mary Gunning Maguire, and within three years they were married. The Colums formed a lifelong personal and belletristic partnership, collaborating on children's books, travel writing, collections of Irish folklore, and criticism, among other literary projects. Unable to earn a living in the Irish literary world, they left Dublin in 1914 for what would become an international lifelong excursion during which they settled, especially, in New York, Paris, and London. Finances, however, were not the only reason for Colum's departure from Dublin and withdrawal from the Abbey: Colum was also engaged in a feud with Yeats and other dramatists over the direction of the Abbey and the new Irish drama.⁷ Though he would

continue writing plays after he left Dublin, after *Thomas Muskerry*, he “wrote nothing of significance for the Irish theatre for over fifty years.”⁸

Although the majority of Colum’s professional life was devoted to other literary genres, most especially poetry, it was as a dramatist that he first established his literary reputation. *Thomas Muskerry* was the final in his trilogy of Irish peasant plays. The first, *Broken Soil* (1903; revised as *The Fiddler’s House* in 1907), is about the choice an aging peasant farmer must make between his duty to home and family and the promise and attraction of the romantic life of a wandering musician. *The Land*, the second play in the trilogy, was perhaps so successful at the Abbey because it seized upon a prominent issue of the day -- peasant control and ownership of the land. In the play, two aging farmers attempt to keep their children from emigrating by arranging two marriages. Nonetheless, Colum’s play suggests that even the prospect of land ownership is not sufficient to keep talented young people in Ireland -- the stronger and brighter of the two couples in the play chooses to emigrate. In each of these plays, as in *Thomas Muskerry*, Colum presents family dilemmas which seem to have almost universal relevance: the differing choices and responsibilities of members of older and younger generations are at the core of his dramatic art.

Still, Colum himself said of this trilogy, “I wrote [those plays] for an audience that was tremendously interested in every expression of national character.”⁹ The playwright’s vision, while it may be regarded as universal, also works on a symbolic level on which it grapples with significant social issues specific to Ireland. Whereas in *The Land*, Colum was commenting on an issue that was on the minds of most of his contemporaries, *Thomas Muskerry* raised new issues for its Irish audience to confront and contemplate. In this sense, the fact that the play is set in an Irish workhouse is most significant: industrialization and subsequent changes in the British isles resulted, for most of Ireland, in widespread and inevitable impoverishment.

The workhouse was established in Ireland in 1838 by the British government as a way of dealing with the Irish poor, but as British historian Cecil Woodham-Smith pointed out in *The Great Hunger*, “the problems of poverty in England and Ireland were totally

different.”¹⁰ England was throughout the 1800s very much an industrial and industrializing nation, while Ireland largely remained rural and agricultural. As a result of the 1838 extension of England’s Poor Law Act to Ireland, according to Martin Wallace’s *A Short History of Ireland*,

the country was divided up into Poor Law districts or unions, each with a workhouse managed by a board of guardians. It was a degrading system, which divided families and often forced peasants to give up their land and enter the workhouse when their real need was for temporary assistance.¹¹

Britain’s attempts to remedy the problems of rural Ireland were at first welcomed in Ireland, even by many Catholics, in part because solutions were so desperately needed, in part because the government administration in Dublin was regarded favorably, as being tolerant, in the aftermath of reforms which had emancipated Catholics in the previous decade.¹²

Still, however favorably the Irish Poor Law Act was received initially, over time, industrial England’s attempts to address the plight of the poor in Ireland, by all accounts, failed miserably. Woodham-Smith wrote that

the immense amount of destitution in Ireland would entail a gigantic expenditure if a poor law was to be effective. Workhouses for hundreds of thousands would have to be erected, and the annual cost would be at least five million pounds a year; there was no possibility of raising such a sum in Ireland.¹³

Instead of investing in such measures, the British government adopted a laissez faire attitude toward Ireland’s problems; even in the most dire of circumstances, England declined to disrupt the natural course of trade,¹⁴ operating on “the basic principle of the great English poor law reform. . . that relief should be given only in workhouses, and. . . that any departure from the rule resulted in population increasing faster than the means of subsistence.”¹⁵ Also, British government officials were motivated to thrust the burden of responsibility on Irish landlords whom they blamed for what was taking place.¹⁶ In turn, faced with the economic burdens thrust upon them, Irish landlords raised their rents and became more rabid and resolute in evicting tenants who could not pay. Vast numbers of evicted tenants, in turn, were thrust into the workhouses.¹⁷ A vicious cycle, in which economic value displaces human value, is replicated, and even evoked symbolically, at the level of the family

in *Thomas Muskerry*.

The play is very clearly situated in a changing Ireland which, even in the rural town of Garrisowen, is becoming increasingly concerned with commerce and industrialism in the early 1900s. At the end of the play, an old pauper reveals how Thomas Muskerry came to the workhouse:

Each of his brothers could lift up their plough and carry it to the other side of the field. Four of them could clear a fair. But their fields were small and poor, and so they scattered.¹⁸

This period in Ireland was a time of great dispersal, from farms to towns, from towns to cities, and a time of emigration from Ireland to England, and to America. The traditional notion of the Irish family was threatened by this dispersal. The members of Thomas Muskerry's family went their separate ways, and he took up employment in the Garrisowen workhouse. But the family that Thomas Muskerry has established in Garrisowen is even more susceptible to the economic circumstances and corruptions of modern urban life, and the standards they live by are not the same as the value system of their predecessors. As discussed in the following section, the play contains a noticeable changing of the guard, which allows the playwright to suggest concerns about the future directions of life for the poor and the old in Ireland.

Interpretation

The play's most elemental theme, the struggle for independence from the ties which bind the individual, seems obliquely suggestive of Ireland's colonial situation. The way that Muskerry is steered away from his wish to retire to an independent life by a family much more concerned with his economic rather than his human value does seem to reverberate with potential political associations -- with echoes of Britain's economic rather than human interest in Ireland as a colony, and with particular echoes of the persistent late nineteenth century Home Rule debate regarding the degree of Ireland's sovereignty within the British empire. However, *Thomas Muskerry* contains no overt political theme, and its concern is much more fully *social* than it is *political*.

At every level the play maintains an intense awareness of economic and social issues; it depicts the social climate of a changing Ireland, where class and status take on an increased role as a result of industrialization. From the opening stage direction, readers and observers of the play are made acutely aware of the fact that *Thomas Muskerry* is not a peasant comedy which hearkens back to rural (and nineteenth century) Ireland in the pervasive tradition of the Abbey plays of its day. Colum's play opens not in a rustic peasant's cottage, but rather in a town, in an office which doubles as an apartment. Books, papers, and files visible on a table indicate that business transactions take place here; the heap of newspapers on a chair suggest that the apartment's dweller is aware of the goings-on in the world far beyond his home; and the "bunch of big keys" which hang on a rack indicate the significant responsibility with which its owner must be entrusted.

In fact, the most conspicuous detail of this opening description may also be taken as the play's most pointed political comment. A picture of Daniel O'Connell, the "Great Liberator" who was the first nationalist politician in Ireland,¹⁹ hangs above the doorway. While O'Connell was held in most high esteem throughout his lifetime, many who followed him contended that by committing himself to loyalism and pacificism in his last years of public life, he betrayed the nationalist cause. One must wonder why O'Connell's picture hangs in a workhouse office -- perhaps this is merely a detail remembered from the Longford workhouse of Colum's youth. Nevertheless, the picture also perhaps suggests, with irony, that the great achievement of O'Connell's legacy is the Irish workhouse, implying that O'Connell hangs comfortably within the British workhouse system -- which itself remains as a product of his passively conceding and yielding to the British rather than actively fighting for the suffering and starving Irish peasantry.

One might simply be inclined to take for granted the economic and social atmosphere of the play: it may seem natural, because the play is set in a workhouse, that clear distinctions are drawn between the paupers who inhabit the workhouse and the petit bourgeois who manage it. However, social and economic circumstances in the play are much further complicated, and the class distinctions ultimately somewhat blurred, by the play's two pervasive sets of value systems. The old order, led by Thomas Muskerry himself, the "pattern for the officials of Ireland," is contrasted sharply with the emerging

new order. These two orders can be classified generally as follows: the established order is traditional, intellectual, and self-sacrificing, representing the values of older generations, while the modern, business-minded, and self-interested new order represents the world view of younger generations. One of the play's most dominant themes is the collapse of the old order, symbolically depicted through the tragic downfall of its last noble representative, Thomas Muskerry.

Particular focus on social class and status, and on the two value systems, is initiated within the opening lines of dialogue, upon the entry of the workhouse porter, Felix Tournour. Immediately, Tournour asserts his right to an air of superiority over young Christy Clarke -- declaring that it is not Christy's "office" to challenge him since Christy is "poorhouse rearing" (114). Ironically, Tournour admits just a few lines later that he himself was born in the workhouse (115); his claim to superiority seems based on his desire to climb his way out of his lowly social standing. It is only appropriate that Tournour is the character who first calls attention to social status, since he is the character most preoccupied with it, and since he will prove to be the most nefarious representative of the new social order in the "modernizing" Ireland that Colum's play evokes.

Colum's judgment of the new order is implicit in the actions and even the physical description of its representative, Felix Tournour. The porter is drawn as a stock villain with a melodramatic character description: he is dark, ugly, and bony, with discolored teeth and "the ugly dress of a pauper" (113). Beyond the physical elements, in almost every way, Tournour is Thomas Muskerry's opposite: unlike Muskerry, he is not interested in the events, or even in the natural world, outside of town. Furthermore, he does not understand Muskerry's aspirations for independence, much less his nightly walks in the country. He seems incapable of any emotions outside of jealousy and resentment, although he is adept at contrivance and disguise. Tournour is superficially deferential to the "Master's" face but mockingly resentful behind his back.

As the porter loses his timidity over the course of the play, and his selfish, deviously two-faced nature is revealed more fully, he becomes intimately involved in, even at the core of, the transfer of power that brings Thomas Muskerry down. In the opening scene, Tournour announces that "we've been under him long enough" (115). The jealous

resentment of the porter is initially manifested through underhanded jabs and mockery, such as “The Devil’s Rambles,” a bar-room rhyme composed by Tournour:

The Devil went out for a ramble at night,
 Through Garrisowen Workhouse to see every sight.
 The oul’ men were dreaming of meat to come near them,
 And the Devil cocked ears at the words for to hear them,
 ‘Twice a year we get meat,’ said the toothless oul’ men,
 ‘Oh, Lord send the meat won’t be too tough again.’
 . . .
 Deep dreaming that night of fast days before,
 Sagging the walls with the pull of his snore,
 In his chamber above, Thomas Muskerry lay snug,
 When the Devil this summons roared in his lug--
 ‘Get up,’ said the Devil, ‘and swear you’ll be true,
 And the oath of allegiance I’ll tender anew.
 You’ll have pork, veal, and lamb, mutton-chops, fowl and fish,
 Cabbage and carrots and leeks as you wish,
 . . .
 Long years you will have without envy or strife,
 And when you depart you’ll find the same life,
 And in the next world you’ll ’ve your will and your sway,
 With a poorhouse to govern all your own way. . .’ (121-3)

While Albert and Crofton Crilly, Muskerry’s grandson and son-in-law, acknowledge the rhyme’s cleverness and humor, Tournour values only the rhyme’s message--because it allows him to express his bitterness toward Muskerry’s “privileged” status--apart from whatever the rhyme can get him, for example, the beer that Crofton Crilly promises to buy him.

However, much more insidious than Tournour’s rhyming is the conspiratorial plot in which he engages. As gatekeeper, Felix Tournour has the advantage of knowing “what’s coming in through the gate” (144), so that when Thomas Muskerry makes a crucial mistake, Tournour is there to catch it. But instead of alerting the master about the tons of coal which have not been delivered to the storage shed, Tournour uses this information to his advantage. He has told James Scollard about the missing coal in act one (130); by act two, largely because of the coal situation, James Scollard has been appointed to succeed Muskerry as workhouse master. “The Master that’s going to give me promotion is Mister James Scollard,” Tournour says to Crilly. “And you know why” (144) -- for, as Tournour has already imparted to Crilly, “doesn’t a gate-keeper know what’s coming in through the gate [and what is not], and doesn’t that help him to promotion? Sure it does,

and you know it, Mister Crilly” (144). By passing on what he knows about the missing coal to James Scollard, once Scollard has pressured the Crillys into forcing Thomas Muskerry’s resignation, Tournour has in effect sealed Muskerry’s fate.

To add insult to injury, throughout the early parts of the play, Tournour cannot resist flaunting his news by taunting the unknowing Muskerry about the missing coal, and about the master’s failing memory, which seems to have caused the error. In act one, Tournour makes his primary occupation to ensure that the master’s stove has sufficient coal. As he is shoveling the coal, the gate-keeper makes a “*purposeful rattle*” to call Muskerry’s attention to the coal. Furthermore, Tournour verbally jabs at the master, by saying, “Coal. It is to be remembered. Coal” (121). Lest one think that Tournour’s primary intention is to make sure the apartment is well-heated, at the crucial moment when Muskerry is about to be informed of the missing coal, Tournour again enters, banging and rattling the stove, drawing attention to himself, and announcing, “Coals, I’ll have you know, Mister Muskerry,” and, when he is asked to leave, he adds gratuitously, “There’s still coals, Mister Muskerry” (135).

It is Tournour, in fact, who witnesses, participates in, and even initiates the critical stages in Thomas Muskerry’s demise. Tournour takes pride and pleasure in announcing to Muskerry, finally, at the end of act three, that he knows about the missing coal:

The Guardians might take account of Thomas Muskerry in a way he mightn’t like. . . I know something about you. . . You and your hundred tons of coal. . . The Guardians will take account of you. Will they? Talk to them about the hundred tons of coal. Go and do that, my pattern for the officials of Ireland! (169)

Provoked by Tournour’s mocking disrespect to confront the Guardians about his mistake, Muskerry sets his mind to appear before them, to preserve whatever is left of his dignity, trust, and self-respect (170). As a gesture of repentance and repayment, Muskerry decides he will return his fifty pound annual pension; however, his daughter Marianne has taken control of his finances, and asking her for the money forces her, finally, to confess that the family’s entire savings has been lost by Crilly’s foolishly backing of a bill from James Covey, the same man who shorted the workhouse of the promised amount of coal. Disgusted by this news, and desperately seeking to be free of the family, Muskerry declares

that he will throw himself at the mercy of the Guardians and request that they provide for him. When he appears before the Guardians, however, Muskerry suffers a stroke, so that when act four begins, he is recovering in the Select Ward of the workhouse.

Given Tournour's prior role in the events leading up to Thomas Muskerry's downfall, it is appropriate that he is responsible for the final indignity. Oblivious to the fact that the old master has just suffered a second, fatal stroke, Tournour tosses Muskerry's belongings out of the Select Ward, with an utter lack of respect for the man and for his possessions, even Muskerry's Bible, his holy pictures, and a timeworn book containing mementos of Muskerry's younger days. Tournour's conducting the transfer of Muskerry's belongings from the Select Ward to a pauper's bed is an action which completes the play's tragedy, in a sense, by reducing Thomas Muskerry, literally and figuratively, from workhouse master to workhouse resident.

Following Muskerry's pitiful demise and death, as the young man Christy Clarke has prophesied, the town is "left to people who have bankruptcy inside and outside of themselves" (177). Tournour himself is the most blatant example of the new order which orchestrates the demise of Thomas Muskerry and that for which he stands; however, just as culpable as Tournour are the members of Muskerry's family, themselves exemplifying aspects of the new, emerging value system.

Each of the characters of the Crilly family -- the daughter and son-in-law, Marianne and Crofton, the granddaughter Anna and her new husband James Scollard, and the grandson Albert -- conducts his or her affairs by plotting and covert discussion rather than honest, straightforward confrontation. Moreover, each of the members of the Crilly family acts out of self-interest rather than out of any genuine concern for others, including even other family members. Albert Crilly, Muskerry's grandson, has wit and insight but these qualities are somehow perverted by his other qualities. Even though he "might be a bank clerk or medical student" (122), Albert seems unable to advance in the world of commerce without the assistance of the recommendation of his grandfather. Albert seems to resent having to assist his aging grandfather with the workhouse accounts. It is he who finds the error in Covey's coal delivery; however, he hesitates in notifying his grandfather and, instead of telling him directly about such things, Albert prefers to avoid confrontation by

leaving notes for his grandfather. Like Felix Tournour, Albert is underhandedly disrespectful and, overtly, a coward. Albert's father, Crofton Crilly, is a "loiterer" (123) and foolish risk-taker who loses his family's life savings to James Covey. Crofton conspires to set up Albert as the "impartial" coal inspector, so that Albert can willfully deceive the Guardians, at his father's behest, and thereby preserve the family's income -- Muskerry's annual pension (157).

Meanwhile, Muskerry's daughter Marianne covertly plots to keep her father in the family home after his retirement, not out of concern for his well-being but because his presence will lend credence to the idea that the family is economically stable so that the bank will not foreclose on their business. Marianne's actions are at times incredibly underhanded, as when, for example, she pretends to persuade her father to return home with her from the workhouse even though she has already finalized these arrangements without consulting him (178-81). When Muskerry learns of her scheming and declares that he will leave on his own, Marianne blocks him from doing so by telling him he needs a doctor's discharge, forcing him to remain in the workhouse (182). Marianne acts most despicably, though, when she forces him to go before the Guardians in the first place. She denies her father the fifty-pound pension that belongs to him, telling him that she has no money to give him. However, as soon as he sets off for the workhouse, Marianne hands over to her daughter a check which will enable Anna and her new husband to buy new furniture. This perhaps is the play's ultimate expression of the misplaced values of the new order: Marianne chooses to deny her father that which will preserve the last vestige of his dignity because she must gratuitously add to her daughter's economic prosperity.

The responsibility for Marianne's choice lies perhaps more with Anna and James Scollard than with Mrs. Crilly herself. Anna and James insist on receiving Anna's dowry immediately, even though they are aware that the money will leave the Crillys completely destitute (153-4). Anna herself is no different than the other girls her age, according to her father: "She's like the rest of them, that girl! All for herself!" (152). In turn, Anna blames this on her parents, declaring, "This house would teach anyone to look after themselves" (155).

James Scollard, even more fully than Felix Tournour, embodies the values of the

new order. Early in the play, Anna tells her family that Scollard has learned from Tournour “something about the stores which are in grandfather’s charge”, that “Mister Scollard wants you to take a lot of care in the way you bring things forward,” and that “What Mister Scollard is doing is for our good” (130-1). Through Anna, Scollard forces the Crillys to pressure their patriarch to resign, and, by courting Anna, Scollard sets himself up as Thomas Muskerry’s successor. Despite Anna’s claim that James Scollard acts in the Crillys’ best interests, the most that can be said for Scollard is that he acts toward them without malice, yet with an impartiality which amounts to indifference. After learning of his in-laws’ financial hardship brought on by Covey’s deceit, without a trace of sympathy, Scollard persists in demanding from them Anna’s full share of the money owed her. Rather than being restricted to his in-laws, Scollard’s indifference extends to everyone with whom he deals. Although Scollard seems to have relaxed the rules and seems, superficially at least, to be more lenient a workhouse master than Muskerry, what separates them at heart is that Muskerry had a genuine interest in helping the poor, whereas Scollard believes that successful administration of the workhouse depends on abstract statistics rather than the human element. Upon taking over the duties of the master, Scollard declares,

[Thomas Muskerry] had excellent qualities--no one will deny that. But we’re coming into a time when statistics are in the field. . .A person in charge of a workhouse will have to know about the itinerant in relation to the normally productive, the ratio of disablement. . . (139)

In sum, Scollard stands as a figure who claims to act by the rules, with impartiality, but who achieved his position through his ambition and significant self-interest. Still, something about Scollard’s administration seems uneven. For one, his claim to impartiality seems disingenuous when he tells Marianne, “I think I’ve leaned backwards a little to help you” (184). Furthermore, for reasons which are not explained, Scollard grants a discharge to the blind piper Myles Gorman, allowing him to wander the open road as an itinerant, though Muskerry, following the rules, had not allowed it. Still, Muskerry values the great intelligence and vitality of a man who, though he is “blind and a wanderer,. . .has not wasted his life” (118). Scollard, on the other hand, cares not for Gorman himself but for what he represents: while he grants the discharge, Scollard is simultaneously devising a scheme to

advise “the Local government as to how to deal” with itinerants (184). Whether Scollard’s plan is merely an extension of his self-serving ambition or whether it is a genuine attempt to address the problems of the itinerants “in the abstract” is difficult to determine.

Colum’s play thus clings to the notion of an Ireland in a state of flux, where traditional values are being replaced through the actions of younger generations of conniving, self-interested “whippersnappers” (126). Still, Colum’s indictment of Ireland’s state of affairs is not as reactionary as it may seem. For one, the play acknowledges that many of the changes are generally *meant* to improve present circumstances (though perhaps only in intention). The workhouse’s “new regulations,” for example, are intended to provide outside supervision, so that situations like the coal deficiency will not be repeated (149). Likewise, Scollard’s statistics are meant to improve the management of the workhouse. Still, Colum’s vision does not allow much room for hope within the institution of the workhouse. If the system improves, it does so only minimally, and in spite of any changes, the poor will remain poor, as one of the paupers himself acknowledges (140).

Nevertheless, whether or not the system itself changes, even by remaining the same, the system *can* change individuals. Muskerry’s old friend Peter Macnabo laments this very situation:

Doesn’t [this] tell you something of the state of affairs we’ve got into? Workhouse miscalled! Towns where nothing is made and people only think of jobs and pensions! And what is before us, I ask you? Bankruptcy! Bankruptcy in all directions! (161)

Macnabo’s vision is of the workhouse as a stagnant, bureaucratic remnant of Ireland’s past which reduces individuals to a bankruptcy which is both fiscal and moral.

Thomas Muskerry’s tragedy is, in large measure, attributable to his refusal to see that he is caught up in a system which creates moral bankruptcy. Muskerry is not only blind to the initial deceit of James Covey, he is ignorant of all of the myriad cover-ups and deceptions which are subsequently arranged by members of his own family:

- *James Scollard conspires with Tournour to displace Muskerry.
- *Crofton arranges to secure Scollard’s position as new master.
- *Crofton conceals his family’s financial loss after he learns that Covey has left the country.
- *The Crillys initially keep the news of Anna’s marriage from Muskerry.

- *The Crillys conceal the fact of the missing coal from Muskerry, and they cover-up its loss from the Guardians by arranging for Albert to be appointed outside inspector.
- *Crilly learns from Christy Clarke that Muskerry plans to retire to a country house and thereafter prevents and delays the plans.
- *Crilly tells Marianne that Muskerry's pension is eighty pounds, yet Muskerry thinks it is fifty pounds.
- *Marianne Crilly conspires to keep Muskerry from moving out of the Crillys' home, and when she fails, she covertly arranges for him to remain in the workhouse.

Muskerry's betrayal by his family is not meant to suggest that the Crillys are an isolated incidence of moral degeneracy. They are not unique, in fact, and *Thomas Muskerry* outlines a whole pattern of betrayal by families. Even more lamentable than Muskerry's situation is Myles Gorman's: Gorman's brother sent him off to Dublin to visit a sick friend, and while he was gone, the brother sold off their farm and fled the country, leaving him destitute and bound for the workhouse (119). Another of the workhouse paupers, Shanley, tells Muskerry, "Living in a bad house--living with your own. . .[T]hat's what brought him into the Workhouse. And that's what brought me here, too" (174).

What is perhaps more remarkable than these betrayals themselves is Muskerry's failure--or refusal--to perceive them. For example, when Christy Clarke relates the story of Myles Gorman's abandonment by his brother, Muskerry responds,

[Gorman's] brother did wrong, but he didn't do so much wrong to Myles Gorman. . .He sent Myles Gorman to his own life. He's a man who went his own way always; a man who had never any family or affairs. A man, I'd have you know, Christy Clarke, far different from me. I was always in the middle of affairs. Then, too, I busied myself about other people. It was for the best, I think, but that's finished. (119)

Enticed, late in his own life, by the prospect of the freedom and independence of a life like Myles Gorman's, Muskerry willfully overlooks the hardships that must be endured over the course of such a life.

Similarly, Muskerry refuses to see the compromises he has made in his own life as workhouse master, compromises which will never permit him to escape the burdens of obligation. Muskerry tells Peter Macnabo, "It was a great thing to exercise the authority of a Master of a Workhouse, giving one's mind to the poor and homeless" (164). He is proud of his record as the pattern for the officials for Ireland, and especially proud of the

good he has done:

No one that comes after me can have the same heart for the poor that I have. I was earning in the year of the famine. I saw able men struggling to get work that would give them a handful of Indian meal. And I saw little children waiting on the road for some relief! That's why no one that comes after me can be as good a Master of Garrisowen Workhouse as I am. (128)

Still, in spite of whatever good he has done, Muskerry's breed, characterized by human kindness and sympathy, is dying. He acknowledges as much when he talks of leaving the workhouse: "it will be the same as if a history was ended. . . And when I go out of the gate there will be something different here. Old Ireland will have gone out of it" (142). Clinging to the notion that he has made a difference, Muskerry refuses to hear Peter Macnabo's disillusioned words:

MACNABO: I thought I was Master there, but I was just as much of a pauper as any old fellow in the wards.
MUSKERRY: Let you never say that, Peter.

In spite of his refusal to heed Macnabo's warnings, and in spite of the fact that he seems blinded to the corruption that surrounds him, Thomas Muskerry is acutely aware throughout the play of the "badness of the world" (129).

In fact, Muskerry's chief preoccupation, in the late stage of his life which the play presents, is to find a way to retreat from the world's "badness." Consciously aware that he is nearing the end of his term, Muskerry relies on long walks in the country and the romance novels which Christy Clarke fetches for him as daily escapes from the day-to-day drudgery of the workhouse. More than anything, he looks forward to the day when he will be his "own man" (148), when there will be "no more claims" on him (136). He looks forward, in his old age, to establishing a personal autonomy, to relinquishing his responsibilities on his own terms. Specifically, this means retiring to a country house and living a quiet, comfortable, secure life on his pension. Nonetheless, while he remains in his workhouse apartment, he realizes that he "ought to be as secure and contented. . . as if he was in his own castle" (120)--he *ought* to be, but cannot be, for he constantly feels under siege. He has a dim perception of his own failing abilities--his grandson Albert, for example, now helps him with the accounts, and he nearly forgets his workhouse responsibilities on occasion--and a profound awareness of his responsibilities. Twice

during the play he tells his daughter he can do more for the family, yet each time subsequent revelations not only prevent Muskerry's plans for retirement, but also reduce and humble the stature of the workhouse master. First, Albert's note discloses the coal missing from the stores; Muskerry stands at the door, looking out, "*a helpless man*," according to the stage directions (135). Muskerry then tells Christy, "They want me to resign from this place. . . And it has been shown to me, Christy, that I'm at my failing time" (137). At the end of act one, defeated, Muskerry has not even "the heart to read" the love stories Christy has brought him—his romantic visions have given way to inescapable realities.

Subsequently, at the end of act three, Muskerry decides that he will confess to the Guardians his culpability in the matter of the missing coal, to preserve some vestige of dignity and self-respect. Marianne denies him the fifty pound pension to which he is entitled and which he intends to return to the Guardians. He tells her,

I have provided for [the family] long enough. And now you would take my place, my honour, and my self-respect, and provide for them over again. . . I thought that nothing could humble me. I have been humbled. (172)

Indeed, the play itself may be seen as a repeated series of revelations by which a man of integrity and substance becomes pitiful. In the final act, Muskerry is reduced to tears when he realizes that he will never be free of the familial burdens placed upon him, and he suffers a fatal stroke only after his dreams of independence have been crushed, when, with a last humiliating blow, he is "given the pauper's bed."

In the final analysis, Thomas Muskerry is the victim of a combination of circumstances. Certainly, the family's deceptions and machinations play a significant role in their patriarch's decline. The changing of the times is not necessarily bad, but it is, apparently, inevitable. To a degree, old age itself is to blame. "We come to an end, Gorman; we come to an end," Thomas Muskerry declares, with a tinge of resignation. Nevertheless, one of the most admirable of Muskerry's traits is his unwillingness to yield to the limitations of his aging body, nor to the world's "badness"; instead, he continues to the end in pursuit of freedom and dignity. As act four begins, Muskerry appears disheveled and broken down, having suffered a stroke, yet it is clear that his spirit remains firm. He tells the pauper Shanley, "Don't pass your whole day here" in the workhouse. "You

ought to go out along the country road” (173). Muskerry himself looks forward to leaving the workhouse as well that day, bound for the little country cottage the Guardians have arranged for him. Even after he suffers the second stroke which will ultimately end his life, Muskerry appears at the door making one final struggle, slowly, pitifully, to escape. He can barely even pronounce the word, yet he somehow manages to carry himself out of the ward:

TOURNOUR: And where are you going?
 MUSKERRY (*in a thickened voice*): Ow--out. (*Motioning with his left hand, he moves across ward, and goes out by door of corridor.*)

Returning shortly thereafter to learn that Tournour has relegated him to the bed of a pauper, even with a last, pitiful gesture, Muskerry struggles to preserve a tinge of his dignity: he begins to make his bed with his own sheets. His final utterance is in asking Myles Gorman to say a prayer, that “God be good to Thomas Muskerry” (187).

While Muskerry himself must come to an end, the dying out of what he stands for is not necessarily inevitable. Other representatives of the older order are left to carry on. The play concludes with the sounds of Myles Gorman’s pipes on the road, expressing symbolically the freedom and independence for which Thomas Muskerry struggled. Peter Macnabo and young Christy Clarke will carry on with the idea of making clay pipes, a vision which Muskerry admires but which he had not the energy to pursue. In the end, perhaps Macnabo, Gorman, and Clarke are able to carry on because they have been able to escape the constraints and demands of the workhouse world, and to see that life is lived beyond the institution. For Thomas Muskerry, what is crushed more than even the man himself is his idealistic vision of the good that is possible within the institution of the workhouse; the creative, the intellectual, and the good are still possible, but they are only achieved individually, by men rather than institutions.

Stage History

Thomas Muskerry premiered on May 5, 1910 at the Abbey in a performance produced by the Theatre’s Director, Lennox Robinson. The play debuted on June 11, 1910 at the Royal Court Theatre in London, performed by the traveling Abbey company.

Thomas Muskerry was twice revived at the Abbey for multiple performances within the following two years.²⁰ It was revived again at the Abbey in early August 1936. Colum's revised text was performed at the Abbey's temporary home, the Queen's Theatre, in October 1964, of which Colum has commented:

When *Thomas Muskerry* was revived by the Abbey in the early sixties it was done so badly that it attracted practically no audience. . . Of course, the workhouse has gone out of the consciousness of the people and the Abbey should have produced it as an historical play.²¹

The specific faults of the performance are unclear, but at least, as Colum's comments suggest, a revival of *Thomas Muskerry* as a historical play seems merited.

Critical Reception

Even before the first production of *Thomas Muskerry* in 1910, "generous predictions of [Padraic Colum's] eventual stature as one of the great dramatists of Europe were made," and he earned the "reputation of being in the vanguard of the new Irish drama."²² Colum's first two plays, which immediately preceded *Muskerry*, enjoyed great popularity, since they "were as much patriotical and national as they were artistic."²³ In *Thomas Muskerry*, however, Colum departed in a new direction that would prove less popular but more influential: as a dramatist whose work was critical of Irish life.

Robert Hogan, Richard Burnham, and Daniel P. Poteet, in their study of Irish drama from 1910-1915, *The Rise of the Realists*, usefully point out that *Thomas Muskerry* became caught up a debate about dramatic values in Ireland: "In these years any debate about an Irish play was usually argued from a purely aesthetic view or a purely nationalistic one."²⁴ Furthermore, in polarized responses, almost every critic used the pen either to bury *Thomas Muskerry* or to lavish it with overweening praise. Aesthetically, Colum's play drew comparison with *King Lear*, *Pere Goriot*, Ibsen, and Strindberg, among others.²⁵ Lennox Robinson, who produced and directed the original performances of the play, regarded it as Colum's best.²⁶ Meanwhile, to some Irish nationalists, *Thomas Muskerry* was, in the tradition of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, "a denigration of the Irish

character.”²⁷ In the latter aspect, the play was labeled “gloomy” and precipitated a debate in the press about whether “gloom” was a worthy dramatic subject. “Jacques” in the *Irish Independent* wrote that, “I fail to find any good reason for this play,” finding it unrelivingly dull and too grossly realistic.²⁸ The play received so much attention, in fact, that one review even coined the term “Muskerryism,” synonymous with defaming the Irish character. On the other hand, and in the opposite respect, Ella Young wrote that

I am one of the several people who think *Thomas Muskerry* a great play, an achievement—not only the greatest play Padraig [sic] Colum has written, but the greatest play that has ever been written by an Irishman.²⁹

A reviewer of the first production of the play accurately posited that *Thomas Muskerry* had “produced a crop of curiously inadequate critiques.”³⁰

Over the years, criticism of the play, even in less-politicized environments, has been plagued in like manner by unevenness. While noted theater critic Andrew E. Malone wrote in 1929 that *Thomas Muskerry* is “in almost every respect inferior” to Colum’s earlier work, Zack Bowen in 1970 declared it “in many ways the most moving of [his] three early plays.”³¹ Similarly, where Malone praised Muskerry as “true to life in rural Ireland, sparing nothing of the drab existence in an Irish country town, [memorable] as a picture of the ‘petty bourgeois’ of Ireland,”³² Micheal O hAodha deemed the play an “unconvincing” picture of small town life.³³

While such conflicting claims call into question the value of their dramatic judgments, much more dubious is the contention by Colum’s principal biographer, Zack Bowen, that

the chief value of *Muskerry* and indeed the three plays comprising Colum’s contribution to the Irish theatre is less in their dramatic or literary quality than in their sociological and historical importance.³⁴

Bowen’s point that Colum’s plays “were the first of a kind of drama”³⁵ is well taken, but his judgment of the plays’ importance seems a gross underestimate, particularly in light of other commentary on *Thomas Muskerry*.

The generation of realists who emerged in the 1930s, for example, evaluated *Thomas Muskerry* in a different light. Upon witnessing the 1936 revival of the play, Sean

O'Faolain expressed his opinion that the play was "the greatest in the Abbey's repertoire."³⁶ At the Abbey Theatre festival of 1938, Frank O'Connor praised Colum and *Thomas Muskerry* as the only attempt to date an Irish writer had made to write about the middle classes.³⁷ Frequent theater collaborator Hugh Hunt credited Colum with having

made no attempt to "poetise." His dialogue is far closer to the actual speech of the greater part of Ireland than is the dialogue of his predecessors. The plots of his plays concern relevant and vital situations.³⁸

Furthermore, countering Bowen's valuation of the play on exclusively social terms, Robert Hogan has in recent years offered several noteworthy estimates of the play's literary value. Hogan and Richard Burnham in *The Art of the Amateur* deemed *Muskerry* Colum's "lasting contribution to the modern Irish drama";³⁹ Hogan wrote in "*Since O'Casey*" and *Other Essays on Irish Drama* that *Muskerry* "trembles on the edge of greatness";⁴⁰ and, writing about the version of the text published in a 1963 revised edition of *Three Plays*, Hogan called *Thomas Muskerry* "a masterpiece."⁴¹

Perhaps the most useful of all criticism of the play, meanwhile, came in one of the 1910 first-production reviews which did put aside politics. "Imaal" seems justified in pointing out the singular flaw of a slight inconsistency in *Muskerry*'s character when he initially covers up his mistake about the missing coal stores,⁴² as well as in asserting, furthermore, that

The striking merit of Mr. Colum's play is that all the characters are genuine. . . One profound critic said that Mr. Colum's new drama was a collection of characters rather than a play. . . [T]here is no scope [in the play] for any ascent into the poetical. This may seem a fault to some, but under the circumstances I fear it was inevitable.⁴³

Publication History

Colum, Padraic, *Thomas Muskerry* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1910).

-----, *Three Plays. The Fiddler's House, The Land, Thomas Muskerry* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1916; Dublin and London: Maunsel, 1917; revised ed., New York: Macmillan, 1925; new revised ed., Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1963).⁴⁴

Texts

An abundance of manuscript materials for *Thomas Muskerry* exists. Apart from the fact that this abundance can, of course, be attributed to Colum's having preserved the drafts of his plays, it is also important to begin a discussion of the *texts* of Colum's play by noting that there are two different published versions of the play. In 1963, over fifty years after he had first published the play, Colum revised and expanded *Thomas Muskerry* significantly. The play as it was published in 1910 contained three acts; the 1963 revision expanded the text to four acts, adding as well two characters, one of which is key to the superiority of the play thematically in its later version. Further discussion of the major changes resulting from the revision will be provided below.

Of the drafts and manuscript materials pertinent to *Thomas Muskerry*, five are stored at the National Library of Ireland—MSS 413, 414, 13293, 21318, and 29141. These range from Colum's earliest plans and sketches in 1909 to texts related to the revised 1963 version. As well, the corrected proofs of the edition of the play published in 1910 are held at the University College, Dublin library, and drafts of the play's 1963 revision are held at the library of the State University of New York at Binghamton.

Before turning to a specific consideration of the main trends suggested by the evolution of these manuscripts, it is necessary to say a few words about the inception of the play. In 1909, while he was working on another play titled *The Desert*, Colum began to flesh out in his notebooks his ideas for the play which became *Thomas Muskerry*. The playwright's original title was *The Workhouse Master*. However, when the play was accepted for performance at the Abbey, at the behest of Lady Gregory, who wished to avoid confusion with her similarly-titled play, *The Workhouse Ward*, Colum agreed to change his title.⁴⁵ Thus, just four weeks before the first performance of the play at the Abbey, and while rehearsals were being conducted, Colum experimented with such titles as *The Magnate* and *The Man Who Missed the Coal*. He settled, of course, finally, simply, on the name of his main character, Thomas Muskerry.⁴⁶ In similar fashion, Colum fiddled with the name of the workhouse itself: Ardagh in the earliest manuscripts is changed to Clooney and, ultimately, to Garrisowen.⁴⁷

The remainder of this section will examine the stages in the development of the text, starting with the earliest drafts and proceeding chronologically, with observations on the thematic and character development throughout.

1. Colum's Notes (MS 413)

MS 413 at the National Library, a small brown notebook of twenty-one pages, bearing the title, "*The Workhouse Master*" *Notes for Play*, contains what appears to be the original notes for and sketching out of *Thomas Muskerry*. On the first inside page, the notebook is dated December 6, 1909. Colum sets down briefly the setting for each of the three acts; he lists and briefly describes the characters. With three exceptions, this character list is the same as that of the 1910 edition: Anna Crilly is not included in this list—she *is* present in the scenarios and drafts under the name "Georgina"; Albert Crilly is listed as a "medical student," though Colum later made him, merely, a would-be medical student; and Christy Clarke's last name is listed as "Eden." Colum's notes on the play begin, interestingly, with very specific attention to the details which would occupy the mind of the workhouse master and which create the play's chief conflict. With care, Colum outlines the structure of events to arrange chronologically for his main character's downfall, noting that the finances are accounted for each half-year on

25th March & 29th Sept. Half-yearly abstracts sent to Local Government Board three weeks afterwards. Local Government Board sends down notice three weeks afterward that auditor will attend.

Colum constructs the time-frame for act one by figuring that the master would depart for his walk in the countryside at 6 pm, returning to go on rounds for about a half-hour at 9 pm. Colum then offers a basic nine-sentence synopsis of the entire play:

Thomas Muskerry has been working for his family all his life. Now at the age of sixty he wants to live to himself. His ideal is to take a cottage outside the town & settle down. He intends to retire in a year when he will be thirty years in the place. The Crillys discover that he has some intention of leaving & it is their interest that he should leave soon and stay with them. As they discuss the matter Albert discovers the mistake about fifty tons of coal. Mrs. Crilly shows him the mistake. Now he thinks he will make a cunning move by resigning. He sends up his resignation.

Subsequently, the playwright outlines in “scenarios” the basic action for each of the three acts, using short phrases to encapsulate what will become fully realized thoughts when he writes out the play’s dialogue. These scenarios are worth quoting in their entirety because Colum labored over them⁴⁸ and because they succinctly encapsulate the plans which are realized in the initial drafts of the text:⁴⁹

Scenario for First Act

The time is about 8 pm - Felix Tournour the Porter’s assistant is sweeping up the office and muttering satirical rhymes - Christy Eden a youth who tidies up the Master’s office enters. A scene between the pair preparing the entrance for Thomas Muskerry.

or

Myles Gorman finds his way in to ask a favor.

Christy Eden is tidying & Felix Tournour comes in with a message from the Porter - The scene - Then Myles Gorman enters - They prepare the entrance for Thomas Muskerry - He comes in - The Scene between himself & [inserted later: His first business is to write about Albert] Myles Gorman - Myles Gorman goes off & Thomas Muskerry turns to Christy Eden - His own life - He sends Christy Eden on a message.
* * *

Then he goes on his rounds leaving a direction with Felix Tournour to sweep the place - Felix sweeps & gives vent to his satire - Albert Crilly enters - Albert & Felix - Crofton Crilly comes in - then Georgina - Finally Mrs. Crilly - They discuss the situation from Georgina’s information - Mrs. Crilly - Albert & the books - He is preparing the abstracts - the discovery - Crofton Crilly & Georgina go - re-enter Thomas Muskerry - The scene between himself and Mrs. Crilly begins with the question of Albert’s appointment - She is worried with him - then Albert brings up the discovery The arguments for resignation - “You could stay with us”. - She develops this point - Albert goes out - Muskerry to Mrs. Crilly - She goes - Christy returns with the papers - Muskerry announcement - The bell tolls
* * *

07/13/10

The Second Act of “The Workhouse Master”

In a room off shop in Crilly’s House - Crofton Crilly is seated in front obstructed & having business with his pipe - Thomas Muskerry is near fire - He turns his chair a little away during Georgina’s speeches - Georgina is at window gossiping of people in street - Christy Eden enters from back & goes to Muskerry’s chair - a dialogue between the two while Crofton Crilly packs his pipe & Georgina watches in the street - then Mrs. Crilly enters - She sends

Georgina into the shop - Amongst the four there is gossip of what has happened - then Georgina comes back with the question of credit for the Doctor's daughter - Thos. Muskerry goes out with Christy - The

scene between Crofton Crilly & Mrs. Crilly - then Georgina comes on - the scene between Mrs. Crilly & Georgina - Albert with Felix Tournour - Mrs. Crilly & Georgina go off - Felix Tournour & Albert - The door opens & Thomas Muskerry comes out - Thomas Muskerry & Tournour - Tournour goes to the door & is muttering - Muskerry calls him back - the scene between the two - He puts on his hat to go off - Muskerry & Mrs. C - The crisis - Christy Eden comes in - Muskerry takes the papers - He tells what he is going to do - the bad. . .⁵⁰ - then the cat marking his meal - To return to the Workhouse.

8/12/09

The Third Act of The Workhouse Master

It is morning in the Infirm Ward - the paupers are round the fire - They talk of Muskerry, how he has come there, how he is leaving, he has been at mass - Then of Felix Tournour - They go out to mass - Muskerry comes out - Muskerry by himself - then Christy Eden comes in - He gives Christy directions about the meal - calls him back & questions him - the talk goes to the cottage - Mrs. Crilly enters - The long scene between the two - Scollard - Muskerry goes in - Mrs. Crilly goes out - ~~Then the paupers come back~~ Muskerry comes out by himself - He tries to go down the passage, comes back - sits down at fire - Myles Gorman comes in - then Felix Tournour

Felix Tournour pulls out the bed - the scene between the two - Myles Gorman and Thomas Muskerry - the third stroke the form on the bed - Albert comes on - Mrs. Crilly & Albert - Mrs. Crilly & Crofton - the bed brought in - the condolences - The Pipes on the Road.

On one hand, these scenarios lay out the basic plot, not just of the initial draft, but of the published version of *Thomas Muskerry* itself. However, the scenarios also exemplify the differences of the early versions of the play from the eventual text published in 1910. The roles of Felix Tournour (who is here merely the porter's assistant and who does not aspire to be appointed Ward Master) and James Scollard are greatly enlarged in later versions. Colum, in the scenarios, has not decided how Muskerry will be informed of the missing coal. Furthermore, in the first draft and the scenario, the whole Crilly family gathers to talk about Muskerry in act one. It is there that "Georgina" shares the hearsay that her grandfather is planning to move to a house in the country, and also that Albert discovers the

mistake. Thus, the play's crisis at this early stage seems forced rather than allowed to develop. Similarly, the whole family is gathered at the end of the play to mourn Muskerry's death.

2. First Draft (MS 413 and 414)

The above-mentioned notebook in MS 413 continues with the first draft of act one of *The Workhouse Master*. The draft begins with the scene in which Georgina (Anna) and Mrs. Crilly discuss the rumor that Thomas Muskerry is making plans to live on his own, followed by Albert interrupting them with the news of the mistake in the abstracts he has found. In a separate notebook, MS 414,⁵¹ Colum then moved backward to start the draft from his conceived beginning, with the scene between Christy and Felix Tournour, progressing as outlined in the notes back to the family scene he had already drafted in MS 413. MS 414 thus ends where 413 begins, forming a reasonably complete draft of act one.

3. Performance Texts, 1910 (MS 21318)

The Abbey Theatre donated to the National Library these texts, accessible only on microfilm in MS 21318 and used in the preparations for the 1910 performance. Contained in MS 21318 are a corrected typescript of acts one and two of *Thomas Muskerry*, which was at this stage titled *The Magnate*; attached to this typescript, some typed notes on the staging of the play, probably by Lennox Robinson, who directed the first production; a snippet of the conclusion of act three, handwritten, jotted by Colum on the back of an Abbey Theatre playbill; and copies of the actors' lines for each of the parts in the play. On the back of many of the pages are specific notes about the positioning of the actors on the stage. Particularly worthy of mention among the production notes are a visual rendering of the props and scenery for the opening scene, seen from overhead, and a listing of the entire cast of the play, actors and the roles they played. Two of the typed character parts are signed and dated by the actors: Eric Gorman (as Albert Crilly), March 29, 1910, and J. A. O'Rourke (as James Scollard), March 16, 1910.

4. Page proofs for the 1910 Maunsel Edition (MS 13293)

5. Maunsel edition of *Thomas Muskerry*, 1910

6. Drafts for the revised 1963 edition of *Thomas Muskerry*

Two sets of manuscript pages, brief sketches of dialogue toward the 1963 revision, and a complete typescript of the revised version. The first manuscript of six pages generally follows the beginning of act one, scene two. The second manuscript of sixteen pages follows fairly closely the conversation between Macnabo and Muskerry in act three.

The ninety-seven page typescript is nearly identical to #8, below. Only slight variances occur: the poem which Peter Macnabo recites on page 163 is missing, and a line of stage direction, "Mrs. Crilly is disturbed by all he portends," is added after Tournour's speech at the top of page 135.

7. Typescript for the Abbey performance, 1964 (MS 29141)

Identical to the typescript in #6.

8. *Thomas Muskerry*, revised edition in *Three Plays* (Dublin: Allen and Figgis, 1963)

This is the standard published text of the play.

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CHAPTER 3

John Ferguson

A Play in Four Acts

by St. John Ervine

Contexts

Somewhat paradoxically, St. John Ervine supplied the Irish national theater with a fresh and unique perspective by asking vital questions of national importance in his serious drama of the early 1900s. The playwright himself was from Ireland's northernmost and most unionist province, Ulster; throughout most of his life, he generally did not support the idea of nationalism in Ireland; and he regarded the Abbey Theatre as one minor, provincial theater within the British isles rather than as a *nation's* theater.¹ It may seem deeply ironic, then, to say of Ervine's work that it made a substantial contribution to Ireland's national theater.

The playwright was born John Greer Irvine in a suburb of Belfast in 1883 of parents who were deaf mutes. His father died when he was three, and the boy's maternal grandmother, Margaret Greer, to whom *John Ferguson* is dedicated, played a very significant role in his upbringing. According to Ervine's unpublished autobiography, Mrs. Greer would often tell the boy about his father, that he was

gentle and serious in his mind and habits, and that he had a great love of learning and literature: a love which, Grandma never tired of telling me, had put him in his grave before his time and would put me there too, if my fingers itched every time I saw a book.²

Ervine's grandmother died when he was ten, leaving his mother to care and provide for the boy and his sister as best she could. Without money to pursue higher education, at age seventeen, Ervine became an insurance clerk in Belfast and afterward in London.

In London he joined the Fabian Society and wrote for newspapers, eventually beginning also to write drama. Ervine became a friend and disciple of George Bernard Shaw; the two developed a lasting friendship based on their status as exiled Irishmen, and many years later Ervine would pen one of his most enduring literary works, a biography of Shaw.³ Ervine also met William Butler Yeats and had a short play, *The Magnanimous Lover*, and his first full-length play, *Mixed Marriage*, accepted for performance by the Abbey in 1911. It was at this stage, when he began to think of himself as a writer, that he added the literary-sounding “St.” to his name and John Irvine became “St. John G. Ervine.”

He continued to write plays while earning a living as a journalist, and in 1915 he was invited to become manager of the Abbey Theatre. That fall, he accepted the position, and *John Ferguson* was staged in late November. By July 1916, however, Ervine had resigned his position. He certainly was an awkward choice for the position of manager in the first place since, as a political unionist, he viewed the Abbey not as a *national* theater, but rather as “merely one link in a chain of repertory theatres covering the British Isles.”⁴ Among the many factors in Ervine’s swift departure, the most prominent, though, was the uncompromising and even bullying way in which he dealt with the Abbey players, who in late May of 1916 refused to perform under his management in a most public protest.⁵

Shortly after leaving the Abbey, Ervine enlisted in the British army and fought with an Irish battalion in World War I. He was very seriously wounded in action and had to have a leg amputated. Nonetheless, he returned to London and succeeded there and in New York as a caustic drama critic over the course of the next twenty years. In this occupation he especially deplored and turned a harsh pen toward sentimentality and commercialism wherever he found it in English, American, and Irish drama. Nearly all of Ervine’s adult life was spent in England. As his friend John Boyd observed, Ervine “greatly loved England, the English way of life, English literature: but. . .like Shaw, he felt himself a sojourner, even a stranger.”⁶

The aging Ervine was not the same man who had written in his 1915 preface to *Sir Edward Carson and the Ulster Movement* to remind English readers “that Ulstermen are

Irishmen; that they are proud of their Irishry; and that they dislike intensely any suggestion that they are aliens in a hostile land.” Ervine went on to declare defiantly that the English “inability to understand my countrymen has not prevented them from attempting to govern them.”⁷ In *John Ferguson*, Ervine was generally thought to have undertaken the very task of explaining the Northern Irish character to the world by writing a play about the *typical* Ulster Protestant, though he expressed in 1915 how little English generalizations about Ireland meant to him:

Few countries have suffered so terribly from loose generalisations as Ireland has, and few peoples have been so tragically misunderstood and misrepresented as the Irish people have been. . . by the English people.⁸

The first of many illusions held about Ireland by English people which must be dispelled is that there are two nations in Ireland: one, the minority, resident in Ulster and composed of Protestants, all of whom are thrifty, industrious, sober, honest, intelligent, brave and highly enlightened; the other, the majority, resident in the remaining provinces and composed of Catholics, all of whom are spendthrift, lazy, drunken, corrupt, ignorant, often cowardly. . .

In Ulster itself, nearly half of the population is Catholic, possessed of all the characteristic virtues and vices of the “typical” Ulster Protestant, differing only from him in the expression of their belief in God.⁹

In spite of these declarations, in his later years, the one time young Fabian became staunchly conservative and intensely unionist, bearing an abstract prejudice against the whole of Ireland and its literature--though retaining a very much provincial interest in and commitment to Ulster.¹⁰ Later in his life, deeply embittered by the partitioning of Ireland, Ervine felt moved to see distinctions such as Catholic and Protestant as a great divide and to reject the notion of his Irishness out-of-hand.

The fading out of Ervine’s career as a dramatist may have been the result of his loss of commitment and connection to the place which he knew best. His later plays, most notably *Boyd’s Shop* and *Friends and Relations*, are comedies of manners written for a British audience; after 1915’s *John Ferguson*, Ervine gave up writing serious drama. John Boyd lamented that Ervine’s most serious flaw as a writer was that he “imaginatively and

emotionally renounced his birthright as an Irishman and Irish writer,” a renunciation which other world-renowned exiles such as Shaw and Joyce, as conscious as they were of their exile and as harsh as was their criticism of their country, never made.¹¹

Interpretation

John Ferguson is grounded in a series of debates on moral issues which are at the fore of the play’s thematic concerns. D. E. S. Maxwell, in his 1984 critical study of modern Irish drama, classifies these debates as two systems of thinking at work which are best expressed by two definitive quotes:

‘An eye for an eye, da, and a tooth for a tooth’, says Andrew of the murder of Witherow. ‘That’s not the spirit that lives now, son!’ his father replies. ‘That’s the spirit that was destroyed on the Cross.’ Thus the play grounds the issues of that moral debate. . . [In] its main situations, *John Ferguson* shifts the participants to one or other of the two choices it permits.¹²

In 1991’s *Field Day Anthology*, Maxwell made the same point more succinctly by writing that the play contains two “bluntly opposed moral systems” -- “versions of an Old and a New Testament ethic.”¹³ In general terms, these claims are valid enough. However, Maxwell fails to acknowledge the subtlety and complexity which underlie the generalization he has outlined. To fully comprehend the play’s moral and philosophical thematic concerns, examining the text more carefully, especially in light of its subtle Biblical subtext, is a key to interpretation.

John Ferguson as a character is not only the physical center of the action on stage; he is also the moral standard by which all other characters can be measured. From the play’s opening moments, John’s spiritual devotion and moral uprightness are quickly and firmly established. He lives in a simple moral world in which hope equals faith, and his faith seems able to carry him through whatever troubles he and his family might encounter. Hope is desperately needed, for the great obstacles the Fergusons face are quickly established:

*John is physically impaired, unable to work on the farm.

*His son Andrew, raised to be a clergyman but financially unable to

become one, is a very poor farmhand.

*No longer prosperous, the family is in fact in danger of losing their home and property since they cannot pay the mortgage.

*They anxiously await word from John's brother Andrew in America, their last hope.

*Their sense of loss is deepened by the fact that four generations of Fergusons have been born in the house.

*The landlord, Witherow, is a "hard man" and has already cast out other tenants in similar situations.

John Ferguson's faith and patience are, at the opening of the play, a buffer against these dire circumstances. He reads a Biblical passage from the Psalms, "'weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning,'"¹⁴ and exhorts his wife to take comfort in it. "God never deserts His own people," he tells her. "We're tried a while, and then we're given our reward."¹⁵

By juxtaposing John's spiritual solace with his wife's distress over practical matters, Ervine leaves open the possibility that these words are *just* words. Sarah responds to John's plea to be comforted by declaring,

indeed, I hope it will, for we have need of joy in this house. We've bore enough trouble. Here's the farm mortgaged up to the hilt, and you sick and not able to do no work this long while, and Henry Witherow bothering you for the money you owe him!. . . (124)

Sarah continually acts as a foil to John's abstraction since she seems almost completely rooted in the pragmatic. Later in the play, a further calamity befalls the Fergusons when their daughter, Hannah, is raped. At that point, especially, Mrs. Ferguson's compassionate response, rooted in real human concern, seems much more noble than the way her husband remains distant, unemotional, and abstracted. Throughout the play, in fact, Sarah maintains a consistent fierce and practical loyalty to her family, and often these qualities are contrasted effectively to counterbalance the stoic disposition of her husband. At the same time, throughout the play one might say that Sarah's stance is one of desperation, and because she is so concerned with mere practical matters, she refuses to see larger issues.

At that, the greater evidence in the play suggests not only that she acts desperately, but that her desperation is undignified. For example, Sarah not only asks but expects her daughter to sacrifice herself for the salvation of the family home. Sarah has repeatedly heard her daughter say, "I wouldn't marry [Jimmy Caesar] if he was the last man in the

world" (128), yet in her desperation Sarah expects her daughter to make just such a sacrifice. "For God's sake, Hannah," she pleads, "have him if he asks you. Witherow 'll not spare us, and mebbe Jimmy 'll pay the mortgage" (132). Furthermore, after Hannah *does* accept Jimmy out of a feeling of obligation to her family, and returns home sobbing to tell her mother and father that she has tried but cannot stand him, Sarah responds with fear, anger, and bullying tactics: "But you promised him, Hannah! John, you're never going to let her break her word to the man? . . ." (144). Furthermore, Sarah is at her most harsh and least likable when, dejectedly trying to deal with the knowledge that Andrew has murdered Witherow, she blames Hannah: "it's your fault he's in the trouble he is" (191). In contrast to Sarah's desperate responses, the stoic endurance and spiritual hope of John Ferguson seem both noble and dignified.

Jimmy Caesar's character also counterbalances John Ferguson quite effectively in the play. At first, Caesar helps to further establish John's goodness and uprightness with his comment that

you're a forgiving man, John Ferguson, but I'm not, and never will be. Look at the way [Witherow] treated me and mine. I've never forgot that, and I never will if I live to be a hundred years old. (*Violently.*) I'll choke the life out of him one of these days! (130)

While Caesar's internalized bitterness immediately makes Ferguson seem more noble by contrast, in fact, the two share certain similarities. Both characters are more men of thoughts and words than men of deeds. Both accept Hannah's decision to marry Jimmy because it is what they want to hear.

However, whereas Caesar is extremely self-conscious of his great gulf between word and deed, one might say that John Ferguson is not conscious enough of the fact that he has structured his life around words at the expense of whatever action might be taken. This becomes especially clear when Hannah is raped by Witherow, and the family members must decide how they will respond to what Hannah has suffered. Sarah Ferguson and Jimmy Caesar both voice their opinion that if they had the power to do it, they would kill Witherow. By contrast, John Ferguson seems not only ineffectual but uncaring as a father in failing even to be angered by his daughter's rape. Instead of the injustice that has been done to Hannah, Ferguson seems fully focused on what *might* happen to Jimmy Caesar if

he were to murder Henry Witherow. It seems rather disingenuous for a father who has been bedridden for quite some time to rise from his illness and set out from his home on the night his daughter has been raped in order to spare the rapist from revenge. Ervine heightens the irony of the situation by the fact that Jimmy Caesar never actually leaves his home that night, while John succeeds only in forewarning the rapist of the intended retaliation.

In this light, when Caesar says, "I'm not like you, John Ferguson, that. . .can forgive a man that does an injury to you," one must wonder what the limits of Ferguson's forgiveness are, or if there are any limits. The man seems almost inhuman for not responding to his daughter's dilemma, and for directing his attention instead, abstractly, on a murder which *might* take place. Furthermore, it seems completely disingenuous for John Ferguson to remark, the day after his daughter has been raped, "I'm as happy this minute as ever I've been in my life because I know God's saved you [Jimmy] from sinning your soul with a murder" (172).

Perhaps this is disingenuous, but it is not therefore unbelievable--as Elizabeth Buckmaster has noted, John Ferguson as a literary character is "uniformly good without being unrealistic. He is devout, gentle, and forgiving, yet, unlike many virtuous characters, absolutely convincing."¹⁶ Perhaps Ferguson is most believable as a character because even while he struggles to remain true to his beliefs, readers and observers can witness and judge the limitations of a genuinely pious abstraction and investment.

In contrast to Ferguson's rigid stoicism, as flawed a character as he is, Jimmy Caesar at least reaches a profound awareness of his situation and of himself--though he still cannot act upon it. He knows and admits, in one of the play's most poignant (and at the same time disturbing) speeches, that he would marry Hannah whether or not she wanted to marry him:

Andrew: Would you marry a woman that doesn't want you?
 James Caesar: (*fiercely*) I want her, don't I? What does it matter to me whether she wants me or not so long as I'm married to her? (*His ferocity passes into complaint.*) Don't I know rightly she doesn't want me? . . . When she said she'd have me, . . . I was light-hearted and happy for all I knew she was only consenting to have me to save your farm, John. I had my heart's desire, and I never

felt so like a man before! (152-3)

Likewise, though he is a coward, Jimmy at least knows--and confesses that he knows--what he is and is not capable of: "I'm full of hate, and I want to hurt them that hurts me, but I haven't the courage to do it" (172). Toward the end of act three, having *not* committed the act of murder, and sorry that he has been unable to do it, Caesar's self-recognition is the first of three such scenes which structure the play's conclusion. A contrite Jimmy, amazingly contradicting Ferguson on a matter of religion, says,

I'm not saved from sin, John. I didn't leave Witherow alone because I didn't want to kill him. I left him alone because I was afeard to touch him. . .I'd be glad this minute if some one come in the door there and tole me he was dead. But I'd be afeard to lay a finger on him myself. That's the cowardliest thing of all, to want to commit a sin and not have the courage to do it. (172-3).

Still, in spite of his last few speeches, Caesar is not a man who becomes more righteous than John Ferguson. In the end he is, rather, a pitiful creature whose only consolation is in confession: "Sure, I must tell people the way I feel. That's the only thing that's left to me now" (175).

But what is more important about Caesar thematically is not his own self-recognition and contriteness as much as is what he contributes to the play's central conflict. Caesar is the man accused of killing Witherow, and the play's tragic effect is heightened because of the delay of Andrew's confession until the play's closing moments. Moreover, Caesar's newfound assuredness counterbalances John Ferguson's lapse into confusion. Though John Ferguson is absolutely convinced that Caesar has committed the murder (which is itself false), surprisingly, it is his faith that wavers. He tells Jimmy as act three begins to draw to a close, "I can account for nothing. . .outside God's will" (176)--which seems paradoxical because other of Ferguson's statements would lead us to believe that *nothing* is outside of God's will. Furthermore, the logic of John's theology seems fuzzy when he tells Jimmy that he must submit to the law. If only God can judge men's deeds, as John has stated (169), why does he insist that Jimmy must answer to the law (179-80)? One response that is not stated but is perhaps implied in the name of Jimmy Caesar's character is the statement attributed to Jesus that one should "render to Caesar the things

that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."¹⁷

If Jimmy and Sarah provide counterbalancing elements in the play, the greatest challenge to John's faith and his belief system comes from his son, Andrew. As has been quoted at the beginning of this section, Andrew stands for the idea that those who do wrong should be punished in kind. Thus, in the action of the play, Andrew thinks the Fergusons are not obligated to stop Jimmy from taking violent action against Witherow -- "it's right that he should kill him," Andrew says (159). And when he becomes convinced that Jimmy will not act, Andrew himself seeks retribution for the wrong that has been done to his sister. When Andrew appears on stage in act three, readers of the play know he has killed Witherow. Members of an audience watching a production will at least suspect that Jimmy has taken some action against Witherow, since at the end of act two Jimmy has left the house with a gun in hand. But readers of the play also are privy to Ervine's stage direction that Andrew has

a sombre look on his face. It is not the darkness of a man who is horrified by his own deed, but the darkness of a man who has set himself willingly to do some desperate work that must be done. (167)

This stage direction not only indicates that Andrew has killed Witherow, but also it seems that Andrew has done so fully justified in his own mind. He says to his father, "It's a plain matter that a child can understand. The man done wrong, and he has a right to suffer for it" (169). When John Ferguson rebuts his son's argument, Andrew responds only with, "I don't understand that kind of religion" (169). At the end of the play, Andrew admits his wrongdoing, but still he never concedes that he is remorseful, or that his father has been right all along. Andrew, instead, holds that Witherow *should* have been killed, and he says, "I'm not sorry I killed him" (188). In Andrew's recognition scene, the second of the three which structure the play's conclusion, he faces the fact that he must take responsibility for his action. "I must go, ma, for my peace' sake" (191), he says, and what seems most to convince him are the words his father has said to Jimmy Caesar: "'You can't hide from yourself'. . . There's nothing truer nor that" (192). How one judges Andrew's action is left for individual readers and observers to decide. But, at least, he has acted; and Andrew's action, and John's inaction, are at the fore of the play's thematic concerns.

But beyond the basic “eye for an eye” versus “turn the other cheek” debate which is foregrounded, the play also raises some of the most profound and important moral and ethical, theological and philosophical questions, to which John Ferguson in each case—at least in the earlier portions of the play—*seems* to have an answer:

*Does reason rule the world?

Sarah: There’s no sense or purpose in it. . .

John: There’s a meaning in it, whatever happens. I can’t see God’s purpose, but I know well there is one. His hand never makes a mistake. (127)

*Why do bad things happen to good people?

Hannah: It’s quare and hard to see what purpose there is in misfortune and trouble for people that never done nothing to deserve it!

. . .
John: Everything that happens is made to happen, and everything. . .has a purpose and a meaning. There’s things hid from you and me because we’re not fit to know them, but the more we fill ourselves with the glory of God, the better we get to understand the world. . .[S]in [is] not knowing or understanding! . . .Keeping your mind shut is sin. Not letting the sun and the air and the warmth of God into your heart—that’s sin. (127)

*Is a person morally justified in seeking retribution from those who do him/her wrong?

Sarah: If any one was to hurt me, I’d do my best to hurt them back, and hurt them harder nor they hurt me. That would learn them!

John: Would it? Men’s been hitting back since the beginning of the world, but hitting back has learned no one anything but hatred and bitterness. (167)

*Is murder justifiable under any circumstances?

Sarah: There are extenuating circumstances. . .

John: Nothing can extenuate a murder, Hannah! God’s Word is clear. [he quotes from Luke 6:27-30, “turn the other cheek”]

In spite of the grave spiritual assurance with which these retorts of John’s are delivered, and which seem to characterize John Ferguson generally, the man’s spiritual resolve and consolation begins to waver toward the end of act three, with the late arrival of a letter which would have prevented all of the play’s tragic events. Ervine has been criticized as being Hardy-esque for structuring his plot around the coincidence of a late-arriving letter.¹⁸ However, it is crucial to note that the tragedy does not hinge on the letter’s arrival at all.

Ervine could easily have constructed the play with a nearly identical tragic effect *without* including the letter or the uncle at all; the letter is essentially a *gratuitous* rather than an *essential* plot device which only contributes to, rather than inspires, the play's tragic proportion.

Nonetheless, the inclusion of the letter itself is significant, not because of its contributions to the plot, but because it complicates the play thematically. Immediately before the letter arrives, Hannah has responded to her father's Biblically-grounded arguments by declaring that "We all have our natures, da!" John retorts, "Ay, daughter, we have, but there's the one duty for the whole of us" (184). The claim that "we all have our natures" is repeated a few times throughout the play, and is not disputed by John Ferguson here or elsewhere. But Ferguson does counter the statement by arguing that every person should aspire to a "duty" beyond whatever his or her nature is. Thus, the play raises the basic problem (a philosophical one dating back to its origins in Plato) of the real versus the ideal, here framed in terms of how we *do* act versus how we *are supposed to* act. A character's recognition of failure to realize the ideal--and of betrayal of ideals--results in the three recognition scenes which have been mentioned. The third of these, involving John Ferguson himself, has yet to be discussed.

Tied to John's recognition is the issue of whether people act of their own free will at all, or whether they are merely instruments of a divine will. Although John's belief system ultimately reconciles and embraces the doctrines of fate *and* free will, he seems much more apt through the course of the play to turn to the Bible to find a passage about God's grace than to take action that will alleviate the suffering and hardship around him. Of course, he is immobilized by a physical illness which greatly impairs his ability to take such action, and perhaps that is why at this stage of his life more than ever he resigns himself to passively seeking spiritual solace in his Bible. Still, at certain times in the play there seems a very fine line between putting one's trust in divine justification and merely resigning oneself to one's fate: "it can't be helped," John says (134, 151), and "It was to be" (134). John's spiritual justifications could, alternately, be seen merely as empty excuses which, because they comfort his mind, prevent real substantive action. In fact, the self-assurance which

early in the play definitively establishes John's character eventually breaks down, and his rebuttals are issued increasingly less confidently as the play moves toward its conclusion:

*Is there divine justice?

[after Uncle Andrew's letter arrives two weeks late]

Hannah: (*bitterly*) God's late, da!

...

John: There *must* be some meaning in it. There *must* be! God doesn't make mistakes.

...

Hannah: Isn't it quare and funny, da? Isn't it funny. . .

...

Hannah: (*lapsing from laughter to tears*) Where's the right in it, da? Where's the right in it? It's not just! It's not fair! (185-6)

John's reply to Hannah, finally, is, "We can't understand everything. It's no good trying to puzzle it all out. We must just have faith. . .that's all! Just have faith!" (186).

This reply reflects a significant change in the man who had sanguinely uttered, two weeks earlier, that to not know God's plan is to sin (127). Now he must somehow adjust his thinking to account for the reality that he does not know what God has in store for him. As late as the beginning of act four, John is still asserting that "God never hits you with both hands at the one time" (183), but his faith is shaken unalterably a few moments later, once he learns that his son Andrew is the one who has killed Witherow. God *has*, in fact, hit him squarely with both hands, it seems. John despairs, staggering back and uttering, "Oh, my God, my God," words reminiscent of Christ's moment of despair on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"¹⁹

John's despair is not merely verbalized. He pushes the Bible away from him, a physical sign of at least temporary abandonment of his trust in God. This gesture is ironic - in his moment of greatest need, he seeks not spiritual solace but tangible physical aid. In this dire moment he is shaken out of his spiritual abstraction, and he tries for a few minutes to devise a practical scheme to help his son escape punishment. It is not only disingenuous but also hypocritical that while John Ferguson tells (the innocent) Jimmy Caesar he must face God's judgment by submitting to human law, he advises his own son to try to escape both law and judgment. However hypocritical his action is, it also seems natural; here it is that one sees John Ferguson at a moment of most human weakness.

The play seems to leave John Ferguson in a state of moral confusion; he has trusted

in God and, now torn by the tension of loyalty to his family versus doing what is right, John is ultimately paralyzed spiritually just as much as he is incapacitated physically. He especially seems confused about the nature of a God who would punish him in this way; his assurance that God is forgiving gives way to a tendency to view God as a wrathful and punishing divinity in the manner of the Old Testament. John can only speculate, finally, that his own sinfulness must have brought this tragedy upon his family:

*Which is the greater: moral/spiritual values or ties of kinship?

Sarah: (*passionately*) I don't want God's will! I want my son! It's nothing to me what he done--he's my son! I don't care if he's killed a hundred men--he's my son! . . .

John: I can't advise you, son. Don't ask me. I was weak a minute ago. . . I'm getting old, and I haven't the strength of mind I had one time. . .

John: I take no pride in anything now. I must have sinned bitterly against God to be punished this way. It must have been something I done that's brought calamity on us. I'd be willing to pay whatever price was demanded of me. . . but Andrew! . . . (189-90)

The final vision of John Ferguson is of a man who is powerless to save his son, practically and spiritually. As Andrew says, "It's no good other people doing things for [a man]. He must do them himself" (192). In the end, John cannot even bring himself to meet his son's little request that he accompany him to the jail:

Andrew: Will you come to the barracks with me, da?
(John Ferguson *looks up piteously at his son. His will fails him, and he puts out his hands in supplication to Andrew, and then, recovering himself, draws them in again.*)

John: Don't ask me, son; I couldn't bear it.

Ferguson is a broken man, a man who can only, finally, turn back again to the Bible for consolation. Returning to his religion, echoing the same words he has been uttering throughout the play, and reading the same passage that he had been reading as act four began, he continues:

John: . . . we must just bear it, for God knows better nor we do what's right to be done. (*He takes up the Bible again.*) Listen to God's Word, Sarah, and that'll strengthen you. (*He continues his reading.*) "And the king said unto Cush, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Cush answered, The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that

young man is. And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went (*his voice begins to break as he reads the following passages*), thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son. . .my son.” (195)²⁰

As becomes clear from the last passage, the suffering and forbearance of the father in the play is in fact cleverly written to parallel events in the Biblical passage of the second book of Samuel, the very passage he has been reading. Thus, it may be helpful to recount the Biblical events to which Ervine’s play alludes. This section of 2 Samuel illustrates one of the most vivid Old Testament examples of the sins of the father being visited upon the sons. In the second book of Samuel, chapter eleven, King David seduces Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of David’s soldiers, and then, upon learning of Bathsheba’s pregnancy, he gives orders that Uriah is to be put at the battle line’s front, where he will be in greatest danger of being slain. Uriah does die in battle, and David makes Bathsheba his wife. The Lord is angered and delivers a message to David:

‘I anointed thee king over Israel. . . I gave thee thy master’s house, and thy master’s wives into thy bosom. . . and if *that had been* too little, I would, moreover, have given unto thee such and such things. Why hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in his sight? Thou hast killed Uriah, the Hittite, with the sword, and hast taken his wife *to be* thy wife. . . Now, therefore, the sword shall never depart from thine house. . .’²¹

Subsequently, David faces a period of stoic resignation as he bears the indemnities of the Lord. By the Lord’s command, the child of David and Bathsheba dies shortly after it is born. Then, David’s son Amnon rapes his sister Tamar. David is angered by Amnon’s action, but does not react with violence himself. David’s son Absalom hates his brother for the awful deed he has committed against their sister and refuses to speak to Amnon for two years. Meanwhile, Absalom counsels Tamar by saying, “Now hold now thy peace, my sister. He *is* thy brother; regard not this thing” (2 Sam. 13: 20).

Nonetheless, at the end of the two years, Absalom plots and succeeds in killing Amnon out of vengeance, and in turn it is David who, though he mourns for Absalom sincerely, refuses to speak to his son for a period of two years. Still, unlike Absalom, David refuses to meet violence with violence. Shortly after they are reconciled, then, Absalom

secretly conspires to take over the kingdom; rather than stand up to his son, David flees. Upon his flight, a man curses David, calling him a “bloody man” and saying that, “The Lord hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul” (16:8). Still, even after David’s army is forced to meet Absalom’s in battle, David commands his troops to “*Deal gently, for my sake, with the young man, even with Absalom*” (18: 5). One of David’s minions, Joab, refuses to heed this exhortation, and instead secretly, and intentionally, kills Absalom. Thus, the violent cycle in which David’s children are caught is completed in the very passage read by John Ferguson, when David learns of his son’s death and laments his loss.

John Ferguson, in fact, may be seen as a modern-day composite of a number of Biblical figures. He certainly has the patience of Job, the innocent, honest, good man who believes that God has picked a quarrel with him and who longs to discover the purposes and meanings of God’s ways.²² John also resembles the Biblical Moses, to whom he is compared in the opening stage direction:

*He looks like a portrait of Moses--not that Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt and was a great captain of hosts, but the Moses who surveyed the Promised Land from Mount Nebo in the Plains of Moab.*²³

In other words, John is like the dying Moses, that man who has been throughout his travels surrounded with people who are in despair, and yet who at his own death on Mount Nebo is denied entering into the Promised Land which has so long been sought. It seems most apt, though, that the play begins and ends with quotations from David (the psalm from which John reads in act one is from the Psalms of David) for it is with David that John shares the greatest similarity of circumstance. David’s son, like John’s, has murdered a man in retribution for the rape of his sister. At the end of each of these stories, the father is left to brood over and lament the loss of a son who is punished for his vengeful action. Each of these two men, having arrived to a late stage in his life, is stoically poised to accept whatever God’s will dictates. In both stories, the father attempts to break a cycle of violence, refusing to meet violence with violence, but ultimately the father is forced to deal with the consequences of his son’s disobedient participation in the violent cycle—a vengeful murder.

In David's case, of course, the implication is that the sins of the father (having omitted adultery with his soldier's wife) have been visited upon his son. But John Ferguson's case seems all the more difficult to bear because although he does blame himself ("I must have sinned bitterly," p. 192), in fact he has done nothing to merit such a "punishment." The play finally does not resolve its fundamental theological and philosophical issues; instead, it leaves readers and observers with questions to answer for themselves, and it leaves them in pity for and fear at the final, faltering, sobbing vision of John Ferguson which the play affords.

On an individual level, the play raises the question, "how does one respond to violence and injustice done to that which is dearest to one's heart?" This question has a straightforward answer of forgiveness and forbearance, rooted in John Ferguson's religion; but, in putting forward an alternative, and in calling John Ferguson's faith into question, the play forcefully demands that its audience confront the reality that there are no easy answers, whichever route is taken.

Furthermore, not only does Ervine create and disguise John Ferguson and his situation within several Biblical parallels, his play and its implications are both individual and collective. The audience is caught up in the fundamental issues raised, and is forced to base their decisions--even whether they like or dislike the characters--on the religious and moral stances the characters take.

In the sense of the collective, as well, in retrospect this play confronts issues which were central to the Irish nation in the years which were to follow. The year immediately following *John Ferguson's* premiere at the Abbey saw the Easter Rebellion, in which a host of rebel nationalists seized several major buildings in Dublin's city center, sacrificing themselves to further the cause of an Irish nation but initiating a new cycle of violence in Ireland. The rebels were motivated not only by the promise of an independent Ireland, but also by a deeply-ingrained sense of righting the wrongs of the past, and retributively putting an end to Ireland's long colonial history. Among the results of this newly initiated cycle were the Black and Tan War, the partitioning of the country into twenty-six southern and six northern counties, and the Irish Civil War. In this light, *John Ferguson* may seem a

prophetic foreshadowing of issues of retribution and the suffering and endurance required of the whole of the Irish nation, North and South, as they would be confronted with the cycle of violence and tense confrontation in the years which followed.

Stage History

John Ferguson opened at the Abbey on November 30, 1915, shortly after Ervine had been appointed manager of the theater. The play was generally well-received by the audience, earning the author a double-call of applause at play's end.²⁴ The one uniform complaint was the difficulty of the Abbey actors in genuinely portraying the Ulster accent of the characters, and a particularly evident mistake in this regard was made in casting Nora Close, Ervine's English wife, and a novice actress at that, in the role of Hannah. On the other hand, J. M. Kerrigan received great acclaim for his effective portrayal of Jimmy Caesar.²⁵

In 1919, the play's American debut met with surprising success and, in fact, the play had a most distinguished run for the New York Theatre Guild. It opened May 12 at the Garrick Theater and ran there for sixty-six performances. Subsequently, it was transferred to the larger Fulton Theatre, where it ran for sixty-five more performances.²⁶ In all, the play's New York run in the summer of 1919 lasted nearly six months; Robert Hogan has written that "it was the financial salvation of what was probably America's most distinguished company."²⁷ Undoubtedly due to its overwhelming popularity, the Theater Guild revived the play in August 1921.

John Ferguson did not debut in England until late February 1920 at the Lyric in Hammersmith. It was well-received, and again J. M. Kerrigan in the role of Jimmy Caesar earned especially great praise, with the *Times* reviewer declaring that "perhaps the best thing of all" in the play "is the Caesar of Mr. Kerrigan." The same reviewer also deemed that the production was emotionally powerful, of "rich interest," and well worth seeing, and stated that the applause was unusually "explosive."²⁸

John Ferguson and many of Ervine's other plays also had a significant life and an

important role in the Ulster Group Theatre company, which was founded during World War II and regularly produced the work of Ervine, George Shiels, and Joseph Tomelty for over twenty years.²⁹

Critical Reception

John Ferguson has generally been regarded as Ervine's finest play and deemed the best new Abbey play of 1915.³⁰ Andrew Malone in 1929 declared the play one "of surpassing distinction,"³¹ but was, it seems, overreaching when he declared it "one of the great plays of the modern stage."³² In 1971, N. Sahal in *Sixty Years of Realistic Irish Drama* referred to the play as "Ervine's realistic masterpiece,"³³ and in his 1979 history of the Abbey, Hugh Hunt wrote of the play as "a powerful portrait of the religious zeal and dourness of a North of Ireland peasant standing 'Lear-like' against the buffets of fate."³⁴

The play was not without detractors. Several critics have faulted the play for being gloomy and humorless.³⁵ Such criticism actually derives from the playwright's own intention, for Ervine himself opined in a letter to Yeats about the play that "there must not be any humor in a tragedy."³⁶ Joseph Holloway thought the play "extremely reminiscent" of a number of other Abbey plays, naming several instances of similarities in plot and character in earlier plays by Murray and Robinson, among others.³⁷ Andrew Malone saw the play's chief fault as Hannah's seduction by Witherow, which he viewed as neither probable nor convincing.³⁸ Furthermore, a number of critics commented that the play's emotional power greatly outweighed its intellectual impact.³⁹ The harshest criticism came from "Jacques," himself the most vociferous critic against the "gloomy" theater which followed *Thomas Muskerry*, who declared that *John Ferguson's* "atmosphere of morbidity and sanctimoniousness and callousness all made for unreality that would make anyone sick."⁴⁰ In a preface to the 1928 edition of *John Ferguson*, Ervine offered a defense of his play, arguing strenuously that it is a tragic, not a depressing play.⁴¹

In America, in London, and even in Dublin, the warm reception of the play, on the

other hand, seems largely attributable to the uniqueness of the characters and setting it creates. *New York Times* reviewer John Corbin, for example, wrote:

The Theatre Guild explored a new region of the literary map of Ireland last night. . . It is perhaps because of the richer humanity, the sterner passions of *John Ferguson* that the performance of the Theatre Guild players seemed to reach a new level in our experience of drama from Ireland.⁴²

The first of its kind as a drama of the north of Ireland, the play's central figure greatly impressed W. J. Lawrence of *The Stage*, who wrote in his 1915 review:

Few nobler or more pathetic figures have appeared on the modern stage than that of honest old John Ferguson. . . Around this finely conceived and firmly drawn character, Mr. Ervine has woven a plot of intensely harrowing human interest.⁴³

Lawrence's sentiments were, in fact, characteristic: most critics of Irish drama have been captivated by the fresh, original portrait of the stern religious zealot from the North. Andrew E. Malone wrote not only that "in the character of John Ferguson Ervine created a man which the stage had not previously known,"⁴⁴ but also that Ervine

gave to the Irish drama its most conspicuous single character, as in the old man is embodied all for which Ulster stands, all that gives Ulster its distinction, all that makes Ulster fascinating.⁴⁵

William J. Feeney, in an entry on Ervine in *The Dictionary of Irish Literature*, tends to see the play overall as "melodramatic" but nonetheless sees the title character as its great strength.⁴⁶

Quite a number of critics over the years have shared Andrew Malone's view that John Ferguson was a figure representative of Northern Ireland as much as he was a dramatic character. Even as recently as 1991's *Field Day Anthology*, D. E. S. Maxwell referred to Ervine's plays as "persuasive studies of the Northern protestant temperament."⁴⁷ Denis Ireland in 1950, on the other hand, complained that the play was representative of a *type* of northern Irish character, but that Ervine had overlooked what Ireland considered at the heart of Northern Ireland itself: while Ervine "shows us the kind of things that might be uppermost in minds of the prosperous Protestant inhabitants of a red-brick suburb of Belfast," he does not show in his plays "the real [political and religious] tensions below the surface" which are "at the back of every. . . Belfast Protestant

mind.”⁴⁸

Alternately, Robert Hogan has commented that

The best of Ervine’s Irish plays, *John Ferguson*, . . . as much as *Juno and the Paycock*, is the prototypical Irish play. By that. . . [I mean] that in its theme and characters it is the most typical. It is about the most popular Irish themes of land, money and the arranged marriage. Like *Juno*, it is a family tragedy; that is, its larger social concerns are mirrored in the fortunes of a particular family. . . The play is a solidly structured, eminently convincing piece of realism that rises to moments of intense tension, but it has two or three weaknesses that keep it from being the masterpiece that it very nearly is.⁴⁹

The play’s greatest fault of construction, says Hogan, is also, in a way, its greatest strength:

the character of Caesar. . . is so memorable, so fully three-dimensional, that he throws the play out of balance. He is a character like Falstaff, destructive to the intended theme of his play, but the best thing in it. And also one of the best things in Irish drama.⁵⁰

Publication History

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Texts

Whatever manuscript drafts Ervine used to construct *John Ferguson* seem to have been lost. The National Library of Ireland, the British Museum Library, the British Theatre Museum, and the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas hold Ervine’s letters. The National Library holds typescripts of several later plays of Ervine’s, performed at the Abbey between 1936 and 1941,⁵¹ but none which are dated as early as *John Ferguson*.

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CHAPTER 4

AUTUMN FIRE

A Play in Three Acts

by T. C. Murray

Contexts

Toward the end of T. C. Murray's 1924 play, Owen Keegan's new wife Nance says that she has brought him a book about "the doings in Cork during the troubles"¹--that is, Ireland's political conflicts in the years 1918-1923, during the struggle for independence from Britain.² In response to Nance, Owen's daughter, Ellen Keegan, remarks that her father has enough troubles of his own to worry about "without bothering his mind with those of other people" (169). The same might be said of Murray's play: conflict and inner turmoil within the Keegan household itself is so abundant as to create a drama riveting enough that it needs no wider social conflict or even frame of reference.

Though he chose not to write about it directly, the author of *Autumn Fire* had to have been profoundly aware of the effects of the war years, especially the bitter feelings and sorrow brought on by a civil war and the division of the island into two separate entities. Murray was not a writer who chose overtly political themes; still, coincidental or not, it seems quite significant that in the years immediately following the Irish Civil War and the partitioning of the country, *Autumn Fire* dramatizes a family's civil war and its breaking apart. In this light, Ellen Keegan's statement that her father need not bother himself by reading Nance's book on the troubles, and Nance's rejoinder that the stories "aren't true, Ellen--they're all made up," suggest that Ireland's political conflicts may have been, for Ireland's rural population, little more than faraway fictions, of little importance in their daily lives. However, perhaps what is most significant about the troubles stories is that Nance

thinks that Owen's reading them might help him to forget his troubles (169). Ultimately, Owen cannot forget his own troubles, and he is unable to accept the inevitable reality of his aging. His jealous desire to hold on to "what he cared for most in the world" (173), coupled with the "queer enchantment" (172) which draws his son and his young wife together, lead to a seemingly inevitable conclusion: son cast out, with wife, husband, and daughter to live on, in misery.

Like Ireland itself was in 1922, the Keegan family becomes irreparably divided. Ellen's statement that her father has "enough trouble of his own without bothering his mind" about other matters signals the play's intense inward focus, and, in fact, both this play and Ireland after the partition were intensely focused on internal affairs. The Keegans' civil war takes place mostly below the surface, with understated and unstated emotions festering until they brim over, unleashing the play's climactic confrontation, as well as the resulting estrangement realized in its denouement.

It may not be coincidental that T. C. Murray's *Autumn Fire* is preoccupied with age, for not until 1910, at the relatively late age of thirty-seven, did he begin his dramatic career at the Abbey; indeed one might say that he hardly regarded it as a career at all. In a rare interview at the London premiere of *Autumn Fire*, the usually reticent Murray commented that

playwrighting is only a sort of hobby. . . Though the standard of art at the Abbey Theatre is very high, we whose plays are performed there, really write for the love of it, for there is very little pecuniary reward.³

Murray's primary occupation was as a teacher, which he had begun in Cork city in 1893. It was there that he was first exposed to the theater via productions of British touring companies. Not until 1909 did the Abbey Theatre make its first tour stop in Cork, but its impression on Murray (especially the tragic realism of Lennox Robinson's *The Clancy Name*) was so great that, with the encouragement of Daniel Corkery, he began to write plays in collaboration with the local theater company in Cork. When that company collapsed, Murray decided to submit a play to the Abbey. *Birthright* was accepted for performance in 1910, and became a major success which quickly established the playwright's reputation. His greatest triumph, though, was *Autumn Fire* (1924), which, according to Brian Cleeve's

Dictionary of Irish Writers, is “generally accepted as his masterpiece.”⁴

Critical discussions of *Autumn Fire* have often noted that it has the same theme as Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms*, as well as that it preceded O’Neill’s play by several months. Although it seems impossible that O’Neill could have known about *Autumn Fire*, he was greatly impressed with a production of Murray’s *Birthright* he had seen on one of the Abbey’s American tours.⁵ *Autumn Fire* shares the conflict arising from its May-December marriage with Moberg’s *Fulfillment* (1943) and Synge’s *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903). *Autumn Fire* and *Desire Under the Elms* share a theme so universal that its roots are found in classical drama, in Euripides’s *Hippolytus* and Seneca’s *Phaedra*, or perhaps through the *Phedre* of Racine. Many of the elements of Greek tragedy can be seen in the play: the downfall of the hero perhaps due to his pride; forwarnings of his fate; an Oedipal rivalry between father and son; and an implied incestuous relationship between son and stepmother.

Interpretation

At the play’s core--(words like “core” and “root” inevitably seem to arise in a discussion of *Autumn Fire* because so much lies beneath the surface)--are two sets of jealous rivalries which, not coincidentally, involve individuals of the same gender: on one hand, Nance Desmond and Ellen Keegan, and; on the other hand, father and son, Owen and Michael Keegan. These women and men live, work, and play mostly in separate spheres: while the men are engaged in the labor of fieldwork, the women are employed in domestic labor. At play, they engage in different sorts of competition: the men compete to show off their athletic talents, while the women strive to make themselves as attractive as possible. Apart from ties of kinship in this *family* drama, the one other bridge of significance between the separate spheres of men and women is love: the play in this sense can be seen as a dramatization of the consequences of the love of two individuals who stand out in their community by excelling in the highly-valued qualities of athleticism and attractiveness. At the root of these latter qualities, and of the woman and man who bear them, is a

youthfulness that is both physical and mental. But the play's conflict builds as, within the intra-gender rivalries, the elements of age and establishment are pitted against youth--as the real overwhelms the ideal--in ways which are deeper and more complex than a quick surface reading would suggest.

The play's central figure is Owen Keegan, a man in a desperate but inevitably losing battle against growing older. In lieu of *actually* avoiding the process of aging, Owen does whatever he can to remain young, and he certainly remains young at heart. Immediately upon Owen's entry onstage, one notices the multitude of age-related qualifiers that Murray provides:

"A handsome old man" most young people would describe him. Their elders would omit the qualifying word of time. For though Owen Keegan is mid-way in the fifties Time has only brushed him with his wing. Youth might well envy his complexion. . . and the thick clustering hair which has yet too few strands of silver to be noticed except at close range. Nor has the strong figure acquired the characteristic droop which develops so early in men of his class. (126)

Youthful appearance is not the only striking quality which Owen possesses, but according to Murray's description, it does seem to be the quality on which his other attributes depend. Even following the description, Owen's youthfulness becomes the topic of conversation among the characters for the next few pages (126-8): he argues that "a man is as young as he feels" (128), and Nance concurs based on what she sees, while Ellen argues to the contrary that if he persists in his folly and pretense of youth, he might someday find himself injured and sorry. As Ellen points out, Nance does flatter Owen with silly talk--telling him he is growing younger every day (126). In spite of, or perhaps inherent in, what she says, she is very much conscious of the discrepancy between how old he *really* is and how old he *thinks* he is. Nance at first flirtatiously feeds Owen's pride by telling him how young he is, but toward the end of their first scene together, startled by the frankness of his advances, she tells him, "That's no talk for a man of your years, Owen Keegan" (129). Nonetheless, Nance ultimately buys into the myth of Owen's perpetual youth, and it is the conflict and controversy surrounding their May-December marriage that impels the tragic conclusion of *Autumn Fire*.

It can be argued that Owen's willful defiance of his age has led him into a marriage

with Nance that was doomed to fail. Moreover, one could certainly make a strong case that pride is Owen's tragic flaw. The last lines of stage direction upon Owen's entrance suggest that he has taken his gift for granted:

Nature was obviously in one of her buoyant moods when she moulded this son of the soil. Was it his blindness to her gift that stung her to give him a daughter so homely that he might come to realise his own dower of rugged grace and strength? (126)

However, Owen's own talk and action in the play suggest that he has ventured too far in the opposite direction, that rather than neglecting his gifts, he is full of himself and brimming to the point of boastfulness. Ellen scolds him, "'tisn't lucky, they say, Father, to be making praises of oneself," to which Owen responds, "I'm not. There isn't a day that someone or other doesn't tell me so" (126). Owen's line of reasoning seems to be that since others are continually confirming how great he is, there is no harm in repeating what must therefore be true. He goes on to tell a tale of a meeting earlier in the day with an old schoolmate who told him that

"on the other side o' the world there does be always a second Summer - not so strong and fierce maybe as the first, but kinder-like a thousand times. . .and yourself is one o' them kind, Owen Keegan." (127)

This tale, and the one which follows, Owen tells mainly to impress Nance. He tries to avoid *seeming* to boast by repeating the words of others about him--but this does not diminish the fact that he *is* boasting. Similarly, he asks Ellen to tell Nance what happened "at the hurling in Donovan's field" (127). Nance replies that she does not know and does not care, so Owen himself proceeds to tell the story--about himself. It is at this point, when Owen has, in a series of several stories and comments, attempted to build himself up before Nance that Ellen intervenes by saying, "'Twould only serve you right to be hurted or to be put lying on the flat of your back maybe" (127). Owen, of course, *is* by the end of the play put flat on his back, critically injured after falling off of a horse, and Ellen can, behind his back, claim in effect to have told him so:

He wouldn't be warned. 'Tis many the time he laughed and I reminding him what happened his father. Riding a horse to the fair at his time o' life! But live or die he'd have his way. (158)

Thus, the tragic downfall of Owen Keegan may be seen, at least in part, as a result of his

own willful stubbornness.

One of the most significant instruments in Owen's fall, no matter what its causes, is his son, Michael, who throughout the play competes with Owen for Nance's affection. Michael's opening description is the most sparse of any of the play's main characters--the stage direction reveals only that he is "a milder image of the father in his youth" (132) before moving on to a comparison between brother and sister which reveals a great deal more about Ellen than about Michael. The fact that Murray very significantly cut his description of Michael from earlier drafts of the play's text seems of great significance, especially when one analyzes what was removed. The playwright's original description, crossed out in a typescript version, reads:

We see in Michael the father transfigured by youth. There is the same bright complexion, the clean kind eyes, the lithe frame but the magic of twenty-five gives to the body of this country boy a grace and poise of almost lyric beauty. He is of a different world from the earth-worn peasant of Rodin - at least in externals for in essentials all peasants are one whether they wrestle with the clay of Brittany or Mid-Russia or of Munster. Naked and with a dappled fawn-skin flung across his loins one might well mistake this absurdly handsome boy for a youth who had leaped out of some Tale in the Greek mythology.⁶

In the final version of *Autumn Fire*, it seems important that Owen be larger, greater than Michael to make his downfall seem the more tragic. Thus, Nance's friend Molly declares that Michael is "too shy an' reserved in himself. . .He hasn't the gamey spirit of the father at all," while she says that "Owen Keegan have the spirit o' twenty men in him! . . .[T]here wasn't a young girl in the field but could fling her two arms around him" on the day of his great triumph in the hurling match (145).

In its final version, there still is great rivalry between the father and son, but it is a rivalry in which the son acts as a foil to the father's central role. Throughout the text, in fact, there is an interplay, often a direct comparison, between Owen and Michael, initiated by Owen's boast to Nance that he has more life and energy than his son: "'tis many a time I've to tumble Michael out o' bed after myself being abroad two or three hours maybe" (126). His son's potential appeal to Nance seems a continual threat to Owen, even before the intense jealousy of act three. When Ellen announces that Michael and Nance are

chatting pleasantly out in the lane, Michael directs her to “call to Michael to come to his tay” (131). Similarly, when Owen returns to the house to find Nance and Michael in a private moment together, he instructs Michael to drive the lambs out to a place of shelter, seemingly so that *he* can have a moment alone with Nance. In that private moment, Owen tells Nance that Michael is just a “boy,” and refers to him as “the great slob of a son of mine. . . A good fellow, but no sense.” Nance at this point contradicts Owen’s characterization, declaring “A splendid man he is now” (137). However, at the end of the second act Nance declares that Michael is “good and graceful indeed - but he’s a long way off from his father,” and Owen glories in hearing those words, “fine music in my ear” (156), as he calls it. Having “won” Nance by the end of act two, Owen’s struggle in the play’s final act will be to keep her.

Even before act three begins, Owen has taken measures to prevent what seems the play’s inevitable outcome. He has made arrangements to send Michael away for a year to a Model Farm, though Michael, innocent as he remains throughout, does not comprehend his father’s motives. Act three commences after Michael’s return; Owen at this point receives a well-intended warning from his brother Morgan: “I wouldn’t be throwing young people too much in each other’s company” for “the world knows youth is youth” (163). With prodding from Morgan and, especially, from Ellen, Owen’s jealousy becomes inflamed, and upon seeing some evidence of justification for his jealousy, he angrily casts Michael out of the house, initiating the final, pitiful conclusion to *Autumn Fire*.

Meanwhile, Murray goes to great lengths in the opening scene to highlight the play’s other major rivalry--that of Ellen and Nance, who are not only jealous rivals, but also perpetual opposites. From the opening stage directions, as Nance enters the room, she “strikes a note of fragrant charm” while Ellen remains “the only uncomely thing to be seen” (121). Thereafter, the contrasts multiply. Ellen, according to the stage directions and to Nance’s harsh judgment, is old before her time; Nance, on the other hand, in Ellen’s equally harsh reckoning, is impetuously, foolishly youthful, a “prancing young goat lepping in the ditches” (125). Furthermore, while Ellen has been trapped slaving in the kitchen of her family’s country home, Nance, by contrast a lady of leisure, has been “spoiled with notions” she has gotten from the town. Ellen is simple and plain; Nance is

showy, ostentatious. Their fundamental distinction, summed up succinctly in just two lines of their banter, is that Ellen is a realist and Nance an idealist:

Ellen: I'm well pleased with myself as I am and as God made me.
Nance: But you'd be a sight more pleased if you could only see
yourself as I could make you. (123)

Thus, the roots of the conflict between Ellen and Nance are much deeper than the simple fact that they have never gotten along. Furthermore, Ellen certainly has the sense that Owen and Michael are attracted to Nance—even from each of their first encounters in the play.

Immediately upon Owen's entry onto the stage, Ellen's jealousy of his attraction to Nance is evident--she repeatedly refers to the foolish way in which Owen is acting, and she contemptuously calls the compliments Nance offers her father "*plamas*" or mere flattery. Her jealousy is, on the one hand, based on the fact that she desperately clings to her father and brother: as she says, "they're enough for me" (123). On the other hand, Ellen's jealousy springs from a multitude of less obvious sources. First, Ellen has a vague sense of class consciousness, which she expresses to Owen--that Nance is unworthy of the attentions of the male members of her family (131). Perhaps this sense of "unworthiness" is little more than a rationalization; nonetheless, Ellen is very deeply concerned about her family's reputation--about what others will think of the Keegans--particularly after the engagement is revealed. Ellen's position in her own household is certainly on her mind by that point. Not only does she repeatedly complain to her father and brother about how little she means to them, based on how they treat her, but also she feels threatened that, whatever her role in the family is, she will be displaced altogether if Nance is allowed to get too close to Owen or to Michael. With or without the male members' approval, Ellen has assumed the role of an overprotective mother.

Ellen's jealousy may also stem from other unspoken feelings she harbors. As act two opens, for example, Murray hints that Ellen's resentment and overprotectiveness arise from the emotional scars of a past love affair (141-2). Furthermore, it seems strange that there is no mention whatsoever in the play of Owen's children's mother--presumably, she must have died years previously, but at least one can say that, rather than having her father and brother embrace an outsider, Ellen conceives of herself as her mother's replacement. In

fact, the play's only reference to the deceased mother at all is in an unvoiced stage direction intended to illustrate Ellen's character: Ellen is "true to the type of her dead mother, whom neighbours used to describe unkindly as 'a married old maid'" (132). It remains unspoken, but it should not escape the careful observers' notice that Ellen pays meticulous attention to the minutia of the household chores. The cleanliness which is the trademark of the house at the beginning of the play, for Murray, "*express[es]* the careful habits of the women folk who have successively managed the farmhouse" (121; emphasis mine). That household management should be a source of *expression* says something important about the nature, or the repression, of Ellen's personality, if not about the status of such women in society. Ellen's role is borne and accepted in passive silence--until Nance's idealism threatens that role.

Nance's idealism itself is as vague as Ellen's resentment of her. Just as Ellen *is* old before her time, Nance *is* young and impetuous. Nance has a sense that she *needs* a man, or at least that men and women need each other: she asks her mother, "What signifies [significance is there in] the work of a house and only a couple o' women to be in it? A man fooling round makes all the difference" (140). Despite these words, Nance does not seem to be overly-anxious to marry; while Owen and Michael very earnestly offer commitments to her, she seems to remain girlishly flirtatious. In act one, Owen makes very serious overtures to her, saying, for example, "Lucky the man that will have yourself, Nance, all the length of his days" (129). However, as Owen's talk proceeds, Nance becomes progressively more alarmed by its seriousness: "For pity sake, Owen Keegan," she says, "don't talk wild like that. You'd frighten a soul" (130). Similarly, in act two Nance dismisses Michael's "queer riddling talk an' nonsense" (148). Nevertheless, there is a very serious difference between these two sets of overtures because in the intervening action between acts one and two, Nance has agreed to marry Owen.

Throughout Nance's affairs with Owen and Michael, there is a sense that though she willingly participates in them, she is not in control. From the early scene where Owen forces her back down into her seat (129) to his showing up at her house every night for weeks, it seems possible to conclude that Nance's attraction to Owen stems from the attention he lavishes on her as much as from any genuine feeling she has toward him. That

Nance is capitulating to Owen's terms is especially apparent when it is revealed that Owen has made her swear, until further notice, to keep their engagement a secret (155)--even from Michael, who has been trying to win her for himself. In a similar way, Michael's final action of kissing Nance is one in which she participates but does not fully endorse. She protests against Michael's desire to kiss her (173) but in the end cannot stop him from doing so. It is ironic that as a result of what is chiefly Michael's action, Nance suffers the more cruel fate. While Michael departs for an exile which may be miserable, at least it is an escape. Nance's fate, on the other hand, seems aptly reflected in her departing lines: "To live is to suffer, and I'm satisfied" (176).

Nance Desmond finds herself in a very interesting and ironic position, not just because of her tragic fate but because, even though she is an outsider to the Keegan family throughout the first two acts, it is she with whom each of the family members communicate directly. Still, mainly this is a testament to the Keegans' reluctance to speak forthrightly with each other more than it is to Nance's value as a confidant. For instance, when Ellen wants to find out what is happening between her father and Nance, she angrily storms into the Desmond household to confront them about it. She cannot offer a response when she is told to ask her father: apparently this is the one thing she cannot do. Michael, similarly, would never ask such a thing of his father, and in fact he even scolds Ellen for not keeping quiet, for raising her concern in such a public way. Partly this stems from a fear of their father's wrath: when Ellen does confront her father, she tries to deflect his anger by asking Michael to "tell them what they're saying" in the village (153). However, it is a tactic at the same time *learned from* their father, who, earlier in the play, tried to deflect his own seeming pridefulness by directing Ellen to tell Nance about his hurling feats at Donovan's field (127). Owen, in a similarly taciturn way, has made arrangements to send Michael away for a year to a Model Farm--but it remains unstated that Owen's rationale is to keep his son away from his future bride. Most especially, Owen Keegan has kept his silence--and forced the Desmonds to do the same--about the impending marriage. In the main, the secret has been kept *only* from the two people who are closest to him--a rumor about it has spread through Tobarnabrosna. This, of course, also highlights the fact that, as close-knit as the Keegans are in some ways, the deep-seated interests, desires, and concerns of each of

individuals remain unuttered to other members of the family.

This tension between individual passion and communal morality is at the center of Murray's play, and the tragedy of Owen Keegan is a result of a seemingly fundamental incompatibility. Murray's treatment of the theme is both universal and particular. The idea that the May-December romance will ultimately be foiled by the passions of youth has found its place in the drama of many cultures, and in the final analysis, although this tragedy is terrible and pitiful, none of the characters is to blame for what has ensued. Murray instills in the play language which heightens the sense of blamelessness. Early in the first scene Nance says to Ellen, "who can hold a young man an' the girl God made for him coming his way?" (123).⁷ Owen echoes this sentiment when he says, prophetically, "men do be after the like o' you, Nance, I'm thinking, all the world over. And they can no more help it than the swallows chasing the Summer--" (129). Toward the beginning of act two, Nance's friend Molly tells a story about how she could not resist the temptation to have a date with another boy, even though it would make her boyfriend jealous: she says, "some devil of mischief possessed us and we couldn't say no to a lark" (144). Probably most importantly of all, early in act three, Owen's brother Morgan suggests the idea that "youth is youth," that Nance and Michael might be tempted to fall in love, thrown together as they have been. This idea is one that haunts and torments Owen until--and indeed long after--he observes it for himself. These references set up the play's tragic denouement, in which Michael's and Nance's proclamations of innocence fall on Owen's deaf ears (172-3). Owen tries to blame the members of his family for his downfall--"They've broken me. . . son - wife - daughter," he says (177). Without saying it, he knows that he himself is as much to blame as any of them. Ultimately, Murray does not blame any one individual for what has happened--Owen, Nance, Michael, and Ellen each have played their significant parts in the tragedy.

Still, although Murray does not blame the individual characters, in some sense the cultural environment itself is to blame. *Autumn Fire* shows Irish culture to itself in terms of the stifling repression of what cannot be said, except in private, in secret, or in rumor. Although she is by no means a villain, the character of Ellen signifies this element in its

most cruel and unfortunate aspects--Ellen is the product of repression, a prudish gossip who self-righteously asserts her moral superiority and inflicts her father with her own jealousy. Jaded by the past, instead of looking forward to her own youthful future, she remains a provincial homebody with no aspirations except to cling to what she has and is accustomed to. It seems significant, then, that Owen separately and finally tells Ellen that she is to blame for Michael's departure at the end of the play (176)--although it is not she herself, but what she represents, that is most to blame. In this way, the particular circumstances which contribute to the tragedy, however universal it may seem, make a significant statement about Irish society as a place in which those who attempt to rise up in aspiration may only find themselves weighted down by the limitations which surround and engulf them.

It should be noted, finally, that the language of Murray's play subtly resonates with the symbolism of its title. "Kindling" and "burning" imagery is used repeatedly as a metaphor for the fires which blaze within, beginning with the rhetorical questions Ellen poses to Nance:

When God made me and every girl like me didn't He make us
hungering for love, or whatever you like to call it, as well as you?
Is that fire there any warmer because there's a share o' comeliness
in the room? Wouldn't it burn as hot in an old bohawn and an
earthen floor? (125)

At the end of the play, Owen laments, almost as an afterthought, that he has been broken "as a dried *cipin* [withered stick] for the fire" (177), consumed by his own passions and the passions of others. Even the fictional town in which Murray set his play, Tobarnabrosna, contributes to this imagery: deriving from Irish, it means, "well of the firewood." Literally, this translation may seem illogical or contradictory, but figuratively it captures the sense of what is at the heart of the play--the fires which burn within.

Stage History

Autumn Fire premiered at the Abbey on September 8, 1924. Its original performance was directed by Michael J. Dolan, who also played the starring role of Owen.

Murray, who was known for his hands-on involvement in performances of his plays, was asked by Dolan to refrain from attending the play's dress rehearsal; Murray politely but reluctantly consented. He had apprehensions about Dolan and about the performance, as he wrote to John Burke on the night before the opening:

I had looked forward for a long time to our seeing the show in rehearsal and I feel just rotten over everything. It appears to me that Dolan is a little nervy, having cast himself for a part for which everyone can see he is utterly unfitted. . . That alone handicaps the play heavily. . .⁸

Fortunately, Murray's apprehensions were unfounded, and in fact both Dolan and the play received rave reviews. Susan Mitchell in *The Irish Statesman* wrote, "I have not seen Mr. Dolan in a part that brought out so fully his powers of subtle interpretation," and a fellow Abbey actor remarked that he thought Dolan's performance in the last scene was "the best bit of acting he had ever seen at the Abbey."⁹ In general, the play was "very warmly received" in Dublin, though the Abbey's Directors were not particularly enthusiastic about it. Not only did they not break the "one week only" rule as they had for Sean O'Casey's equally well-received *Juno and the Paycock* six months earlier, but also they failed to renew the license for *Autumn Fire*, which in time would prove a somewhat costly mistake.¹⁰

Thanks in large part to Murray's meticulous record keeping, the play's production history is well-known and well-preserved.¹¹ Dissatisfied with the Abbey's lack of interest in his play, Murray looked, for the first time in his career, outside Ireland. He appointed a London agent to look after his interests and subsequently released the play to London theatre producers the DeLeon brothers. In London, the play met with great popular success when it was performed at the Q Theatre in mid-March 1926, and it moved from the Q to the West End's Little Theatre on April 13. Two weeks prior to the London premiere, the play was produced in Australia, where it had opened at Melbourne's Palace Theatre. The play was very well-received in each of these venues. However, because the Irish National Theatre Society had allowed its license to expire, ironically, and for the first time in its history, it thereafter had to pay a performance fee for a play which originated in its own theatre.¹² The Abbey did nonetheless revive the play in May 1926 and again in August 1927; in late April and early May 1930; in July 1933; and in July 1943. The play also has been professionally

performed throughout the British isles:

- *at the Cork Opera House in February 1927
- *by the Limerick Drama League in March 1927
- *at the Rusholme Theatre in Manchester, October 1927
- *at the Town Hall in Coleraine in February 1929
- *at the Little Theatre in Brighton, July 1933
- *at the Sligo Town Hall, April 1935
- *at Belfast's Grand Opera House, February 1936.
- *in June 1952, at the Irving Theatre in London
- *by the Bundoran Festival Group in February 1956's Newry Festival in Northern Ireland and also, by the same group, in Belgium that April.

Though the play has been popular among amateur groups of Irish actors over the years, it has not been performed professionally in Ireland since a February 1953 run at the Queens Theatre, which was at that time the National Theatre Society's temporary home.¹³

Autumn Fire's many performances in America have been well-documented by critics, largely again because Murray saved clippings of reviews, which are now preserved in the Abbey Theatre papers at the National Library of Ireland.¹⁴ The play debuted in America on October 18, 1926 at the Providence Opera House before it moved to Broadway a week later, beginning a seventy-one performance run at the Klaw Theatre on October 26. It was played again at the Claw in 1930. Lennox Robinson only arranged for the play to be performed twice at the tail end of the Abbey Theatre's American tour of 1932, on April 14 and 22 at the Hollis Street Theatre in Boston; nonetheless, one onlooker remarked to Robinson that *Autumn Fire* was "the 'crowning event' of the tour."¹⁵ On the subsequent American tour from October 1932 to May 1933, the play was performed in Hartford, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Toronto, and Chicago.¹⁶

Murray's play can boast a significant number of distinguished and unusual achievements, both within Ireland and on the world stage. In July 1936, the Pontardulais Company won first prize in the National Eisteddfod Drama Contest in Fishguard, Wales for their performance of a Welsh translation of *Autumn Fire*, entitled *Tan yr Hydref*. *Autumn Fire* was even pirated by an English director and played in the English countryside as *Irish Hearts* in February 1938.¹⁷ The play was also recorded for radio. It aired on Radio Eireann in the early 1950s and has been rebroadcast both in English and in Irish numerous times since then. The B.B.C. has also broadcast the play in both English and Welsh.¹⁸ An Irish-

language translation of the play, *Laom Luisne Fomhair*, was performed to great critical acclaim at the National Theatre Society's Peacock Theatre from November 22-30, 1973;¹⁹ one reviewer commented that the production demonstrated how well the play has stood the test of time.²⁰ As Albert J. DeGiacomo has noted, Murray's plays have been "translated into German, Spanish, Welsh, Breton, and Japanese, as well as printed in Braille."²¹ Five years after the founding of Irish television, *Autumn Fire* was recorded and aired. Furthermore, in 1949, *Autumn Fire* was the first Irish drama ever to be seen on American television.²²

Critical Reception

Autumn Fire had the unusual distinction of attaining greater popularity upon its revival than for its original production in Dublin,²³ thanks to the critical acclaim with which it was met in London.²⁴ The play was well received by critics in Dublin for its 1924 premiere, but the wider exposure it received through the London production served to draw greater audiences upon its return to Ireland.²⁵ Furthermore, *Autumn Fire* premiered at a time when theatrical tastes in Dublin were changing, with O'Casey's brand of tragicomedy very much on the rise.²⁶ Nevertheless, both in London and in Dublin, and equally in America, through the play's early performances in the 1920s, it met with significant critical acclaim.

Dublin critics particularly praised in unison the conclusion of the play, often called "one of the greatest scenes ever acted on the Abbey stage."²⁷ The effect of this scene often amazed commentators: Daniel Corkery noted, for example, how members of the audience after the curtain falls "sit in an appalled silence--still, almost rigid, they are looking not at themselves but into themselves."²⁸ To this end, Patrick Burke wrote in his entry on Murray for *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook* that "the words with which *Autumn Fire* concludes. . .are some of the best known in Irish drama."²⁹ Critics both in Dublin and in London appreciated the subtle construction of the play, with its hidden tensions³⁰ and "gradual and painstaking" momentum.³¹ The only consistently noted

fault in the play was the absence of humor.³² Andrew E. Malone in his important 1929 work *The Irish Drama* called *Autumn Fire* not only “one of the masterpieces of the Irish drama,” but also “one of the best plays of its time in any country, missing greatness only by its refusal to face the logic of its situations.”³³ Here, though less harshly than his commentary on other plays in Murray’s corpus, Malone refers to the playwright’s tendency to rely on Hardy-esque coincidence for his dramatic effects.

Malone was also the first critic, but certainly not the only one, to notice the thematic similarity to O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms*, noting that “the end of [Murray’s] play is typical of the solution of such a problem in Catholic Ireland.”³⁴ Critics since Malone have often drawn comparisons between the two plays, especially noting Murray’s “tighter construction and more evocative dialogue.”³⁵ Such comparisons culminated in Matthew T. Conlin’s 1959 *Modern Drama* essay, “The Tragic Effect in *Autumn Fire* and *Desire Under the Elms*,”³⁶ though critical comparisons have continued in more recent years. It seems remarkable, given the relative anonymity of Murray’s play, that it has solicited such broad favorable comparison to O’Neill’s play.³⁷

Relatively little critical attention was paid to *Autumn Fire* in the 1930s and 1940s, but in the 1950s renewed commentary on the play seems to have followed the conferral of an honorary doctorate to Murray by the National University of Ireland in 1949. Thomas Hogan, in a 1950 issue of *Envoy*, wrote that the play’s tragic impact was

greater and more profound than that of *Juno and the Paycock*.
Certainly, *Autumn Fire* ranks among the greatest of Irish plays--
perhaps, because of its specifically Irish nature, it could be called
the greatest.³⁸

In bestowing the honorary doctorate, Professor J. J. Hogan commented that *Birthright*, *Maurice Harte*, and *Autumn Fire* are Murray’s masterpieces, that these three showed no trace of time, and that Murray had contributed an addition to Ireland’s “permanent literature.”³⁹ Ironically, however, just ten years later, in an article honoring Murray posthumously, Terence L. Connolly wrote that “Ireland’s most distinguished playwright. . . quite unaccountably [has become] the forgotten man of the Irish professional theatre.”⁴⁰ Echoes of Connolly’s complaint were heard loudly in Dublin in 1973, the centenary of

Murray's birth, prompting the Abbey to revive *Autumn Fire* in Irish.⁴¹

The most incisive and honest criticism of Murray's work was initiated in the late 1960s by Robert Hogan, who wrote in *After the Irish Renaissance*:

The good Murray play was a solidly constructed and closely observed piece of realism. Sometimes one feels it was too solidly constructed and too closely observed, for his beginnings and middles are painstakingly slow and sometimes dull. All of his careful preparations usually pay off. . . in the husbanded strength which bursts forth finally to sweep the play with a fierce impetus to a gutting conclusion.⁴²

Micheal O hAodha remarked ironically but accurately in his 1974 *Theatre in Ireland* that

the most serious fault in Murray's writing is, perhaps, a defect of his quality as an unexcelled delineator of rural life as it was in the early years of th[e] century. Writing from within his people, being himself so much of his people, he seems limited, at times, by some of the inhibitions of the environment he depicted.⁴³

Indeed, the two critical charges most leveled against Murray are the narrow scope of his work--gloomy, tragic, and Irish as it is⁴⁴--and that he implicitly endorses the strict Catholicism which are at the core of his plays.⁴⁵ The second of these charges seems especially questionable--see the discussion of *Autumn Fire* in the "Interpretation" section above for an alternate view of the ways in which Murray presents and responds to Catholicism.

Perhaps the most important judgment of Murray's plays, which has come from the most noted of Irish critics, such as O hAodha and Malone,⁴⁶ places them as pioneering works which are significant and influential in the Abbey's realistic tradition. Neither is it insignificant that contemporary Irish playwright John B. Keane has reflected that he "regarded and still do[es] regard *Autumn Fire* as one of the great Irish plays."⁴⁷ The play has received what can be called a consensus of commendations to the effect that it is Murray's best, finest, most enduring, most effective play. What remains to be seen is whether, for a masterpiece by a minor Irish playwright, the former or the latter of these qualifiers will take precedence: can a play which approaches greatness pass into Ireland's "permanent literature," or will the play and its writer be doomed to obscurity by generations far removed?

Publication History

Murray, T. C., *Autumn Fire* (Dublin: James Duffy: 1925, 1927, 1952, 1964; London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1925, 1928; Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926, 1927, 1931, 1952, 1964).

-----, *Selected Plays of T.C. Murray*, ed. Richard Allen Cave (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998; Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1998).

Laom Luisne Fomhair, Irish translation of *Autumn Fire* (Dublin: C. C. Fallon, 1930).

Texts

Three undated typescripts, each bound with a cover page which is titled and signed by the author, are held at the National Library of Ireland (MS 24843 (i-iii)). Although they are undated, it is clear that TSS (i) and (ii) predate (iii), which is essentially an unmarked performance script, identical to the published text of the play. On the other hand, TSS (i) and (ii) contain significant differences from the published text and from each other, and therefore merit some attention.

The typed text of TSS (i) and (ii) is identical, and the stage directions are underlined throughout with a red pencil. These typescripts *should* each be eighty-three pages long, but TS (i) is missing its final eleven pages. Each of these two typescripts contains additions and a few deletions, all handwritten, using lead pencil. The handwriting of the penciled-in corrections in TS (i) differs from that of TS (ii). Furthermore, the handwritten additions and deletions in the two texts themselves are at variance, sometimes very significantly, suggesting that the corrections were made simultaneously but apart from one another. This can probably be accounted for by the fact that before finalizing a text of his plays, Murray often held readings at his home where others, including Joseph Holloway, F. J. McCormick, and Michael J. Dolan, would comment on nuances of the text. Murray would sometimes make changes based on their suggestions, and since the handwritten corrections on these typescripts appear to be the work of two different hands, that appears to be what is contained herein.

TS (i) appears, from close inspection and comparison, to contain corrections which are from Murray's own hand; it contains many more corrections than (ii), and, with the changes it suggests and incorporates, it is closer to the final, published version of the play. Therefore, it will be discussed more thoroughly -- but first a few comments about TS (ii).

On a few occasions the text of (ii) bears a closer similarity to the published version, though many of the changes in (ii) are also in (i). The chief value of (ii) is that it does contain the last eleven pages of the TS, which are missing from i. The last page of TS (ii) bears Murray's Dublin address in Kilmainham, where he lived until his retirement. Almost all of the corrections in TS (ii) are minor alterations to the dialogue which suggest a concern for the credibility of nuances of characters' speech. A prime example of the latter type of change would be that Murray penciled-in the word "knowing" (in Ellen's four-line speech toward the top of p. 122), preferring it to "knowledgeable," which is used in the typescript. In a few places the additions suggested in (ii) play up the passion and sexual tension, as with Molly's comment to Nance about Owen's attractiveness, (addition italicized) "'twould do you good to see him. . . *an' the little bit of a white breeches on him*" (146).

On the other hand, typescript (i) largely tones down--indeed intentionally suppresses--passionate expressions by several characters. The revision of the text allowed Murray to suppress, to hold back, and often to suggest rather than reveal characters' emotions. For example, Murray omits from the published text a speech which may seem uncharacteristic of Ellen: "and I hungering wild as any one for the warm kindness that does be on a lover's tongue and the feel of his arms in their strength around me - and his mouth on mine maybe."⁴⁸ Likewise, Murray deletes the stage direction which has Owen kiss Nance warmly at the end of act two, and he especially downplays the most blatant expressions of passion and torment in the play's penultimate scene between Michael and Nance. There, for example, the playwright discards the following speech by Michael:

Michael: (more passionately) I could throw myself into the deepest pool of the river -- ~~and be dragged down singing for joy-- only yourself to be in my arms!~~⁴⁹

While at first glance such revisions may seem like deletions for the sake of realism--as in, "an Irish character in rural Cork in the 1920s wouldn't say that!"--it is important to note

that Murray is simultaneously using the revisions to develop his characters' actions and motives in ways that will shape how audiences perceive them.

In the case of Ellen, in TS (i), her passion and her obedience stand out, but upon revision, Murray sought to make her a much more sober yet passively bitter and resentful character. One of the most significant differences is the scene in which Owen reveals to his children that Nance is to be their stepmother. In the typescript, Ellen herself has doubts about the rumors she has heard about Nance and Owen; she feels some guilt about confronting Owen with the rumors at all, and after she does she feels penitent--she even apologizes to Nance at her father's behest. In the published play, of course, Ellen is much more straightforwardly resolved that the rumors are true and she is unwaveringly resentful and judgmental. In the final version of *Autumn Fire*, rather than questioning the opinion of the self-righteous and repressive elements of the community in regard to the May-December marriage, Ellen embraces and acts on behalf of their interests. This change in Ellen's character heightens the conflict by situating Ellen not merely as the obedient daughter but as the representative voice of the community and the mouthpiece for its judgment.

Meanwhile, if Murray's revisions make Ellen a less likeable character, it simultaneously strives to make the audience more sympathetic toward Owen. In the draft, Owen is more of a bully, for example, hypocritically forcing his daughter to apologize to Nance for repeating a rumor which, a minute later, he will acknowledge is true. In the draft, too, Owen's jealousy seems to derive chiefly from within himself rather than with aid from the suggestions of Nance and Morgan. In act one when Nance leaves the Keegan house and stops to talk to Michael, Murray directs that Owen "goes to the door watching the scene a moment without speaking,"⁵⁰ whereas the published version only hints at Owen's jealousy with greater subtlety. One of the most significant changes Murray made to the text from TS to publication involves the timing of Owen's entrance in the final scene shared between Michael and Nance (page 173). There, in the typescript, Murray made Owen appear silently at the top of the stairs just as Nance is begging Michael to promise to leave, and quite a few moments before they kiss.⁵¹ In the final version, of course, Owen *could* be

at the top of the stairs, but Murray provides no specific indication as to how much of the conversation Owen has heard. He only appears within sight of the audience as Michael and Nance are engaged in a final kiss. Furthermore, since Owen refuses to believe that Michael was making plans to leave, it seems unlikely that Owen has heard very much of their conversation. The play's conclusion seems all the more pitifully tragic because it seems coincidental rather than intentional for Owen to enter at this inopportune moment.

In a general way, the most succinct comparative comment that can be made about these two versions of *Autumn Fire* is that the final version is much more greatly subdued. A great deal of paring down the play's dialogue to its elemental themes has taken place. Mrs. Desmond's character in the final version loses many of her lines which develop her character,⁵² likely because they were deemed superfluous. Moreover, the character descriptions in their final form serve largely to highlight the youth-age disparity that clearly divides the characters in the play. Many extraneous details have been removed. The description of Michael as "a milder image of the father in his youth" (132), as has been noted above, was, in the typescript:

~~We see in Michael the father transfigured by youth. There is the same bright complexion, the clean kind eyes, the lithe frame but the magic of twenty-five gives to the body of this country boy a grace and poise of almost lyric beauty. He is of a different world from the earth-worn peasant of Rodin—at least in externals for in essentials all peasants are one whether they wrestle with the clay of Brittany or Mid-Russia or of Munster. Naked and with a dappled fawn-skin flung across his loins one might well mistake this absurdly handsome boy for a youth who had leaped out of some Tale in the Greek mythology.~~

While Michael is an important character, the play itself is chiefly the tragedy of Owen -- so this inflated description was, of necessity, omitted. Furthermore, Murray pared down to almost half the passionate lines Michael speaks to Nance in their final scene.

Another explanation for a change of the latter kind is that in the revision Murray also seems to have consciously toned down his lyricism. Only a few truly lyrical, resonant lines remain in the play, and the ones that do are hauntingly memorable and inextricably linked to the play's conclusion -- Nance's "To live is to suffer, and I'm satisfied" (176) and Owen's "They've broken me. . .son - wife - daughter. . .I've no one now but the Son o'

God” (177). One of Murray’s early collaborators, Daniel Corkery, has written of how Murray’s career as a writer began as a lyric poet and that his achievement as a realistic playwright is a result of a conscious moderation of lyrical tendencies.⁵³ Murray’s control as a writer, and his willful suspension of lyricism, are important and distinguishing marks of his craftsmanship.

Finally, Murray made some adjustments to balance a desire to portray the influence of the Irish language on Cork English with a desire to appeal to a wider audience which would be largely unfamiliar with the Irish language. Incorporated into the characters’ speeches, quite naturally, are several Irish-language words, among them “plamas” (127), “fainne” (143), “oinseach” (155), and “cipin” (177). Of course, many other words that Murray uses belong to Hiberno-English,⁵⁴ but the specifically Irish-language words would not be familiar to a general Irish audience.⁵⁵ One solution to his dilemma, at least for the actors and readers of his plays, was that Murray included in his text footnotes which explained the pronunciation and meaning of the Irish words he used -- and although those notes were omitted from earlier versions of *Autumn Fire*, they have been restored in the new edition of Murray’s *Selected Plays*. Sometimes, too, Murray compromised, as when he changed the Irish language word “tri-na-ceile” in TS (i) to “frish frash” (135). Nonetheless, for those familiar with the Irish language, the play may take on something of a deeper resonance, as with the previously-mentioned example of “Tobarnabrosna.”

The third typescript, which (as mentioned above) is identical to the published text of the play, is stapled, with a white cover, sixty-eight pages. It bears the playwright’s Ballsbridge address, where he lived after his 1932 retirement,⁵⁶ as well as information on applications for performance. Murray himself had been named as the contact for performance applications, but in this TS he has crossed out his own address in favor of an agent he had recently acquired, the Authors Guild of Ireland.⁵⁷

Also, an undated sixty-eight page adaptation for television of *Autumn Fire* by Adrain Vale is held in the archives of the National Library of Ireland, MS 24844.⁵⁸

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CHAPTER 5

THE BIG HOUSE

Four Scenes in Its Life

by Lennox Robinson

Contexts

Following the social concern of Shaw's drama¹ and particularly following the realistic drama of Ireland initiated by Padraic Colum,² in *The Big House* Lennox Robinson brought to an Abbey stage dominated by peasant plays a set of voices and concerns that interpreted Irish experience in the crucial period of national formation in a fresh and original way. Still, as Daniel Corkery suggested in his book *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, the decline and fall of the Big House was a leading theme in Anglo-Irish literature.³ In Robinson's day this theme was to be found, for example, in Somerville and Ross's *The Big House of Inver* (1925) and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929), as well as in Yeats's poem "Coole Park, 1929." But in the dramatic genre Robinson's *The Big House* stands alone as the primary and original treatment of the Anglo-Irish experience of the political turmoil in early twentieth-century Ireland, even, as Christopher Murray has suggested, having perhaps itself

established a genre of Irish drama, that of the besieged Protestant class, seen again in Jack White's *The Last Eleven* (1968) and William Trevor's *Scenes from an Album* (1981), while a different version of the Big House theme is seen in Brian Friel's *Aristocrats* (1979).⁴

Robinson's play, whatever its subsequent influence or lack thereof, blended a clearly realistic plot line with a subtle element of experimental impressionism, in the spectral image of the Alcocks' son Ulick. This latter element is suggestive of yet another Big House

drama which was to follow, W. B. Yeats's late play *Purgatory* (1938).

Appreciating the play's effect and, especially, its dramatic irony requires some knowledge of its political and historical context. The Big Houses were the Irish country homes of the mostly Protestant landowning class, and in the turbulent years of the Anglo-Irish War⁶ and the Irish Civil War which followed it, which are the very years dramatized in Robinson's play, a great many of these houses were destroyed in retaliation for murders and other acts of violence. Irish audiences, particularly in the 1920s but even today, would associate the Big Houses with their destruction and with the fading power and presence of Anglo-Irish Protestants in southern Ireland. Thus, audiences and readers would be very likely to anticipate the burning of the Alcocks' Big House in the play; attentive readers and observers, then, can notice in the play's dialogue ironies which are embedded there when reference is made to the future of Ballydonal.

Many of the Big Houses had been built in the years following massive confiscations of Irish lands by the British parliament under Oliver Cromwell during the seventeenth century. The lands were given to those to whom the government owed debts, including soldiers, and the houses which rested upon these lands became sites of wealth and culture in rural Ireland while they flourished and profited under a feudalistic land system.⁷

During the eighteenth century, especially, the Big House came to be known as a symbol of culture, distinction, and refinement,⁸ even while neighboring Catholic tenants suffered harshly under the British Penal Laws and the potato famine. Gradually over time, however, the Big House culture itself experienced a steady decline as the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, passive and decadent, was forced to relinquish its political clout after the Act of Union with Great Britain in 1800. In the years following the potato famine, many landowners eventually became unable, even, to collect rent from tenants, resulting in countless evictions, resentment and hostility, and a land war which raged on throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁹ Disillusioned with the political and social changes of early twentieth century Ireland, Anglo-Irish culture was, by that time, characterized as much by conflicting loyalties as by decline. After generations of settlement in Ireland, many Anglo-Irish developed a sense of themselves apart from their English and Irish counterparts,

yet they fostered within themselves, as well, a sense of their own Irishness.¹⁰ Still, many within the Ascendancy identified more with the English middle classes than with their Irish peasant neighbors, and being in a minority position, besieged within their community by a little-educated, rural Catholic peasantry,¹¹ the Anglo-Irish sought refuge in the Big House. Some felt betrayal by the British, who were making land concessions to long-persecuted Catholics and who had for years been debating the issue of Irish home rule. Others felt a strong connection to the Union, while still others, including a most renowned group of writers, among them Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge, identified themselves as Irish nationalists.¹²

By 1921, with the creation of an Irish free state, the Big House had become the symbol of an Ireland rapidly vanishing, and the subsequent burning of 192 Big Houses within two years would only further expedite the disappearance of Anglo-Irish culture.¹³ The great majority of these houses were burned in the notorious Black and Tan fighting, which pitted a brutal force of British military police (wearing black and tan colored uniforms) against the guerrilla tactics of the Irish Republican Army. Retaliation followed retaliation, with the brutal Black and Tans randomly killing those who stood in their path, while bands of Republicans would attack police patrols and set fire to the Big Houses, burning them to the ground.¹⁴

A word should be said about Robinson's literary method in the play, which owes something to the work of George Bernard Shaw and especially to his play *John Bull's Other Island*--a play which, using wit and irony, demolishes many of the prejudices of the day regarding what it meant to be "Irish" and "British." Robinson's *The Big House*, one might say, similarly uses wit to challenge preconceived notions about a particular kind of Irishness--in fact, the play redefines, or perhaps simply defines, what it means to be Anglo-Irish in post-colonial Ireland.

Interpretation

The fact that *The Big House* is subtitled "Four Scenes in Its Life," is deserving of

immediate attention as one looks to interpret the play, because this subtitle carries with it several important, unstated implications--all of which point to the representativeness of the house and its dwellers. First, since the house has a life of "its own," Robinson seems to position the house itself as the major character in his drama. Realistically, of course, the house cannot function as a character, but it does serve an important function, both literally and representatively--that is, in standing for something larger. On one level, the Big House's "life" is intricately and inseparably connected with its Ascendancy inhabitants, for whom over the course of generations it has come to represent. Moreover, the particular subjects of Robinson's play, Ballydonal House and the Alcock family, together represent broader political and social conflicts occurring in late colonial Ireland. In fact, Robinson dramatizes the tragic final chapter in the history of the Irish Big House and, as well, it would seem, its Anglo-Irish Ascendancy inhabitants. By taking as its dramatic subject the final stages in the Big House's decline, the play brought to the Irish stage a fresh and unique consideration of the situation of the Anglo-Irish in late colonial Ireland. Approaching the "Anglo-Irish question" with sympathy but also detachment, Robinson problematizes the notion of identity in Ireland by examining the specific case of the Anglo-Irish; simultaneously, by introducing alternative outcomes for the old and new order of Anglo-Irish, he raises questions about what role, if any, his characters--and those they represent--should assume in the newly evolving nation.

The action of the play, as the subtitle suggests, depicts four scenes in the "life," or perhaps more appropriately the "death," of Ballydonal House, the ancestral home of the Anglo-Irish Protestant Alcock family. Alcocks have lived at Ballydonal at least throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, perhaps dating back as far as the time of the Cromwellian settlement. The house is littered with the "vestigia of generations,"¹⁵ as the opening stage directions reveal, suggesting not only that it is past its prime, but also that it is declining in repair and stature. Like the house they inhabit, the members of the present Alcock family, St. Leger, his wife, and their daughter, Kate, struggle to avoid degeneration as they are confronted in the play with cultural forces at work in Ireland which render them politically impotent and irrelevant and bring about their fall. The play's ensuing action

within its four scenes suggests that the Alcocks' personal dilemma at Ballydonal is representative of a greater social dilemma facing the Anglo-Irish, and indeed the nation itself, in the 1920s.

The idea of the representativeness of the Alcocks and of Ballydonal House is suggested and debated early and often in the play's dialogue. The play's first substantive conversation, between Reverend Brown and Captain Despard, quickly evolves into a discussion of how "typical" the Alcocks and their house are in relation to their Irish environment. Despard remarks that while the butler, Atkins, is a "typically Irish old fellow," everything else--the house, its management and appearance, and every other thing about it--"doesn't seem to be so awfully Irish" (141). In a witty reversal reminiscent of Shaw, Reverend Brown, at first taken aback by what he sees as Despard's stereotypically English perception of the Irish, on second thought congratulates Despard "for exceedingly sharp penetration." Brown declares that Despard has noted "the great fact" that Ballydonal is not typical, nor are its inhabitants, the Alcocks. They are instead, to Brown, "a protest against the type."

At this point, and elsewhere, instead of providing a direct statement of what the Anglo-Irish "typically" are like, significantly, Robinson equivocates, rendering who and what his characters *are* problematic. What exactly the "type" is, in this conversation and elsewhere, seems intentionally ambiguous: here Despard asks Brown what the type is, and Brown responds, "Not quite what you think it is." Brown's further statements complicate rather than clarify the ambiguity when he struggles to explain the differences he perceives through a series of negations:

The difference doesn't lie in the obvious things you've seen,
it's not that this room is clean and decent and comfortable.
Irish country houses are frequently that, it's not that your
dinner was eatable and your bath hot-- (142)

Apparently unable to articulate to Despard Ballydonal's difference from the typical Big House, Reverend Brown shifts his focus from house to inhabitant, asking, "But is St. Leger traditional, is Kate--Miss Alcock?" On these more manageable terms, Brown launches into a scathing attack on those who differ from the Alcocks, the typical Big House inhabitants:

Without an idea. With no culture. Ignorant. Don't know

whether the portraits that hang in their dining rooms are
eighteenth-century masterpieces or photogravures, don't know
if the silver they use is old Irish or modern Brummagem. Don't
know the history of their own family, don't know Irish history.
Have nothing but a few religious prejudices and very good
health. Can't even grow decent flowers. (142)

Even despite this harsh critique which unequivocally defines Brown's idea of the "typical" members of an Irish Ascendancy in decline, Robinson as playwright undercuts the seeming absoluteness of Brown's statement by emphasizing the contingency of Brown's singular perspective. First, Brown himself protests too much when he gratuitously declares that, "I know what I'm talking about. My name's as common as dirt, but I'm from County Wexford, and County Wexford Browns fancy themselves" (142-3). Brown's further statement that "I'm attacking my own class" seems disingenuous, for he is at once associating with and dissociating himself from the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. At the root of the complexities and ambiguities of Brown's position lies the question of identity. For Reverend Brown, being Irish means being uncivilized, uncultured, and ignorant, while being British means the opposite of these things, civilized, cultured, and educated. However, what it means to be "Anglo-Irish" is not clear; it is to be some unspecified contamination of British elements mixing with Irish, the result of years of British settlers assimilating with the native Irish.

Meanwhile, the play's text also questions the validity of the reverend's claim of the Alcocks' atypicality by contrasting Brown's with St. Leger's own opinion. Mr. Alcock in fact dismisses the reverend's evaluation, telling Despard that, "Brown talks a lot of nonsense. I keep telling him that we *are* the type" (150). Alcock insists that the so-called "uncultured" are the variant rather than the norm. Still, Alcock's position, like Brown's, is immediately undercut, and in this case by his own comments. While Alcock insists that "cultured" still defines the majority of the Ascendancy, he goes on to say that the same cannot be claimed for the parsons and priests of Ireland:

I'm afraid [Brown is] no longer the typical Irish parson.
I believe you can be ordained now without having been to
college--to what you and I would call a college. And the
priests are as bad. Old Canon Maguire. . . was a traveled,
cultivated gentleman. . . but he's dead and gone and the new
parish priest--impossible--a barbarian. (150)

What finally, then, is one to make of the play's equivocal and, at times, contradictory statements about culture and representation? Perhaps more to the point, why is the play so self-conscious about whether the Alcocks are representative of a "type"? The play raises these questions precisely, it would seem, to nudge its audience to consider for themselves what it means to be Anglo-Irish. On a large scale, then, it would seem that the greatest concern of Lennox Robinson's play is to bring into the consciousness of its audience the problems of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in the evolving nation, most particularly their identity and their future role.

Throughout Ireland's history, and even after independence,¹⁶ the situation of the Anglo-Irish has been a precarious one, divided between loyalty to colonial power which gave them land and prestige, sympathy for the colonized people, and affection for the land, which the Anglo-Irish increasingly perceived as home. *The Big House* enacts these tensions by dramatizing the position of the Alcock family in the particularly significant historical period of 1918 to 1923.

The opening of the play's first scene instantly provides what may be taken as a subtle commentary on the position of the Anglo-Irish landowner--for Atkins, the butler, announces the arrival of a guest to an *empty* room. Soon the guest, peeking onstage from behind a screen, alerts the unaware servant that the lord of the house is not to be found there. The butler has taken for granted that the master of the house would be found in his drawing room--he has assumed this to such an extent that he does not bother to see if the lord is actually present. Thus, the master is out of sight, and even out of mind, for the Irish servant, until he is notified of the absence.

The absence of St. Leger Alcock in the opening scene *may* be taken as little more than a device to stir interest in his character through delaying his appearance onstage, or as an object of humor to highlight the butler's drunkenness; however, one might instead see the absence as symbolic of the detachment and isolation which would represent the position of the master of a Big House. Historically, the Anglo-Irish landowner in Ireland is notable for *literal* absence: absenteeism among Big House lords certainly has not been uncommon. But even more prevalent, and much more to the point, is the *figurative* absence of the Anglo-

Irish in terms of the layers of distance which separate them from the British and Irish alike. Isolated from political and cultural centers in England, where he has been educated, the Anglo-Irish landowner has been relegated to the periphery, the Irish countryside, and removed from contact with British comrades with whom he identifies in his political, cultural, and religious affiliations. The Ascendancy landowner is at the same time alienated more severely from his native Irish neighbors due to a vast divide of culture and economics. Most of the neighbors are his tenants, and while they toil in the fields to fill their days, he plays the piano, reads the days-old news from London, manages the affairs of the estate, and entertains guests. Still, loosely, he feels sympathy for and a remote kinship with the Irish people, among whom he and his ancestors have matured.

The Big House only accentuates what divides the Anglo-Irish Alcocks from the British and Irish, for in placing the Anglo-Irish characters at the play's center, it moves British and Irish characters to the periphery and reduces them much more simply and straightforwardly to types. The play's two chief Irish characters, Vandaleur O'Neill and the butler, Atkins, are endowed with traits that would seem to make them stereotypically stage Irish: Atkins is a drunkard, and O'Neill, a country bumpkin. Despite their faults, the two characters nonetheless eventually achieve some level of dignity, and Robinson eventually succeeds in subverting the stereotypes. As Kate declares, for the O'Neills, including Van, being burned out of their ancestral home "has done wonders for them" (183), causing them to be recognized as voguish in London. Meanwhile, in his retirement, Atkins is sober and even chivalrous as he rails at the English and Irish alike for the atrocity wrought on Ballydonal House at the opening of scene four.

Still, the root of the buffoonish "type" of Robinson's Irish characters is their provinciality, particularly demonstrated in the opening scene. The play begins an hour before the World War I armistice, but its Irish characters seem to be oblivious of, or indifferent to, the war's end. Atkins agrees with Reverend Brown that "it's a great day" because now that the Germans have been defeated, "we'll have posts and sugar and everything back the way it used to be long ago" (140). Vandaleur later agrees, in similar fashion, that it is a great day, "indeed, [for] 'tis wonderful weather for this time of year" (145); he is so out of touch with world events that when he is informed about the end of the

war, he responds, “Oh, to be sure. Is it to be today or tomorrow?” Furthermore, when Alcock tells Vandaleur about Despard’s war injury, the Irish bumpkin can only relate to it in terms of his own experience, so he tells about how Jerry Mangan received a “similar” injury in a recent riding accident. The Irish perspective in this sense is subject to critique because of the severe limitations of its insularity. Furthermore, the main object of Robinson’s social criticism, Vandaleur O’Neill, is satirized chiefly because of the class to which he belongs rather than because of his Irishness.

Meanwhile, the English in the play, Captain Despard and St. Leger’s wife, Mary Alcock, also respond to the complex conditions with which they are confronted in Ireland in less-than-sophisticated ways--ways which seem conditioned by their background and, as they are characters in a play, even caricatured. Not only do the British characters regard themselves as superior to everything Irish; they one-sidedly lack sympathy for anyone Irish, and in stereotypically English fashion, they are most concerned with keeping up appearances and fully lack a sense of humor. Despard himself seems foolish when he claims to have an “Irish” sense of humor because of his Ulster grandmother. Humorlessly, he single-mindedly and blindly aspires only to his military duty; when he appears in scene two as the leader of Black and Tan soldiers, he refuses to see or to feel anything beyond the scope of his present duty--not the suffering of the Irish, not even the consequences of his own actions, which may include the retaliatory burning of Ballydonal House.

Mary Alcock, likewise, will not allow herself to see beyond the self-imposed limitations of her British identification. After Mrs. Alcock defiantly asserts in scene one, “I’m not Irish, Captain Despard, thank God” (149), her husband proclaims that he intentionally married “outside of his race” since he likes “every now and then seeing Ballydonal through her foreign, hostile eyes” (150). While the outsider’s perspective may provide useful insights for her husband, Mary Alcock unfortunately refuses to acknowledge the possible validity of views other than her own. From her own perspective, Mrs. Alcock has lived in fear for twenty years among “a community of criminal lunatics” (161). She dismisses any Irish attempt to rebel against British imperialism as “wrong,” while she justifies Black and Tan violence as necessary to “put down” the Irish unrest. Then, when

confronted with an instance of gratuitous violence by the Black and Tans, the murder of an innocent bystander holding her baby, Mrs. Alcock declares it an accident, “a most distressing one.” Her husband aptly, albeit facetiously, summarizes her position by stating that “England is right and Ireland is wrong, the Republicans commit murder, the Black and Tans commit--accidents” (162).

Continually, Mrs. Alcock’s simple emotional responses are a foil to the complex responses to the same situations by her husband and daughter. At the close of scene one, Ulick’s death is merely incomprehensible for Mrs. Alcock, while it is ironic enough to evoke hysteria, grief, and passionate resentment in Kate. Similarly, Mrs. Alcock’s indignant confrontation with the rebels who demand that the family members vacate Ballydonal House in scene three, and her embittered resentment of the burning of the house in scene four elicit more complex responses from the other members of her family--responses which logically arise for the Anglo-Irish characters because of their divided allegiances.

These differing responses to the same predicament can partially be explained by the fact that if Mrs. Alcock never really feels comfortable in Ireland, at least she lives with the knowledge that she can escape it. At the play’s end, she can look forward to feeling at home when she will return to England with her husband. For Kate and St. Leger Alcock, however, escape--in order to feel more at home--is never a feasible option. As Anglo-Irish characters, they are looked upon as Irish in England and as English in Ireland, but they do not fit neatly into either of these classifications.

St. Leger in particular, as a representative of the older generation of Anglo-Irish, is trapped. He is deeply concerned about the political situation of Ireland but is unable to do act substantively to alter it; as Mary says to him, “Imagine the relief of being in a country whose politics mattered nothing to us” (161). But St. Leger says he feels it “physically impossible” to leave (168). Members of his class, who once governed Ireland, have been politically disenfranchised ever since the Act of Union with Great Britain. He has contemplated running for the Irish senate, but the only real political action of which he seems capable is authoring sympathetic notes to magistrates to excuse the violent deeds of local nationalist rebels. Alcock seems once to have written these apologies because he knew the individuals implicated and had genuine sympathy for the cause; since that time,

however, the writing of such notes seems to have become little more than a routine gesture on behalf of any individual, known or unknown, for whom such assistance is requested. Furthermore, even these letters' minor attempts to alleviate individual sufferings prove futile: St. Leger cannot save Nicolas O'Connor, nor can his having written the letter impact the local rebels' orders to burn Ballydonal House in reprisal for O'Connor's execution (186).

As has been suggested above, the Anglo-Irish Alcock maintains complicated, even ambivalent, political affiliations. With distance and detachment, he sympathizes with Irish nationalist individuals and causes, without condoning the violence enacted by either side. He realizes that his power, wealth, and position are the result of ties with Britain. Still, the Alcocks may also bear a vague sense of Britain's betrayal of them and their kind, as is manifest especially in Kate's caustic response to the news of Ulick's death:

Kate: Damn King and Empire. They don't matter to us.

...
Alcock: We must try and be proud --

Kate: (*passionately*) Never. Never in this world. I'll never be proud of it. I'll never pretend that it was anything but stupid and hateful. You and your King and your Empire! Much good they ever did Ulick, or me, or you. (158)

Although Mr. Alcock deflects rather than embraces his daughter's bitter sense of betrayal, the play nonetheless presents the Alcocks as a family which has, in essence, sacrificed its two sons for the greater good of an empire which has only contributed to their decline in recent years by making concessions to the Irish peasantry.

If St. Leger is paralyzed politically, so too is he deeply encumbered economically. As the years of Ireland's political struggle wear on, it becomes increasingly difficult for the Ascendancy landowners to collect rents from their tenants. Thus, in scene two Mary Alcock complains that

It made me simply furious this morning when I was walking back from the village and the Goods flashed past me in their motor [car] choking me with dust. To think of all the rent they owe us! And their car isn't a Ford either, oh dear me no, some very expensive make Mrs. Brown told me. Is there no way of making them and all the others pay? (163-4)

St. Leger responds, "none," adding that the only consolation is that the Goods' car without doubt soon will be seized by one of the warring factions or the other. It is hardly

surprising, then, in scene three when he reveals that he has collected no rents for three years. With no income, the best the Alcocks can do is attempt to keep up appearances, culturally as well as economically--which Mrs. Alcock attempts to do even with her own daughter, making excuses for why the drawing room is not heated in winter (183). Reduced to consoling themselves and rationalizing their circumstances, the older Alcocks pathetically accept what seems their inevitable decline.

The most difficult circumstance of all for the Alcocks to accept is the loss of their two sons, which for them means effectively that their family's Ascendancy line is unable to perpetuate itself, that it approaches not only decline but also extinction. It was certainly not atypical among the Anglo-Irish to have lost a son in the first world war, but the Alcocks' double loss takes on a graver and even symbolic significance. For the older generation, the announced loss of Ulick at the end of scene one seems to set the stage, ultimately, for the end of Anglo-Irish life at Ballydonal: even if Kate marries, her perpetuation of the line will come at the cost of the family name, and marriage will likely mean her departure from Ballydonal, as well. Kate herself is ambivalent about marriage; she rejects the proposal of Despard in the first scene on the grounds that,

I don't like marrying out of my life, out of my class--I don't mean that in a snobbish way, I'm sure the Despards are as good as we are--but they're different, they're English. (157)

Kate wants to retain her Irishness, to remain close to her native land, rather than becoming an Irish exile by marrying Despard. But if she lingers in the Irish countryside, her mother worries, who could possibly make an adequate match for her? There are simply no suitable prospects.

Kate herself is much more comfortable with the likelihood of not marrying than are her parents, but perhaps this is in part a reflection of the fact that, as a woman and a member of the younger Anglo-Irish generation, her position is markedly--and significantly--different from her father's. As the central character in the play and the primary representative of the younger Anglo-Irish, Kate Alcock articulates the problematics of Anglo-Irish identity with great clarity and eloquence. Discussing the murder of a family friend by the Black and Tans, Kate puts into words the complex dilemma of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland:

Kate: [The Irish] are not us, we're not them. That was the awful thing I realised this evening. There I was in that cottage with the neighbours. . .and I knew Maggie better than any of them, and I—I was an outsider.

Alcock: What do you mean?

Kate: Just what I say. An outsider. Something outside, different, away from them.

Alcock: When death is in question one feels, of course, that religion makes such a difference.

Kate: Yes, there was religion to make me feel outside but lots of other things too; education, I suppose, and tradition and—and everything that makes me me and them them. Between us and them, like the people in the Bible, there was a “great gulf fixed.”

Alcock: I know no one who has made less of the gulf than you, Kitty. Your democracy shocks your mother.

Kate: (*impatiently*) Oh, yes, I threw a bridge across the gulf. . . but it was only a bridge, the gulf remained and when the moment came they instinctively forced me to stand on the farther side. . .I've been conscious of it ever since I've been conscious of anything, but I thought it could be broken down. (166-7)

The crux of the matter for Kate is that among the majority of the people she has known all her life in Ireland, there is finally and fundamentally a difference between Irish and Anglo-Irish, a deep, unspoken, and instinctive “us” versus “them” mentality. Kate goes on to say, “I think I'd like it better if they hated us. That at least would make me feel that we had power, that we counted for something” (167). Kate declares ultimately in scene two that despite what she knows is inevitable difference, still she yearns “to be the same” (168).

In the play's tragic conclusion, with the fall of the house itself, Kate realizes that, rather than feeling ashamed and awkward, she can exploit and celebrate her unavoidable difference. Through Kate there is, at the end of *The Big House*, a synthesis, and a return of the “life-force” of the Anglo-Irish in Shaw's sense of the term. The old order has collapsed, and, as is the way of the world, regeneration in a new form will take place. The burning of the house, Kate says, made her realize that she, her family, and her class *do* matter in Ireland. She speaks eloquently as a mouthpiece for the rights of the Anglo-Irish

in Ireland, declaring that Ireland is “not more theirs than ours” (196). “I was wrong,” she says, “we were all wrong, in trying to find a common platform” (195), for “we’ve spent so much time sympathetically seeing their [point of view] that we’ve lost sight of our own” (196). Now, she asserts, “I don’t want to give up the ‘they’ and ‘us,’ I glory in it” (195), since

We are formidable if we care to make ourselves so, if we give up
our poor attempt to pretend we’re not different. We must glory
in our difference, be as proud of it as they are of theirs. (196)

Kate’s ultimate gesture, which melds these spoken ideals with real action, is to remain and to rebuild. Now, rather than dreaming ideally of assimilation, Kate, with confidence, asserts her will to be different yet still be Irish.

The Big House is not simply and straightforwardly concluded with Kate’s articulate pronouncements, however. Throughout the realistic plot, Robinson has interwoven an impressionistic device in the recurrence of Kate’s brother Ulick as a ghost. Ulick reappears as a continuing reminder that, despite Kate’s efforts, and whatever they may accomplish, in a deeply resonant sense the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy may in fact be dead and gone, that it may be little more than a mere haunting from the past in the new Ireland. In this sense, the absence of the master of the house at the beginning of the play is mirrored at play’s end by the haunting presence, but actual absence, of the future master.

At a moment in the Irish theater when the peasant comedy ruled the stage, *The Big House* gave voice to a fresh and anomalous set of characters and concerns, forcing its Irish audience to confront the dilemma of being Anglo-Irish in an increasingly “Irish” Ireland. More broadly, in the context of the emerging nation, Ireland in its post-colonial mode was increasingly becoming a homogeneous state under the strong (and constitutional) influence of the Catholic church. In light of the homogeneity of government, religion, and people that was fast becoming a significant reality in Ireland, *The Big House* can be seen as a rebellious assertion of the validity, and even necessity, of difference.

Stage History

The Big House opened at the Abbey Theatre on September 6, 1926, produced by the author. It was revived subsequently at the Abbey for a week's run in December 1926, twice in 1927, and once in 1930. A long delay in the play's export had to do with Robinson's own reservations about production abroad--for he himself, of course, was responsible for putting together Abbey tours in America and elsewhere. As a *New York Times* article entitled "A Report from Ireland" states,

The author himself has expressed doubts as to [*The Big House's*] having an appeal for audiences outside of Ireland. . .[W]hile he is not afraid to tackle big themes, he is ever nervous as to how his work will strike neutral audiences.¹⁷

Thus, it was not until 1933-4 that the play premiered in New York, at the Martin Beck Theatre; it debuted in February 1934 in London, at the Playhouse. The play was received with favor in London, but it was panned in New York, as Adele Dalsimer has explained, not so much because it was too specifically Irish (reviews claimed as much), but because the play did not fit the mold of American expectations of Irish plays--that, foremost, they be comically "enchanted" and entertaining.¹⁸

Critical Reception

The most accurate critical statement of the power of *The Big House* appeared at the opening of its *Times* review: "To be indifferent to Kate Alcock is not possible."¹⁹ Micheal MacLiammoir's comments about the play and, especially in this regard, about Kate Alcock, are worth quoting at length:

I disliked *The Big House* so passionately, and was so passionately moved and excited by it, that the seeing of it remains to this day in my mind as one of the theatrical events of my life. I hated its presentation of what to me was then the most maddening of all human beings, the intelligent West Briton. I hated its sympathetic handling of our national disease of rapt self-analysis, practised with such skill by the West British heroine. I hated the fact that with all her unbearable tricks of the mind she was yet unrecognisable and even an attractive type. I hated the tolerance and understanding with which the, to me, intolerable and incomprehensible figures of the play were drawn; and all this was because, like everyone else in the country, I was consumed with emotions of love and rage and burning contempt for various schools of thought not shared by myself: and

very enjoyable it all was, too.²⁰

In similar fashion, Joseph Holloway recorded that on opening night, in response to Atkins's speech toward the end of the play, where he claims that "The English will be desired back to Ireland," a member of the audience was so moved that he replied an emphatic "Never!"²¹ At the other end of the spectrum, the Anglo-Irish writer AE (George Russell) remarked that he felt a "'liberating thrill' [from] the final and defiant outburst of the Protestant heroine. . .as she asserted her Anglo-Irish difference."²² Brooks Atkinson, writing for *The New York Times* in 1934, contended that *The Big House* was "written for audiences. . .whose response rises out of their own experience."²³ Still, whatever the audience's polarized responses, most critics are in agreement with John Jordan's point that the playwright himself maintained a tolerant detachment: "nowhere else in Irish drama is there a more level-headed treatment of one of the Protestant dilemmas."²⁴

Robinson had earned a substantial reputation as Abbey Theatre director, producer, and playwright long before *The Big House* appeared in 1926. Andrew E. Malone wrote in *The Irish Drama* that Robinson was recognized by the more discriminating Dublin theatergoers "as the leading dramatist of the time"²⁵ and as "the finest stage craftsman of the Irish drama."²⁶ In spite of the fact that *The Big House* is generally regarded as the most popular of Robinson's serious plays,²⁷ Malone himself regarded it as "at best only a fairly good play," in 1929's *The Irish Drama* lodging what have come to be the two most consistent criticisms against it.²⁸ First, Malone called Robinson's penchant for experimentalism a "hindrance" since, he wrote, the single experimental element in the play, the recurrence of the ghost of Ulick, causes it to lapse into melodrama. Robert Hogan in 1967 countered Malone's critique by offering the idea that the theater "demands theatrical measures; on that ground the ghost seems effective in consolidating the theme and also a pleasant divergence from total realism."²⁹

Meanwhile, Malone stated his second and more significant critique as follows:

The Big House might have been a great play; its theme is great but its characters are so petty that one cannot grieve for them. The passing of a great tradition is a fitting theme for tragedy, but Mr. Robinson's mixed sympathies enabled him to miss its

greatness.³⁰

Christopher Murray echoed Malone in 1982, though, it must be said, without blaming Robinson:

there was no concept of nationalism broad enough to accommodate Robinson's position. . . Robinson had a tragic theme. . . which he did not or could not express with the intensity necessary for the making of great tragedy. *The Big House* is riven with a determination to be fair to both sides. It goes far too gentle into that good night which was to sweep the Alcocks and their like into a Catholic state governed by the 1937 constitution.³¹

Hugh Hunt argued similarly, though *by* blaming Robinson, that *The Big House* is not "entirely successful, owing to Robinson's hesitancy to commit himself to a positive philosophy."³² William J. Feeney contends, furthermore, that "sometimes after delineating a problem Robinson would not stay for an answer."³³ These critiques each fail to acknowledge, in terms of *The Big House*, that Robinson had a "positive philosophy"—the necessity of accommodation and tolerance in the new Ireland. Furthermore, if his play does, nonetheless, lack an "answer," probably it was intended to do so. Avoiding a propagandistic solution, *The Big House* provoked its audience to think further about the problem—as has been argued in the Interpretation section above.

Throughout its performances at the Abbey in the 1920s, *The Big House* was very popular and generally very well-received in Dublin, with the press preferring it to *The Plough and the Stars*.³⁴ The general consensus was that *The Big House* was a play just shy of greatness which had, nonetheless, a great and controversial theme: Joseph Holloway wrote that "*The Big House* missed being a great play by a short head, but that it will be a much discussed play there is no possible doubt whatever."³⁵ About the play's popularity and wide recognition, John Jordan wrote in 1973 that, "once upon a time the term [the Big House] was associated almost exclusively with Lennox Robinson's play of that name, done at the Abbey in 1926, but I think now forgotten."³⁶

The final phrase of Jordan's statement, that the play has been forgotten, has proved a matter of extended debate and wonderment for scholars. MacLiammoir in 1938 defined the terms of this debate:

And so it is that the great tragedy of what is popularly known as the problem play lies in the fact that its problems belong so essentially to its own day, that it becomes tedious and pointless to the succeeding generation, and a mere corpse after that to all eternity, unless it succeeds in becoming immortal, in which case it grows into a quaint and lonely ghost whose original reason for existing. . .has been completely forgotten. But this, of course, applies only to a certain type of problem play, and is, perhaps, a superficial viewpoint.³⁷

Would *The Big House* merely pass away as its immediate concerns became irrelevant, or would the play maintain its relevance? MacLiammoir went on to judge *The Big House* a play of lasting quality:

The immediate questions that prompted the making of Lennox Robinson's *Big House*. . .have passed away with the troubles of the early twenties of this century, but the inner and intricate turmoil of problems that raged like a demoniac bonfire under that seemingly quiet and unchangeably decorous and Protestant roof can [not] go out of fashion.³⁸

Numerous critics have argued for the continuing relevance of the play's issues and therefore the play itself. Robert Hogan in 1967 made the point that the play's theme has "an enduring pertinence for Ireland":

In the post-Treaty days when the Anglo-Irish were losing much of their influence, [the point that the Anglo-Irish are Irish] needed to be vigorously made. Probably it needs to be repeated today.³⁹

John Jordan in 1973 commented that the topical implications of the play, "written nearly fifty years ago, are so obvious that it would be an impertinence for me to stress them."⁴⁰ In a different vein, Christopher Murray has argued that the significance of Robinson's work, in general, lies in "its value as theatrical art, unremittingly pursued"⁴¹; on *The Big House*, specifically, Murray writes that its permanent value lies

in the sensitivity with which [Robinson] charts both the inevitability of the destruction of the house and the sense of outrage he articulates. . .at the action which seeks to drive out a people as if they had no right to be there.⁴²

Murray, too, concedes the play's "continuing relevance to Irish history, for it still comments on the 'Brits Out' policy of the latter-day extremist republicans."⁴³ Despite its lingering relevance, and in spite of the fact that the play was reprinted in 1957, 1982, and 1990, it has not been performed professionally since the 1930s, prompting Sanford

Sternlicht to posit in 1998 that,

given the current nostalgia for the Irish country mansion and its Ascendancy inhabitants and the popularity of Brian Friel's play about an Irish Big House, *The Aristocrats* (1979), there should be a revival of *The Big House* soon.⁴⁴

While the future of the play in performance remains uncertain, Robinson's achievement has, at least, met with more highly esteemed critical assessments as his play has aged. *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* declared Robinson, "the first Irishman to write a play on the changing order of Ireland's civilization,"⁴⁵ and Christopher Murray has written that with *The Big House* Robinson may be said "to have established a genre of Irish literature, that of the besieged Protestant class."⁴⁶ Sanford Sternlicht has described *The Big House* as "a moving play of historical significance and a fine piece of theater," declaring furthermore that "Kate Alcock is one of the best-drawn women in the early modern Irish school of realism."⁴⁷ Coilin Owens and Joan Radner's 1990 anthology of twentieth-century Irish drama deems Robinson's play "the most graphic and balanced dramatization of the dilemmas facing the ascendancy during the turbulent years of the national struggle."⁴⁸ Moreover, Curtis Canfield's glowing comments on the play from 1929 remain valid: *The Big House* was "written with the sure and sensitive touch of a master of dialogue with incisive insight and sensitive understanding of both sides of a difficult question."⁴⁹

Publication History

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Texts

All published versions of Robinson's play follow the 1928 Macmillan edition. One manuscript and one typescript draft of *The Big House* are held in the Irish Collection at the Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.⁵⁰ Both are undated. The manuscript, written in Robinson's hand, seems to be the earlier version, since the typescript appears in most instances to be much closer to the published text. However, the thirty-four page typescript consists only of the first two of the play's four acts.⁵¹ Furthermore, the typescript is accompanied by several handwritten pages which supplement it. The MS, meanwhile, seems to be a reasonably complete draft, with two very important qualifications: first, that the first ten pages are missing, and secondly, that Robinson's numbering of pages is erratic.⁵² It is quite possible that a number of the manuscript's pages from acts one and a few pages from act two were discarded after they were preserved in the typescript version. Most of the MS pages are numbered, and the MS overall totals sixty-eight pages, including the eleven which are missing.

Much more revealing and enlightening than any of the above speculations is a description of the nature of the changes Robinson made. Rather than using the process of revision to pare down his text, Robinson more often continued to add layers with each successive draft.⁵³ In large measure Robinson's additions have to do with the political implications of the play. The basic action was laid out in the original manuscript version, and most of the political discussion in the play was then layered over it. It should also be said in regard to this political dimension that, through revision, Robinson's play shifts from action-driven drama into the genre of Shaw's "theater of ideas," where discussion is as important as action. Also, it is not an exaggeration to say that both the humor and the social criticism which are in the play are very largely the products of revision.

Robinson focused one dimension of his critical eye as he revised on his Irish characters' provincial narrowmindedness. For example, he added a dimension to the

polarized but subtle verbal jousting of the English Mrs. Alcock and the Irish maid, Annie, by tacking onto Annie's dialogue her comment that "Father Doyle says [the Tans] are a disgrace to civilisation"⁵⁴--which seems to insinuate that she has merely internalized the dogma that has been passed on through the authority of religion. Furthermore, the stage Irish character Vandaleur O'Neill is, to a much greater extent, played up for humorous effect--originally, Despard had condescendingly remarked that "There's a war on there," and Vandaleur had replied, "Sure I know" (146; TS 1.6). But with the published version's expansion of this scene Robinson makes Van's provincial narrow-mindedness clear: although Van says he knows that there's a war taking place, it does not concern him in the least. He even remarks that the English can "go to the devil" (146) as far as he is concerned.

While revision on one hand helped Robinson to more pointedly critique his Irish characters, more broadly at the center of his thematic concerns was seeking to define, or at least discuss, notions of "Anglo-Irishness" in relation to "Irishness" and "Englishness." Revision was the key to realizing this focus. One dimension of Robinson's political awareness in this regard is that he changes Kate's references to the British military police from the nationalists' term, "Black and Tans," throughout the manuscript to the more unionist term, "Auxiliaries," in the typescript (e.g., TS 2.8). More importantly, one can see Robinson's concern for national labels in the fact that the entire text of Brown and Despard's discussion about being "blunderingly English" and "typically Irish" was an afterthought: it is present in the typescript and published versions (141-3; TS 1.3-5), but not in the manuscript. Similarly, when Despard reintroduces the topic of "typicalness" and the Alcocks complicate the discussion by adding their own thoughts (150; TS 1.9), this entire section is absent from the manuscript, as well.

In fact, throughout act one, especially, Robinson adds dialogue which extends the discussion of "Irishness" and "Englishness." Kate's comment, "they're different, they're English" was added into the typescript, but the two lines which follow, where her father tells her she herself is half-English, are in neither the MS nor TS version. Political tension is most particularly impressed upon the later versions of the text in a much-

heightened fashion at the conclusion of act one. Robinson adds St. Leger's insistence on the importance of King and Empire--"That's what matters," he says--and Kate's retort, "They don't matter, not to us," which is followed by "You and your King and Empire! Much good they ever did Ulick, or me, or you" (158; TS 1.18). None of these lines appear in the manuscript.

One of the many significant political changes Robinson made was to distance St. Leger from Irish nationalism, to confuse his loyalties to show his own contradictory affiliations and inner conflicts. In the lines discussed at the end of the previous paragraph, for example, St. Leger's strong declaration of support for the Empire seems at odds with his writing sympathetic notes for nationalist rebels who have been arrested. In the manuscript, St. Leger's letter-writing is not so clearly tied to, or explained as having, a strong connection with nationalists:

*In the manuscript, Alcock merely says, "Oh just a bit of a note to the R. M. at Carrig." (MS 1.18).

*In the typescript, the above statement is supplemented with, "But I'm afraid he's got himself into a bad mess. Three guns found under his bed" (TS 1.15).

*In the published version, to the MS version is added: "His brother has got himself into a bad mess, I'm afraid. He was suspected of being mixed up in that raid for arms at Carrigmore, and now three shotguns were found in the mattress of his bed."

On one level, Robinson is being more explicit in explaining the political dimensions involved--which would be especially needed for audiences not familiar with Irish politics. But also, in making such a change, Robinson is highlighting the fact that St. Leger is aware of the political implications of his letter-writing, even though elsewhere he suggests that he merely does it out of habit. But rather than affiliating Alcock with the cause of nationalism, Robinson creates a character who is aware that he is engaged in a political action, not for the sake of politics, but for the sake of the individual whose life might be spared. There is a deep irony here: Alcock largely avoids public participation in the very volatile political situation that surrounds him, engaging in it only to *save* the lives of individuals he does not know and whose cause he does not endorse; meanwhile, while writing to save the lives of complete strangers, Alcock cannot spare the life of his own son, sacrificed in a war that, in

Ireland, seems merely an abstraction in a distant land.

A further piece of dramatic irony that Robinson teases out through revision are St. Leger's comments following the discussion of the O'Neills being burned out. He says that he thinks it is more likely that his own family will be "starved out" than burned out of their home--but, ironically, he does not seem to believe that either one of these outcomes is likely to happen. Furthermore, St. Leger tells his wife that he plans to remain at Ballydona in order to increase his daughter's chances of marrying in case they are burned out. There is certainly tongue-in-cheek humor intended in St. Leger's statement itself, but the play's finale adds another layer of irony--not only *are* the Alcocks burned out, but also Kate decides she will *not* marry after all.

Robinson significantly changed the tone and the implications of the play's conclusion, for, in the manuscript version, at two key points toward the end of the text, Kate resigns herself to leaving Ireland, rather than deciding to remain in proud defiance, as the play finally does conclude. The playwright's apparently greatest struggle in writing the manuscript--and the typescript as well--seems to have forced him to temporarily abandon them at the point at which Kate, disgusted by the death of Maggie and the subsequent guilt she is made to feel, is tempted to leave Ireland (TS 2.9; MS 2.11). When Robinson completed the scene, he did so by turning the discussion toward St. Leger's refusal to leave. He then bridged it with the scene in which Despard enters by means of a brief scene of clever foreshadowing where Kate questions Annie about whether the Alcocks will be burned out (169).

At the play's conclusion, Robinson had not yet, in the manuscript, developed Kate's passionate realization of her strength and pride in her Protestant Irishness (194-7). Instead, in the manuscript, Kate tacitly agrees to leave with her parents, only privately and spontaneously telling Reverend Brown of her plan to return. The manuscript of the play ends there, unfinished, but Robinson tacked onto the last pages of the MS three pages in which he began to rewrite the ending. There, he creates the speeches in which Kate articulates her pride and her intention to remain and rebuild. The manuscript still lacks an ending, with the Alcocks' departure and the reappearance of Ulick only included in the play's published text.

A Bibliography of Works on Lennox Robinson and *The Big House*

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CHAPTER 6

KATIE ROCHE

A Play in Three Acts

by Teresa Deevy

Contexts

Like *Autumn Fire*, the central conflict of *Katie Roche* involves a May-December marriage; however, whereas the attention of Murray's play is focused particularly on the tragedy of the withering husband, in Deevy's play, the action is concentrated on the young woman after whom her play is named. The best-known play by the "second lady of the Abbey Theatre" (after Lady Augusta Gregory),¹ *Katie Roche* on one level presents an examination of a young woman confined by her circumstances to a set of choices representative of the limited roles available to young women in the new Irish nation: spinster, nun, wife. As such, the play was something of a landmark in its time since it focused serious attention on a realistic treatment of the difficulties of marriage and on the plight of young, independent women restricted by conditions in Ireland.

Though the play has occasionally been called conventionally realistic,² in fact its form is more complicated than it might seem at first glance. Particularly, the play's genre is unconventional. There are certainly resemblances to Ibsen's problem plays, but Deevy's play is perhaps closer to Shaw, since, on a broad and superficial level, it seems to conform to comic conventions: its plot and theme are primarily concerned with marriage, and in spite of the problems of the union between Katie and Stan, the two seem, finally, to be reconciled at the end of the play.

Nonetheless, observers of the play have sometimes been bewildered³ by the fact that the play does not fit neatly into a comic mold--not even the complicated comedy of Shaw.

For one, the characters are *already* married and have been for the greater part of the play, so the classic resolution of comedy, a marriage, is not possible. Furthermore, the resolution the play does afford is one in which Katie submits to the will of her husband. Katie compromises by subduing her independent will, previously a distinguishing mark of her character. Such a drastic reversal perhaps is *characteristic* of her impulsive nature which can change her outlook from moment to moment, but it is not *generic*: that is, Katie's compromise, which leads her to see endurance as a kind of heroism, seems at least as tragic as it is comic, though it lacks the grim laughter of tragi-comedy. Furthermore, Katie's compromise is not necessarily decisive: just as she has changed her mind before, so too, the open-ended nature of the ending suggests, she may change her mind again, and who knows what will happen.

Some might argue that such realism is too real, that the character is leading the plot rather than vice versa. Still, the very fact that *Katie Roche* is not generic (in the sense of formulaic) is thought-provoking, at least, and, one might also say, refreshing. A new kind of life is presented on the stage in this play, one that strikes a chord much more fully "comi-tragic" than it is tragicomic. As much as Katie tries to make the best of her situation and hold her head high at the end of the play, one must sense in the psychological depths which underlie her patchwork contentment the grave sacrifice of an independent will.

The playwright herself was acutely aware of the limitations young Irish women faced since her own were quite severe: after having attended an Ursuline Convent school near her home in Waterford, Teresa Deevy began to lose her hearing--one of the effects of a lifelong struggle with Meniere's Disease⁴ --while she was pursuing a career as a teacher, as an undergraduate at University College, Dublin. Forced to abandon the idea of becoming a teacher, she transferred to University College, Cork, closer to her home in Waterford. By the time she had completed an Arts degree, she had become completely deaf. Subsequently, she went to London to study lip-reading.

In London, Deevy became interested in the theater. In spite of the fact that she was unable to hear the dialogue, she attended as many plays as she could, often reading scripts before the performances. According to Sean Dunne,

Chekhov and Shaw especially appealed to her, and by the time she arrived back in Ireland in 1919, at the age of 25, she had resolved on becoming a dramatist.⁵

Having returned to Ireland, she began to submit scripts to the Abbey but had no success for ten years; she did, however, win the support of Lennox Robinson, who encouraged her endeavors.⁶ Eventually, starting in 1930, she wrote several plays which proved to be popular and successful for the Abbey, culminating in *Katie Roche* in 1936.⁷ After 1936, however, Deevy abandoned writing for the stage for twelve years, concentrating during that time on radio scripts; while the reasons for this shift in her career remain matters for speculation, it seems that controversy was stirred by *Katie Roche*'s "honest exploration of a marriage situation in rural Ireland" to such an extent that the playwright's talent was stifled by the conservative reaction to her efforts.⁸ At least in part, the "stifling" of Deevy's theatrical voice likely had to do with some personal circumstances apart from the restrictive social climate, but Christopher Murray and others have noted that Deevy's achievement as a dramatist was certainly stunted by the Abbey's disregard for women playwrights after 1941, under Ernest Blythe's directorship.⁹

Several circumstances of Deevy's life do seem worthy of mention in light of the "stiflings" one sees in *Katie Roche* and in the direction of Deevy's later life. The playwright was born in January 1894, at "Landscape," her family's home in Waterford, the youngest of thirteen children. Her father died when she was just two years old, and she was "reared exclusively by her seven sisters and her mother."¹⁰ Teresa shared several important similarities with her siblings: all of her sisters remained single throughout their lives, and two of the other Deevy children suffered from the debilitating effects of Meniere's Disease. Mrs. Deevy encouraged Teresa's writing from a young age; in fact, when *Katie Roche* was first published in Victor Gollancz's *Famous Plays of 1935-6*, Teresa dedicated it "To Mother As We Planned," fulfilling a promise she had made before her mother's death in 1930. Mrs. Deevy also instilled in her children a deep sense of Catholicism.¹¹ Within a strict Irish Catholic environment, it was perhaps not surprising that two of the daughters would become nuns, but it was certainly unusual for seven sisters within a family all to remain single. Even in a family of independent women, Teresa distinguished her own

unique independence by her interest in literature and drama.

By the prime years of her career as an Abbey dramatist in the mid-1930s, and throughout the 1940s while she was writing radio plays for RTE and the BBC, Deevy lived in Dublin with her lifelong companion and primary interpreter, her sister Nell. It seems remarkable that a playwright who achieved such success never actually heard the words spoken by actors and actresses in her plays.¹² Nevertheless, she enjoyed observing the performances of the plays on the stage and also supervising radio recording sessions, hearing the words “in her mind just as others could hear them from the radio.”¹³ In 1954, after the death of Nell, Teresa returned to live in her childhood home, “Landscape,” with her only surviving sister, Frances, who was also completely deaf. Away from the theatrical life of Dublin, the playwright kept up some correspondences with friends in Dublin but had little connection with the theater thereafter. She was known in Waterford in her later years mostly as the strange deaf lady who rode her bicycle through the streets and was rumored to have once written plays. In the late 1950s her health began to decline, and as a result of Meniere’s Disease she suffered from bouts of vertigo which severely limited her capacity, even, to venture outdoors. She died in Waterford’s Maypark Nursing Home in 1963. By the time of her death, the Abbey and its theatergoers had more or less forgotten its “second lady,” the woman who had been one of the most popular Abbey playwrights of her day.¹⁴

Thematically, Deevy’s interest in expressing the problematics of womanhood in Ireland was well ahead of its time. As has been alluded to, *Katie Roche* perhaps owes something to Ibsen’s pioneering work in focusing the attention of the theater on the status of women in such plays as *A Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler*, for example. Likewise, throughout his own dramatic corpus, Bernard Shaw brought to the English stage his own version of Ibsen’s concern for the condition of women, and one might perhaps see overlapping themes of women’s independence within or outside of marriage in Shaw’s *Candida* or *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, for example. One could even see Katie and Stan as the descendants of Liza Doolittle and Henry Higgins of Shaw’s *Pygmalion*; a correspondence seems particularly evident in the older man’s desire to raise the social standing of the young woman by insisting on proper speech. Nevertheless, if Deevy’s

portrayals bear some resemblance to Shaw or to Ibsen, the similarities are seen only in the external shape of conflict and situation, not at all in the psychological depth or subtle complexity of the issues facing Deevy's female characters, nor in their resolution. In the work of Ibsen, a female protagonist facing Katie Roche's unhappy marriage would not tolerate such circumstances and would choose instead to leave or even to commit suicide. Likewise, Shaw's heroine Liza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* leaves behind her aging suitor and former mentor, and Synge's heroine Norah in *The Shadow of the Glen* boldly leaves with the Tramp rather than remaining behind in her loveless marriage to an aging husband. Unlike these female characters, Teresa Deevy's Katie, perhaps even more bravely--or some might say more foolishly, because of her willing subjection--elects to stay. Then again, perhaps Katie's decision is in fact the only real option for an Irish woman under such conditions. An element of Hardian naturalism combines mischance and fatalism to crush Katie's "grand" aspirations; still, the situation of Deevy's heroine, within a specifically Catholic Irish milieu, and the psychological complexities which face the heroine as a result are rendered differently and with more subtle complexity than in Hardy. Though Katie herself bears notable resemblances to Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Deevy's "New Woman" of 1930s Ireland was a far cry from Hardy's of 1890s England.

In this regard, it is necessary to consider *Katie Roche*'s Irish milieu, particularly in terms of women in the 1930s, for aspects of the establishment of the Irish nation itself participated significantly in relegating women to certain societal roles and discouraging the kind of independence which Teresa Deevy espoused. In the years of the height of the nationalist movement in Ireland, from the 1890s through the 1920s, there were, of course, a great many names of women widely-recognized for outstanding cultural contributions to the public sphere--Lady Wilde, Alice Milligan, Lady Gregory, Constance Markiewicz, and Maud Gonne, to name a few. However, the newly-formed Irish government, in accordance with Roman Catholic orthodoxy, conceived of and even publicly defined the roles of women in Irish society in more confining ways--sanctioning, as one Irish historian has put it, a "general attitude that the woman should find complete fulfilment in the role of mother and housekeeper."¹⁵ The language of the 1937 Constitution of Ireland formally stated its

position on the role of women in the new Ireland:

41.2.1 In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

41.2.2 The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.¹⁶

Furthermore, given the influence of the Roman Catholic church on Irish life, it may be useful to note the potential influence, whether direct or indirect, of Pope Pius XI's encyclical of December 31, 1930, "On Christian Marriage."¹⁷ The encyclical contains much that Katie Roche and even Teresa Deevy, as Irish Catholic women, would be likely to affirm--such as the Pope's admonitions against contraception and abortion. Nonetheless, by reaffirming the "order of love" of St. Augustine, the language of the 1930 encyclical grounds one of *Katie Roche's* key issues, the position of the wife in relation to her husband:

This order includes both the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children, the ready subjection of the wife and her willing obedience. . . This subjection, however, does not deny or take away the liberty which fully belongs to the woman both in view of her dignity as a human person, and in view of her most noble office as wife and mother and companion.¹⁸

Teresa Deevy's play particularly discounts the idea that the subjection of the wife does not take away her liberty. It may not be coincidental, furthermore, that Katie and Stan's war of words about the head and heart echo the language of the conclusion of the encyclical passage,¹⁹ nor that other issues which the play discusses resonate from the words of the encyclical, such as the "authorship" of the marriage²⁰ and the equal rather than hierarchical nature of the marital relationship.²¹

In the context of what has been called the "monolithic"²² convergence of church and state in modern Ireland, Teresa Deevy's play, without laying blame, exposes the difficulties of mid-century Irish womanhood. In this era, relegated to the home, the woman "was removed from the . . . public scene, in all its aspects."²³ Women like Katie Roche engaged themselves in a struggle for a different kind of independence--not for the nation but for themselves.

Interpretation

The most distinguishing technical characteristic of Teresa Deevy's work, perhaps a result of her deafness, is her attention to silence and the implications of inarticulation--loneliness, miscommunication, what is not or cannot be said. Christopher Murray has noted that "no other Irish playwright so scores her work" with pauses and silences.²⁴ In *Katie Roche*, Teresa Deevy captures the tension stemming from an extramarital passion which must be suppressed, as T. C. Murray did so effectively in *Autumn Fire*. But Deevy's sensitivity to silences extends, furthermore, to the awkwardness of characters who are uncomfortable in each other's presence, even when, like Stanislaus and Amelia, they are brother and sister. Partly, such awkwardness is the result of their uncertain future, and partly it is the result of the distance created by Stan's infrequent visits. Likewise, Deevy depicts the uncertainty of the relationship between Katie and the holy man Reuben, who in time is revealed to be her father. But most original of all is that the playwright uses silences and awkward pauses to highlight the tensions and misunderstandings of a failing marriage.

The gesture of silence itself can take on a symbolic significance in Teresa Deevy's treatment. From the opening scene, in which the servant girl by refusing to respond to the master's questions forces him to treat her with greater respect, Katie's silence helps her to become Stan's equal, both in his eyes and her own. Furthermore, Katie's decision to be "brave" so that she can be "grand" at the end of the play, in one of the key examples, is based on an understanding with Amelia which is not discussed with Stan.²⁵ The wife and husband's future together after they leave Ballycar remains unspoken and, symbolically, uncertain. In this regard, Christopher Murray has aptly compared Deevy's conscious and effective manipulation of silences to Harold Pinter: Deevy's "is a Pinteresque technique long before Pinter himself arrived on the scene."²⁶

Thematically, the tension between Katie's nearly boundless impulses to grasp at her freedom and the restrictions which would harness them is at the play's core. This tension has been best captured by Eileen Kearney's summation of the play:

a multilayered, dramatic portrait of a vibrant, fiercely independent young woman who allows her romantic passions to rule her heart, while her social conditioning rules her head.²⁷

Katie continually ponders the question posed early in the play, “what else can I do?” (10). The question at first glance seems merely rhetorical, an acceptance of one’s role in life, but for Katie, such a question prompts reaction: beyond what is expected, beyond narrow limitations, what else is there for her to achieve? Katie’s ambition pushes her to achieve, to do something “grand,” in her own words—though she is not sure what that “grand” feat should be. It is significant, too, that, however grand is her ambition, Katie’s fundamental question, “what else can I do?” is reactive: whatever her choices, they are the results of her ability to react to the limitations of her station in life.

In one sense, then, *Katie Roche* is a narrative of identity. All at once, the central character is engaged in a struggle to find out, as well as to define, who she is. She continually asks questions about her parents, about whom she knows little. Her name was not derived from them but rather from the woman who raised her after her mother died. Her mother worked for the Greggs, just as Katie does; her father, she learns, once lived in a nearby Big House. Everyone in the play except Katie seems to have a notion of her illegitimacy. Michael Maguire declares that no one would think of marrying Katie because she lacks “a name” (36). Even after she learns of her illegitimacy, she refuses to acknowledge it, choosing to focus instead on the “grandeur” of her ancestry. Based on this notion of the “grand,” Katie carries with her an idealism which keeps her continually preoccupied with constructing images of herself and by which she insists that she will forge her own way toward success.

As the play opens, circumstances seem weighted against any attempts at success for Katie Roche. She has been born into servitude—first to the nuns who adopted her and now to the Greggs. While she does not visibly resent the work she does for the Greggs, neither does she intend to stay where she is. Katie’s “grand” ambition of escape at the beginning of the play seems to hinge upon entering the convent; she comments to Stan, “wouldn’t it be a good thing to save my soul—and to more than save it—so what else can I do?” (10). Even here, in spite of its context, Katie is not resigning herself to the life of the convent.

Instead, without saying it, she is expressing her lack of contentment with such an arrangement. Beneath her words is the hope that there is something else she can do. She clings to the petty wish that Mrs. Gregg will allow her to attend the “last dance of [her] life” (10), and as the dialogue proceeds she prevails upon Mr. Gregg to plead her case to his sister. The dance is one small indication of a larger, understated conflict: Katie dreads the idea of entering the convent. She confides to Stanislaus that some of the saints “hated the convent as much as myself, until. . .until they conquered” (13). Katie’s convoluted, unfinished sentence implies that triumphing over or suppressing a part of oneself is a necessary aspect of religious life—a compromise that Katie is unwilling to make.

Unsuited for religious life, Katie has the option of marriage thrust upon her as the action of the play proceeds when Stanislaus unexpectedly, almost as a way of quelling Katie’s questions about her father, proposes. Stanislaus reveals later in the act that he had been plotting their marriage for some time (39). In contrast, Katie responds in her usual impulsive and wavering way, at first rejecting him without even considering the possibility: “Ah no, Mr. Gregg,” she says, “I would not” (15). Then, she struggles with her goals and desires openly before the holy man Reuben, saying that,

I long ago made up my mind I’d be a saint. . .most of them entered
a convent very young, and I was wondering would I-- But now
there’s a man came here and asked me to marry him--and, I know
in my heart I’d like that better. (*Silence.*) Sure if I was a good
.wife to him--that mightn’t be an easy job! (19)

Katie wants to challenge herself, to push herself toward something better, and to her marriage seems a suitable vocation in this regard. Still, marriage involves compromises which Katie does not seem to consider, foremost among them a significant relinquishing of autonomy, particularly for a woman in mid-century Ireland.

In fact, Katie considers the marriage proposal exclusively in the abstract, in terms of how it will affect her social standing; she has not thought about the idea of marrying Stan. When Reuben asks if she cares for him, Katie responds with the dubious pronouncement that:

I do indeed. . .Wouldn’t yourself if he wanted to marry you?
And it isn’t that only; for a long time now when he’d come to
the house the power would go out of my limbs. I didn’t know that
was love till he asked me now, and I said to myself, “there’s your

convent.” (20)

Katie pauses and then proceeds to tell Reuben that she also has “another boy besides. . . He’s a clever, handsome boy, but I don’t know if he’s great in any way like Mr. Gregg is. Mr. Gregg draws plans for houses” (20). Katie does not seem to have made up her mind about the marriage proposal, but she is very much enticed by what she perceives as greatness. She convinces herself, “I was meant to be proud. Didn’t I know always I came from great people” (21), and for this reason elects to marry Mr. Gregg, who is much closer to “greatness” than is her other suitor, Michael Maguire. Ironically, Michael himself in the first act denies his affection for Katie on the same grounds—to Michael’s mother, and therefore to Michael himself, Katie is unsuitable for marriage since “there’s no one round here would think of her—for want of a name” (36). Only when Michael learns of Stan’s proposal does he appeal to Katie with a weak counter-proposal:

The Greggs are nice people but they’re all a little bit queer. . .
[Stanislaus] might be grand right enough, but he’s not for you.
What we’re born to—that’s what we’ll be. . . Let us be like we
were, and in a couple of years I’ll make you a home. . . You can
take that from me. I won’t let you down. (41)²⁸

At this point it becomes clear that there is no choice between the two men for Katie, for no matter what she aspires to become, her philosophy of life is clearly at odds with Michael’s idea that “what we’re born to—that’s what we’ll be.” Stan, who will allow Katie to change her mind (11), who openly declares his love for her, who fits the mold of Katie’s image of greatness, seems the better option. It is more the image of what Stan represents than Stan himself that Katie is eager to marry; likewise for Stan, it perhaps as much the resemblance of the woman with whom he was once infatuated, Katie’s mother, as it is Katie herself, that he is marrying.

By the beginning of the second act, several months of marriage have forced the partners to confront the real images of their spouses. Stan is continually correcting his wife’s speech; unlike her mother, Katie does not speak well (39). Katie’s marital ideals, meanwhile, are shattered: she has thought of Stan as a husband whose duty it is to devote himself to two things, to her and to his work, and she sees her duty as supporting and encouraging his work. She resents that Stan feels the need to share the satisfaction he feels

in his work with his sister Margaret, and she jealously accuses him of having left her behind three times already in the short time since their wedding (50). Katie seems especially envious of the fact that Stan can come and go as he pleases, while she must remain behind. In this sense, Katie begins to feel entrapped in her marriage, which causes her to give up the opportunity to attend dances, to have fun with her peers in the village, and even to associate with Michael.

The front door of the Gregg household seems an apt symbol of Katie's confinement. As the play opens, "the house door stands a little way open" (7), welcoming visitors. Entering through the open door, Stan returns, as usual, from an extended absence. In the course of act one, he and Katie settle on their marriage, but by the end of act two, his extended absences resume. With the man she has married mostly absent, little seems to have changed in Katie's life, and in a sense she seems to have given over one kind of servitude for another that seems not so different: she pleads with Stan, "I am your wife that you married," to which he replies, "Then do what you're told!" (50). Michael underscores Katie's subservience when he comments to Katie that Stan "only took you on like a servant girl" (93).

Furthermore, once Katie and Stan have married, the front door of the Gregg household, which provides Katie's sole opportunity for contact with the outside world, is shut firmly. Katie seems acutely aware that doors carry such significance: in act two she locks the kitchen door and lures Michael in through an open front door in the hope of making Stan jealous and, thereby, bringing him closer to her. Her plan only drives Stan away from her, however: forcing Stan's jealousy causes him to leave Ballycar as a means of punishing Katie. Refusing to express his anger, he effectively shuts the door to his heart. Stan proceeds through a period of extended exile, with occasional visits to Ballycar. Katie, in the intervals between his visits, is torn between opposing impulses: obedience to her husband, which means living in isolation with the front door shut until his return, and a desire for social contact, which leads her to attend a dance with Michael but to feel a sense of her own sinfulness because of it. Even in Stan's absence, he learns of Katie's adventures outside of the front door from his sister Amelia. By the beginning of act three, so uneasy is Katie that Stan will get the wrong idea about visitors that she does not even

bother to answer the door.

The burden of responsibility for these circumstances falls not on a specific character but instead on miscommunication, which is at the heart of the play's conflicts. The action comes about chiefly from the inability of individuals in the play to understand one another. Just as Katie cannot comprehend Stan's brooding silences and his self-imposed exile, Stan himself fails to realize a means by which he can deal with Katie's impulsiveness and immaturity. Ironically, Stan's rationale for leaving is voiced at the end of act three, but not to Katie. Instead, Stan tells Reuben:

I went off that evening purposely to frighten Katie: I wanted to show her that I wouldn't put up with any nonsense. . . [When] I came back in a month[,] she appeared quite indifferent. (102)

Stan acts out of his belief that "we must be lonely before we can be anything. . . . So how can a person expect understanding? or complain about it?" (96). Chiefly, Stan's means of addressing conflicts is to ignore and avoid them, and it comes as no surprise that his solution to marital problems is to escape to Dublin. In Stan's absence, the misunderstandings between husband and wife only fester, and their gap widens.

The couple's problems come to a head only when, Stan, enraged in act three upon discovering that Michael Maguire has been hiding in the house, decides that Katie will leave for Dublin *with* him, never to return (100). Finally, some of the air between them is cleared: the secret of Katie's paternity is revealed, as is the innocence of her relationship with Michael (109). Stan explains to Katie,

When I stayed away a long time, that wasn't. . . . want of love. It was that I had to be on my own. (*Pause.*) I didn't know, when we married, how used I had got to being on my own. . . . Being with you was too. . . . too vital. Sometimes it was a strain. . . . because you were so eager. (109-10)

Many of their concerns are uttered, and some are perhaps even resolved in their discussion at the end of act three.

Still, though Stan's decision reconciles them to a life together, what kind of life it will be is unclear. Stan naively insists that going away means they can begin again, declaring that the tensions which have divided them can be resolved with a fresh start, but Katie seems doubtful. She asks, "Won't we bring ourselves with us?" (110).

Furthermore, she bitterly laments that she will miss Michael and Jo and the dances at Ballycar and, more importantly, that she has to either forsake or modify her ideas of grandeur. Again, ironically, this is communicated in words not directed toward Stan but to Amelia:

KATIE: There's no grandeur in this! Taken away. . . .my own fault.
(Covers her face with her hands.)

AMELIA:If you're brave, you can make it grand. My dear, you must!

KATIE: (*gazes at her for a moment, then*) I think you're right!. . .
(Pause.). . . I will be brave!

. . .

I was looking for something great to do--sure now I have it. (113)

Because Stan seems thoroughly unaware still of Katie's innermost nature, and of the great sacrifice she makes to accomodate him, what the future holds for the couple seems especially uncertain. What is clear is that, as with so many aspects of Katie's married life, the couple's future has been decided on the husband's terms.

While Katie's impulsiveness seems almost a natural result of her lack of control of her situation, Stan, by contrast, acts with control and authority. Although he often adopts a patronizing attitude, he is usually evasive about his own authority. In the opening lines of dialogue he tries to downplay Katie's assertion that he and his sister own the house, saying that the house belongs "--To my sister" (8). However, it is later revealed that Stan has been paying for the house in which his sister lives when he asks her what would happen if he were to sell it:

Then where'll you be?. . .Of course, you're perfectly entitled to do what you like. . . .*perfectly entitled*--please keep on thinking of that. My own opinion is you should do something. . . . (29)

The "something" Stan then suggests is for Amelia to get married. His declaration that Amelia is "perfectly entitled" is not only too insistent, but also it is undercut by the fact that he has been talking of marriage with Frank Lawlor, Amelia's former beau. Furthermore, when Stan tells her that she should "keep on thinking" that she is "perfectly entitled" to choose for herself, he is granting her a degree of autonomy on *his* terms by not deciding *for* her. Similarly, Stan has told Katie that he would allow her to stay on as a servant when a change is made. But while Stan tells Amelia that a change needs to be made because he has

too many expenses, he has said to Katie, “I was not short of money. I’m thinking of buying this place” (13). While he is perhaps manipulating the facts to impress Katie, there is no doubt that he is engaged in manipulation.

Whenever Stan’s subtle manipulations take on a patronizing aspect, Katie vociferously denounces them, as when she says, “If you’re asking to marry me, show me respect” (15). Stan seems content not to show respect but to keep his own dignity. “Whatever you like,” he repeatedly insists: whatever decision she comes to, will be fine with him (15, 40). Even Stan’s public declaration of his proposal to Katie has a patronizing tone, which he attempts to downplay:

Fact is—a long time ago I made up my mind that I’d marry Katie: I mean that I’d try (*bows towards her*). I didn’t know her then: I was living abroad, and when I came home I found she hadn’t been properly educated—

...
You don’t speak well (*to Katie*). I was disappointed: I went away. . . . But afterwards I came again and I found she was what I wanted. Her heart and her mind were what I wanted. (39)

Katie again takes offense, here at his patronizing possessiveness: “My heart and my mind! A queer way to love!. . . Taking a body to pieces!” (40).

Furthermore, even more than Stan’s words, his actions demonstrate an attitude of condescension. For example, his self-imposed exile seems a crude punishment designed to teach his wife a lesson. Stan’s sister Margaret believes that by staying away he has taught Katie a lesson (112), and Katie certainly seems to have learned such a lesson in act three when she says of Stan’s return that, “I must have his room ready--like a good wife” (82). One may argue that the ending of the play teaches Katie that the man’s world is no place for a female spirit of independence: any attempts to construct an identity or direction for herself will only be quashed by a world which men control.

This male authority, the moral, spiritual, and familial dimensions of it, and Katie’s rebellion against it, is most fully articulated by the holy man Reuben, who also turns out to be her father:

She’ll make her own goodness. What does that mean?

...
She’ll serve God--when she’s ready! She’ll be a saint--in a way she likes! Full of false pride! (*Turns to Stan*) She’s not to be

depended on. What she needs is humiliation,—if she was thoroughly humbled she might begin to learn. (105)

Reuben too asserts that Katie needs to be taught a lesson because her independence does not conform to the moral strictures of authority. Attributing Katie's lack of conformity to her illegitimacy, the "wild blood in her veins" (107), Reuben has tried repeatedly to force her obedience—by hitting her with a stick, disclosing her illegitimacy, and revealing himself to be her father. On one level it may not seem entirely coincidental that Reuben is both Katie's father and her confessor, for he lays claim on her and attempts to guide her as a familial and moral authority. Reuben is also Katie's only significant link to her past, her roots, and, ultimately, her identity. Simultaneously, Stanislaus, her surrogate father-figure, steers Katie's future toward a new life with him in Dublin. In this way, he makes a fresh attempt at the end of the play to tame Katie's "wild," independent spirit. Still, however much these men attempt to shape and guide Katie toward a proper and expected role, ultimately, her "wild," independent spirit probably is not so easily tamed, and the play ends, in the spirit of the character herself, inconclusively, or at least open-endedly.

Stage History

Katie Roche was first produced by Hugh Hunt at the Abbey Theatre on March 16, 1936. It was revived on February 7 of the following year, and in 1938 it was performed in London (late November), Cambridge, New York, and other cities in America as part of the Abbey tour. It was included that year, as well, in the Abbey's Festival of Plays. While records do not specify the length of the run for these stagings, it is notable that Michael J. O'Neill in his 1999 book *The Abbey at the Queen's* lists *Katie Roche* as among the five most popular plays at the Abbey in the years 1930 to 1950.²⁹ Furthermore, after their original performances in the 1930s, several of Deevy's plays, including *Katie Roche* were "regularly revived by amateur companies over the next four decades."³⁰

In August 1949, *Katie Roche* had an eleven-week run at the Abbey, and it played again in November 1953 and February 1954 at the Queen's Theatre in Dublin, the National Theatre's temporary home (1951-1966) after the original Abbey was destroyed by a fire. A

revival at the Abbey opened on June 2, 1975, and the play's most recent Abbey Theatre production, in the Peacock in late April 1994, was in honor of the centenary year of Deevy's birth. As well, a radio version of the play has been broadcast in Sweden.³¹

Critical Reception

Teresa Deevy's career as a playwright came to prominence very quickly in 1930, when Andrew E. Malone, probably the most prominent Irish drama critic of his day, wrote that, "Probably the new dramatist from whom most may be expected in the future is Miss T. Deevy."³² As she was the only woman of her day writing plays about serious issues facing Irish women, her work was prominent and became a standard part of the Abbey repertory;³³ nonetheless, it proved simultaneously to be both innovative and problematic--largely resulting in a mixed reception of her work.

Katie Roche, widely acknowledged as the playwright's best work,³⁴ is a case in point of the pioneering and enigmatic nature of Deevy's corpus: over the years performances of the play have confounded some, particularly male members of its audiences. Famed Dublin theatergoer Joseph Holloway wrote in his diary on March 16, 1936, "*Katie Roche* proved a strange play about the strangest character I ever saw on the stage."³⁵ Holloway was certainly not alone in struggling to find words to define the play; in a letter to a friend, Sean O'Casey quoted from a review of *Katie Roche* which declared that the play's idea is "'hard to put down on paper.'"³⁶ Temple Lane in 1946 perceptively commented that Deevy's plays "evade labels. . . Nothing is ever quite what one expects."³⁷ While many critics "hailed [*Katie Roche*] as a passionate comedy,"³⁸ the play does *not* fit neatly into a comic mold.³⁹ For that matter, neither is the play "well-made": numerous critics have found fault in *Katie Roche*'s "vague," unresolved conclusion.⁴⁰ Alternately, however, the movement of *Katie Roche* away from the formula of the well-made play may be seen as unique and original, as is argued in the Contexts section above.

Despite mixed reviews, the play has been much more extensively praised than panned, and even its detractors have noted its merits. Particularly notable is Robert

Hogan's well-explained 1967 assessment of the play:

Katie is. . .possibly too full and complex for the naive art of the stage. . .Miss Deevy tried to portray an illogical character in a flux of contradictions. . .

Miss Deevy tries to reflect Katie's constantly changing moods by a peculiar quality of the dialogue. The speeches break off halfway through a topic and abruptly switch to a new topic or adopt a new tone. Fiction can more easily handle such quick shifts, for dramatic dialogue must be obvious enough to be caught on the wing. Three or four contradictory tones in the same speech are probably too dazzling. . .

In the couple of minutes which [a] short sequence [of Katie's dialogue] takes, the actress must convey her confusion, her attempt to overcome it, her inability to overcome it, her despair and flight, her shock, her "ecstasy," her control, nervousness, aversion, and finally her anger. . .Each point must be made clearly and instantly. Few actresses could do it, and few audiences could take it in. For this reason, the play is not quite a success, but at least it fails by trying to be too good.⁴¹

Agreeing in spirit with Hogan's last line, Fintan O'Toole's review of the most recent Abbey production of the play, in 1994, ironically reflects the same kind of bewilderment as Joseph Holloway's in 1936; O'Toole described "an utterly schizophrenic production of an utterly schizophrenic play" while concurrently acknowledging that Deevy's play fails "not because of any fundamental incapacity on the part of the writer, but because what [the play is] trying to say is, in [its] time and place, unsayable."⁴²

On the other hand, great praise has often been lavished on the play. For example, an *Irish Independent* reviewer in 1936 declared, "Masterpiece is a word to be used sparingly, but I have no hesitation in applying it to Miss Deevy's *Katie Roche*."⁴³ Similarly, Sean O'Faolain considered Deevy's plays the best the Abbey had to offer in the 1930s,⁴⁴ and in 1958 Abbey director Micheal O hAodha named *Katie Roche*, in his estimation, as one of the five best Abbey plays of the past twenty-five years.⁴⁵ Seamus Kelly professed the 1975 performance to be "outstandingly the best" period revival he had seen at the Abbey, commenting also that even despite her deafness, Teresa Deevy "had a more sensitive ear for dialogue and a more sensitive heart for human feeling at all age-levels than many later and harder-trying successors," as well as that though *Katie Roche* owes something to *Autumn Fire*, Teresa Deevy was in 1936 "way ahead of Murray."⁴⁶ The construction of Katie's

character has unequivocally met with widespread commendation. In the words of J. D. Riley, for example,

Katie's extraordinary charm and humour are the very great virtue of the play, she has much of the complex appeal of a *gauche* Rosalind, seeing and loving her lovers for what they are but revealing a less simple nature to the audience so that her every action contributes to the quality of the play's comic--tragic power.⁴⁷

Ultimately, Riley's further comment on the play seems to capture in a nutshell the complexity of Deevy's treatment of character and dramatic work which has rendered critical judgments of the play ambiguous and difficult:

One suspects that for so fine and complete a dramatic character as Katie Roche there is no wholly appropriate end that is not also wholly tragic. Miss Deevy's characters carry the seed of tragedy with them in their conflicts with the world, but, as so often and so happily in our language, they are the players in a comedy, a situation which has puzzled many a foreigner.⁴⁸

The fact that Riley himself is struggling--even within this statement--to deal with the play's genre, exposes a contradiction in his final comment about the puzzling situation the play creates. Problematic or praiseworthy, *Katie Roche*'s uniqueness has proved difficult not just for "foreigners" but even for the most saavy *Irish* critics.

Unlike the other plays considered in this dissertation, *Katie Roche* has in recent years been revisited with serious attention by critics and performers, due mainly to feminist reevaluations of Teresa Deevy's significance as a female Irish playwright. In the realm of criticism, two special issues of journals, the May 1985 *Journal of Irish Literature* and the Spring/Summer 1995 *Irish University Review*, have been devoted to Deevy's work; both feature critical articles which examine *Katie Roche*. Particularly worth of mention are Cathy Leeney's "Themes of Ritual and Myth in Three Plays by Teresa Deevy" and Anthony Roche's "Woman on the Threshold: J. M. Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche* and Marina Carr's *The Mai*."⁴⁹ The very fact that such articles have extended critical analysis of the play in terms of contemporary interpretation attests to *Katie Roche*'s continuing relevance and value.

Publication History

Deevy, Teresa, *Katie Roche* in *Famous Plays of 1935-6*, ed. Victor Gollancz (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1936).⁵⁰

——, *Three Plays. Katie Roche; The King of Spain's Daughter; The Wild Goose* (London: Macmillan, 1939).

Texts

An eighty-page autographed, but otherwise unmarked, uncorrected, and undated, typescript of the play is held in the archives of the National Library of Ireland.⁵¹ This typescript is identical to the text published in *Three Plays* and *Famous Plays of 1935-6*.

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APPENDIX I

NOTES

Chapter 1

¹Anthony Caputi, quoting John Gassner's definition of realism, in "On Reading Modern Plays," *Eight Modern Plays: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), p. xvi.

²*Ibid.*, p. xvii.

³Richard Harp, "Count Florimond de Basterot and the Founding of the Irish National Theatre," *Notes on Modern Irish Literature* 11 (1999), p. 26.

⁴Public statement by the Abbey Theatre founders, quoted by Lady Gregory in *Our Irish Theatre* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 9.

⁵Originally published in a letter to *The United Irishman* in 1904, Yeats's comments are reprinted in *Modern Irish Drama*, John P. Harrington, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), p. 389. A. G. Stock quotes Yeats as having declared the national theater "a mirror showing the nation a true image of its mind and features" in N. Sahal's *Sixty Years of Realistic Irish Drama* (Bombay: Macmillan, 1971), p. v.

⁶In addition to the examples which ensue in the discussion, see for example Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), p. 184, and Ernest Boyd's *Ireland's Literary Renaissance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1916), reprinted in *Modern Irish Drama*, p. 394.

⁷(New York: Random House, 1986), p. 6.

⁸(New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 1997).

⁹The work of Sean O'Casey, arguably the most famous of Abbey playwrights, did not begin to appear on the Abbey stage until the mid-1920s.

¹⁰Moreover, Murray's study makes surprisingly little mention of its debt to Yeats's idea of the theater.

¹¹Even critical studies which purport to examine the early history of the Abbey Theatre devote almost singular attention to Yeats and Gregory. See, for example, James W. Flannery's *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre: The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976) and Adrian Frazier's *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990).

¹²*Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, p. 8.

¹³Micheal O hAodha, "T. C. Murray and Some Critics," *Studies* 47 (Summer 1958), p. 188.

¹⁴See, for example, Seamus Deane's comments on the early Abbey in *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 160, or Christopher Murray's comments on St. John Ervine and others in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, p. 189.

¹⁵For instance, in the advertisement for the first productions of Yeats's play *The Countess Cathleen*, the playwright announced that the new Irish theater would be *literary*, defined as "inspired by artistic ideas, uninfluenced by...achieving commercial success" (P. S. O'Hegarty Collection MS D384, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, Special Collections, University of Kansas).

¹⁶Preface to *The Complete Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1960), [n. p.].

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Public statement by the Abbey Theatre founders, quoted by Lady Gregory in *Our Irish Theatre* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 9.

¹⁹Maud Gonne, quoted in Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, p. 37.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 50.

²¹"George Shiels, Brinsley MacNamara, etc." *The Irish Theatre. Lectures delivered during the Abbey Theatre Festival held in Dublin in August 1938*, ed. Lennox Robinson (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 205.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 205-6.

²³Zack Bowen, "Padraic Colum and Irish Drama," *Eire-Ireland* 5.4 (Winter 1970), p. 72.

²⁴*Sinn Fein* June 2, 1906, p. 3.

²⁵"Muskerryism--A Reply to 'X,'" *Sinn Fein* July 23, 1910, p. 3.

²⁶"Ibsen and National Drama," p. 3.

²⁷Yeats in Robert Hogan, Richard Burnham, and Daniel Poteet, eds. *The Rise of the Realists, 1910-1915* (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 72.

²⁸It does not seem coincidental that Joyce's main contribution to *Ireland* was in the earlier phase of his career, in taking himself and his country seriously. The achievements of *Portrait* and *Dubliners* are due, in large measure, to their realism, to their confrontation with and grounding in social circumstances. Although the dynamics of realism in Joyce's fiction and Colum's drama differ in manifold ways, it is notable that, as friends, Joyce and Colum both began as admirers of Ibsen.

²⁹*Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995). In slightly different terms, Christopher Murray has argued that drama "helps society find its bearings; it both ritualises and interrogates national identity," *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, p. 9.

³⁰(Dublin: Maunsell, 1910), pp. 4-5.

³¹*Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, pp. 40-63.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 37.

³³Murray in particular points out some of the subtleties of Gregory's approach to her nationalism, language, and theatricality on pages 40-63.

³⁴John Jordan, "Teresa Deevy: An Introduction," *Irish University Review* 1.8 (Spring 1956), p. 26.

³⁵Buckmaster, p. 564.

³⁶Review of *Autumn Fire* in *The Irish Statesman*, Jan. 23, 1926, [n. p.].

³⁷Lloyd Worley and Gary Phillips, quoted in Kurt Eisen's "Lennox Robinson," *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, p. 316.

³⁸Gordon Henderson, "Padraic Colum," *Critical Survey of Drama*, ed. Frank Magill (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Salem Press, 1985), p. 387.

³⁹George Shiels, Rutherford Mayne, George Moore, and Edward Martyn, to name just a few.

⁴⁰"There is Realism and Realism," *'Since O'Casey' and Other Essays on Irish Drama*, (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 46.

⁴¹For further information on and examples of these distinctions, see Hogan, *ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

⁴²"Green Goddess of Realism," *The Green Crow* (London: W. H. Allen, 1957), p. 80.

⁴³(London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), pp. 25-6.

⁴⁴"St. John Ervine," *Critical Survey of Drama*, p. 564.

- ⁴⁵"Jacques," *The Evening Herald* (Dec. 1, 1915), p. 5.
- ⁴⁶"Red Brick City and its Dramatist," *Envoy* 1 (March 1950), p. 60.
- ⁴⁷*The Irish Drama* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1929, 1965), p. 202.
- ⁴⁸"The Rise of the Realistic Movement," *The Irish Theatre. Lectures delivered during the Abbey Theatre Festival*, p. 113.
- ⁴⁹"There is Realism and Realism," p. 60.
- ⁵⁰*A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891-1980*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 81.
- ⁵¹"Red Brick City and its Dramatist," pp. 65-6.
- ⁵²"There Is Realism and Realism," p. 43.
- ⁵³Caputi, *Eight Modern Plays*, p. xvii.
- ⁵⁴My words describing *Muskerry*, obviously, usurp some of the language of Yeats's "The Second Coming," which bears a similarity to Colum's play at least in the sense of entering into a new age.
- ⁵⁵Brenna Katz Clarke, *The Emergence of the Irish Peasant Play at the Abbey Theatre* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1982), p. 64.
- ⁵⁶"Muskerryism--A Reply to 'X,'" p. 3.
- ⁵⁷Christopher Murray, "Introduction," p. 2.
- ⁵⁸Later revised and subsequently known as *The Fiddler's House*.
- ⁵⁹Zack Bowen, "The Theatre and Padraic Colum," *Threshold* 29 (1978), p. 43.
- ⁶⁰O hAodha, "T. C. Murray and Some Critics," p. 188.
- ⁶¹*Ibid.*
- ⁶²Patrick Burke, "T. C. Murray," *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, Bernice Schrank and William Demastes, eds. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 247.
- ⁶³Andrew E. Malone, "The Rise of the Realistic Movement," *The Irish Theatre: Lectures delivered during the Abbey Theatre Festival*, pp. 108-9.
- ⁶⁴Robert Hogan, *'Since O'Casey' and Other Essays on Irish Drama* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 61.

⁶⁵Malone, "The Rise of the Realistic Movement," pp. 108-9.

⁶⁶William J. Feeney, "Lennox Robinson," *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Hogan. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1979), p. 561.

⁶⁷Eileen Kearney, "Teresa Deevy," *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, p. 87.

⁶⁸Christopher Murray, "Introduction: The Stifled Voice," *Irish University Review* 25.1 (Spring/Summer 1995), p. 8.

⁶⁹"Teresa Deevy: An Introduction," *Irish University Review* 1.8 (Spring 1956), p. 26.

⁷⁰Andrew E. Malone, *The Irish Drama*, p. 205.

⁷¹Notes from the performance program for *The Plough and the Stars* by Sean O'Casey, directed by Stephen Rea at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, May 8 - June 4, 2000.

⁷²Mathew O'Mahony, lecture on T. C. Murray for the Irish Theatre Archive, Nov. 17, 1982, National Library MS 26,976.

⁷³Several such occurrences were related to me during a recent stay in Dublin. Father Walter Macken told of how his father, the novelist, actor, and playwright of the same name, burned all the drafts after having his first novel published (personal interview, June 15, 2000); Harriet Sheehy, the widow of short story writer Frank O'Connor, described how a neighbor of hers rescued a box of materials from the Abbey Theatre some years ago (June 13, 2000); and the son of playwright Dennis Johnston lamented that, during his own work for Radio Telefis Eireann in the 1960s, many valuable recordings of writers reading their work were lost when the tapes on which they were stored were recorded over (June 8, 2000).

Chapter 2

¹Micheal O hAodha, "Padraic Colum," *The International Dictionary of the Theatre*, vol. 2, ed. Mark Hawkins-Dady. (Washington, D.C.: St. James, 1994), p. 214.

²He was actually born "Patrick Collumb," but in his twenties he changed his name to the Gaelicized form "Padraic Colum." See Zack Bowen, *Padraic Colum: A Biographical-Critical Introduction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), p. 1.

³For example, a short story of Colum's, contemporaneous with *Muskerry*, entitled, "A Meeting on the Road," tells of a coincidental encounter between two brothers, one of them a blind piper named Myles (described, like Myles Gorman of *Muskerry*, as having a face in which "there were ardours and intellect and the beauty of the creature that had never submitted to the yoke"). The story, published in February 1912 in *The Irish Review* 1.12, presents a variation on the theme of *Thomas Muskerry* played out to a different end: here both men have been forced upon the road by mismanagement and by sons who abandoned them.

⁴Sanford Sternlicht, *Padraic Colum* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), p. 7.

⁵Yeats, quoted in Robert Hogan, Richard Burnham, and Daniel P. Poteet's *The Rise of the Realists, 1910-1915* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 72.

⁶James W. Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 347.

⁷Sanford Sternlicht, ed. *Selected Short Stories of Padraic Colum* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), p. vii.

⁸O hAodha, *International Dictionary of the Theatre*, p. 214.

⁹Colum in Sternlicht, *Padraic Colum*, p. 22.

¹⁰(New York: Penguin, 1991), pp. 36-7. Woodham-Smith also noted that the object of the Irish Poor Law Act of 1838 "was not so much to mitigate the sufferings of the Irish poor as to prevent them from coming over into England" (p. 36).

¹¹(New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996), p. 74.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*The Great Hunger*, p. 37.

¹⁴Seumas MacManus, *The Story of the Irish Race*, rev. ed. (Old Greenwich, Conn.: Devin-Adair, 1990), p. 602.

¹⁵E. E. R. Green, "The Great Famine," *The Course of Irish History*, eds. T. W. Moody and F.X. Martin (Niwt, Col.: Roberts Rinehart, 1995), p. 270.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹⁷Green writes that, "An intolerable burden was placed on the Irish poor law unions whose workhouse accommodation was already grossly overcrowded. Even so, they managed to increase the maximum number of inmates from around 100,000 to 300,000 within four years. In 1849 the staggering number of 932,000 people were maintained in the workhouse for some period" (*Ibid.*, p. 272).

¹⁸Colum, *Thomas Muskerry*, in *Three Plays* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1963), p. 188. All subsequent textual citations of the play refer to the 1963 edition, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁹Gary Owens, "Visualizing the Liberator," *Eire-Ireland* 33.3/4 (Fall/Winter 1998), p. 104.

²⁰March 9-11, 1911 and also for four performances in 1912.

²¹Colum in a September 1969 interview with Des Hickey and Gus Smith, "Colum: Life in

a World of Writers,” in *A Paler Shade of Green* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1972), p. 18.

²²Bowen, “Padraic Colum and Irish Drama,” *Eire-Ireland* 5.4 (Winter 1970), p. 71.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁴(Atlantic Heights, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 26.

²⁵See, for example, O hAodha, *Theatre in Ireland* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), p. 67; Yeats in a 1910 interview, quoted in *The Rise of the Realists*, p. 72; and Imaal, “Thomas Muskerrey,” *The Leader* 20.12 (May 14, 1910), p. 300.

²⁶Robinson, *Ireland’s Abbey Theatre: A History 1899-1951* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd., 1951), p. 39; also, *Pictures in a Theatre* (Dublin: The Abbey Theatre, 1946), p. 8.

²⁷*The Rise of the Realists*, pp. 26-7.

²⁸“A Workhouse Drama. Gloomy Play at the Abbey,” *Irish Independent* May 6, 1910, p. 6.

²⁹“‘Thomas Muskerrey’ in Court,” *Sinn Fein* July 9, 1910, p. 3.

³⁰Imaal, p. 300.

³¹Malone, *The Irish Drama* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1929, 1965), p. 168; Bowen, “Padraic Colum and Irish Drama,” p. 79.

³²Malone, p. 168.

³³O hAodha, *International Dictionary of the Theatre*, p. 212.

³⁴Bowen, “Padraic Colum and Irish Drama,” p. 81.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Kay S. Diviney, “Padraic Colum,” *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995. A Research and Production Sourcebook*, eds. Bernice Schrank and William W. Demastes (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 72.

³⁷“Synge,” *The Irish Theatre: Lectures Delivered during the Abbey Theatre Festival held in Dublin in August 1938*, ed. Lennox Robinson (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 51.

³⁸*The Abbey: Ireland’s National Theatre 1904-79* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 53.

³⁹(Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1984), p. 205.

⁴⁰(Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 51.

⁴¹*After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of Irish Drama since The Plough and the Stars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), p. 10.

⁴²Imaal, p. 301.

⁴³Ibid., p. 300.

⁴⁴The 1925 revisions did not effect the text of *Thomas Muskerry*, which was reprinted in the same form as the previous editions. However, the 1963 edition, which is today taken as the standard edition of the text, reflects a significant revision of the play. See the "Texts" section of this chapter for a discussion of Colum's changes.

⁴⁵Zack Bowen, "Padraic Colum and Irish Drama," *Eire-Ireland* 5.4 (Winter 1970), p. 79, note 8.

⁴⁶The evolution of these titles can be seen in MS 21318, the performance texts of the play from 1910, including the individual lines of specific characters written out for the actors. Two of the actors' scripts are dated, March 16 and March 29, 1910, respectively. *The Magnate* was the standard title of the play when it was distributed to the actors, although in some of the parts preserved in this MS, that title is crossed out in favor of *Thomas Muskerry*.

⁴⁷Again, see MS 21318.

⁴⁸The detail with which the acts are planned out here is evidence enough, but also it is important to note that while Colum's scenario for act one was completed on the day he started planning out *Thomas Muskerry*, he spent the next day (December 7) planning out act two, and the following day (December 8) planning out act three, according to the dates in his notebook.

⁴⁹The scenarios have been transcribed here as closely as possible. Colum used a single dash (-) to separate his short phrases in these scenarios. Page breaks in Colum's notebook are indicated by three asterisks (***), while an extended line of dashes (-----) merely indicates places where Colum himself drew a similar line of separation.

⁵⁰Four undecipherable words from the manuscript are omitted here.

⁵¹MS 414 is catalogued by the National Library as a draft of *The Desert*, another play on which Colum was working at the time, and one which bears no relation to *Thomas Muskerry*. Upon initial inspection, one notices that MS 414 is made up of two small brown notebooks, bound together, each of which is the same type as the notebook in MS 413. However, upon closer examination, one notices that the text of *The Desert*, written in black ink, is interspersed throughout the two notebooks with the text of a draft of *Thomas Muskerry*, handwritten in pencil. Colum seems to have worked on *The Desert* first, and then, perhaps lacking paper, he wrote *Thomas Muskerry* on unused portions of the same notebook.

Chapter 3

¹See, for example, Ervine's *The Theatre in My Time* (London: Rich and Cowan Ltd., 1933), p. 143. The Abbey and its playwrights receive little mention in this book.

²Quoted in John Boyd's "St. John Ervine - A Biographical Note," *Threshold* [Lyric Players' Theatre, Belfast] 25 (Summer 1974), p. 102.

³The biography is *Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends* (London: Constable, 1956).

⁴David Kennedy, "The Drama in Ulster," *The Arts in Ulster: A Symposium*, eds. Sam Hanna Bell, Nesca A. Robb, and John Hewitt (London: Harrap, 1951), p. 61.

⁵Disgruntled because of Ervine's insistence on twice daily rehearsals while they were on tour, the players actually passed out handbills in front of the Abbey on May 29, 1916, explaining that they were boycotting the theater's management. The actors were fired but promptly formed their own touring company which became a great rival of the Abbey for tours in Britain. See John Cronin's introduction to *Selected Plays of St. John Ervine* (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1988), p. 8; also Robert Hogan's *After the Irish Renaissance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), p. 30.

⁶Boyd, "St. John Ervine - A Biographical Note," p. 113.

⁷*Sir Edward Carson and the Ulster Movement* (Dublin and London: Maunsell & Co., Ltd., 1915), p. 15.

⁸*Sir Edward Carson*, p. 11.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰Boyd, p. 110.

¹¹Boyd, p. 114.

¹²Quoted in Maxwell, *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama 1891-1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 83.

¹³Maxwell, "Irish Drama 1899-1929: The Abbey Theatre," *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 2. (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. 564.

¹⁴The passage from which John quotes is Psalms 29: 2-6.

¹⁵*John Ferguson* in *Selected Plays of St. John Ervine*, ed. John Cronin (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988; Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1988), p. 124. All subsequent textual references are to this edition.

¹⁶"St. John Ervine," *Critical Survey of Drama*, ed. Frank Magill (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Salem Press, 1985), p. 564.

¹⁷Mark 12: 17, *The Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version*, ed. C. I. Scofield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). Biblical quotations noted subsequently in this chapter refer to this edition. See also Luke 20: 22-6; Matthew 22: 20-2.

¹⁸Andrew Malone, *The Irish Drama* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965), p. 205.

¹⁹Mark 15: 34-5.

²⁰This is the passage John Ferguson began to read on page 182; it is 2 Samuel 18: 29-32.

²¹2 Samuel 12: 7-10. Italics are as given in the text.

²²Job 33: 10; 23: 2-5.

²³*Selected Plays*, p. 123. This passage refers to Deuteronomy 32: 48ff. and to chapter 34.

²⁴*Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, eds. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 175.

²⁵W. J. Lawrence, review of *John Ferguson* in *The Stage* (Dec. 16, 1915); see also Dawson Byrne, *The Story of Ireland's National Theatre* (New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 106.

²⁶John P. Harrington, *The Irish Play on the New York Stage 1874-1966*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), pp. 79-80.

²⁷*'Since O'Casey' and Other Essays on Irish Drama* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 56.

²⁸"John Ferguson," *The Times* (London) 25 February 1920, 14b.

²⁹Ophelia Byrne, "An Ongoing Balancing Act," *Irish Theatre Magazine* 2.5 (Spring 2000), p. 21. After stumbling upon this article, I contacted Ms. Byrne, who is curator of the theater collection at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast, about the history of productions of *John Ferguson* in Northern Ireland. She is in the process of searching for records of productions of the play by the Group Theatre, but sparse and inadequate record-keeping has made recovering the history of such productions virtually impossible. June 1940 is the only confirmed date of production, but as one of the Group's actors has said, Ervine's plays were frequently revived and enjoyed great popularity in Ulster (J.R. Mageean in Sam Hanna Bell's *Theatre in Ulster* [Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1972], p. 77).

³⁰*John Ferguson* has been called Ervine's best play by Sean McCann (*The Story of the Abbey Theatre*, p. 78), Lennox Robinson (*Ireland's Abbey Theatre*, p. 100), and Hugh Hunt (*The Abbey*, p. 109), among others. The play is referred to as "undoubtedly the finest play of the year" in *The Rise of the Realists, 1910-1915*, eds. Robert Hogan, Richard Burnham, and Daniel P. Poteet (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), p. 388.

³¹*The Irish Drama*, p. 198.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 202.

³³(Bombay: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1971), p. 77.

³⁴*The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-79* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 109.

³⁵See, for example, the *Times* review, "John Ferguson. Irish Play at the Lyric, Hammersmith," February 25, 1920, p. 14b, and the review by "Jacques" in *The Evening Herald* (Dec. 1, 1915).

³⁶Ervine's letter of Jan. 12, 1914 is quoted in Hogan, et. al., *The Rise of the Realists*, p. 327.

³⁷*Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, p. 175.

³⁸See Malone's *The Irish Drama*, p. 205; also, see *Sixty Years of Realistic Irish Drama*, p. 77.

³⁹For example, see "John Ferguson. Irish Play at the Lyric, Hammersmith," p. 14b.

⁴⁰"Jacques" in *The Evening Herald* (Dec. 1, 1915).

⁴¹(New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. ix.

⁴²This review of May 12, 1919 is quoted in John P. Harrington's *The Irish Play on the New York Stage*, p. 80.

⁴³*The Stage* (Dec. 16, 1915).

⁴⁴Malone, *The Irish Drama*, pp. 204-5.

⁴⁵Malone, "The Rise of the Realistic Movement" in *The Irish Theatre: Lectures delivered during the Abbey Theatre Festival*, ed. Lennox Robinson (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 113.

⁴⁶Feeney, "St. John Ervine," ed. Robert Hogan. *Dictionary of Irish Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1979), p. 228.

⁴⁷"Irish Drama 1899-1929: The Abbey Theatre." *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane, vol. 2 (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. 564.

⁴⁸"Red Brick City and its Dramatist," *Envoy* 1 (March 1950), p. 65-6.

⁴⁹'*Since O'Casey' and Other Essays on Irish Drama* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 60.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Boyd's Shop, William John Mawhinney, Friends and Relations, and Who Sups with the Devil*, MSS 21337-43.

Chapter 4

¹T. C. Murray, *The Selected Plays of T. C. Murray*, ed. Richard Allen Cave (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998; Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1998), p. 168. All subsequent textual citations of *Autumn Fire* refer to this edition.

²The political conflicts here referred to as the “troubles” are the Irish war for independence (alternately known as the Black and Tan War), which pitted Irish nationalists against Britain, followed by the Irish Civil War which erupted over the partitioning of the country. For further information, see the “Contexts” section of the following chapter, pertaining to Lennox Robinson’s *The Big House*.

³Mathew O’Mahony, “T. C. Murray – Dramatist,” Lecture given to the Irish Theatre Archive at Newman House, Dublin on Nov. 17, 1982. National Library, MS 26976, p. 12.

⁴(Cork: Mercier, 1967), pp. 96-7.

⁵Albert J. DeGiacomo, “Remembering T. C. Murray: The Man and His Plays,” *Irish University Review* 25.2 (Autumn/Winter 1995), p. 301.

⁶National Library of Ireland, MS 24843 (i). For further information, see the “Texts” section at the end of this chapter.

⁷Originally, “somebody will come one day and coax your brother away from you - and your father maybe as well,” this passage was deliberately altered in a revision Murray made to the text. For further information, see the “Texts” section of this chapter.

⁸Quoted in Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham’s *The Years of O’Casey, 1921-1926* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), p. 202.

⁹Susan L. Mitchell, rev. of *Autumn Fire, Irish Statesman*; the Irish actor F. J. McCormick’s remark on Dolan is recorded by Joseph Holloway, National Library MS 1888.

¹⁰See DeGiacomo’s “Remembering T. C. Murray,” p. 303.

¹¹Murray kept an album of press cuttings, National Library MS 23,510, preceded for each play by a hand-written list of performance dates (month and year) and locations up to 1956, mostly for productions in England and Ireland.

¹²Dates of productions are from MS 23510. The success of these productions is noted by Albert J. DeGiacomo in “Gloom without Sunshine: The Reception of T. C. Murray in America, 1911-1938,” *Eire-Ireland* 30.3 (Fall 1995), p. 158. See also DeGiacomo’s “Remembering T. C. Murray,” pp. 303-4.

¹³Patrick Burke, “T. C. Murray,” *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995*, eds. Bernice Schrank and William Demastes (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 247. The Queens 1953

performance was, in fact, the last English-language production of a Murray play by the National Theatre Society – see De Giacomo, “Remembering T. C. Murray,” p. 304.

¹⁴National Library, MS 24843, 23510, 25510, and 25511.

¹⁵*Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, vol. 2, eds. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Dixon, Cal.: Proscenium Press, 1968), p. 10.

¹⁶DeGiacomo, “Gloom without Sunshine,” p. 161.

¹⁷*Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, vol. 3, p. 6.

¹⁸Mathew O'Mahony, “T. C. Murray – Dramatist,” Lecture given to the Irish Theatre Archive at Newman House, Dublin on Nov. 17, 1982. National Library MS 26976.

¹⁹DeGiacomo, “Remembering T. C. Murray,” p. 305.

²⁰Desmond Rushe, “Murray's Plays Badly Neglected,” *Irish Independent* Nov. 23, 1973, p. 24.

²¹“Remembering T. C. Murray,” p. 305.

²²DeGiacomo, “Remembering T. C. Murray,” p. 304.

²³“Before the Footlights,” *Irish Independent* May 18, 1926, p. 8.

²⁴*Autumn Fire* made “a great stir amongst the London critics” according to Joseph Holloway's diary entry for April 26, 1926; see *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from His Unpublished Journal, Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, eds. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 267.

²⁵“Drama and Variety,” *Dublin Evening Mail* May 18, 1926, p. 3.

²⁶Albert J. DeGiacomo, “Remembering T. C. Murray,” p. 303.

²⁷Dorothy Macardle, “The Dramatic Art of Mr. T. C. Murray,” *The Dublin Magazine* 1 (1925), p. 397; see also S. L. M., “Drama Notes,” *Irish Statesman* Sept. 13, 1924, p. 20 and *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, p. 237.

²⁸Corkery is quoted in Micheal O hAodha's “T. C. Murray and Some Critics,” *Studies* 47 (Summer 1958), p. 186.

²⁹Burke, “T. C. Murray,” p. 247.

³⁰Daniel Corkery, “The Genius of T. C. Murray,” *Tribune* (Cork) March 19, 1926, p. 21.

³¹An Lonndubh, “The Worker at the ‘Abbey.’ T. C. Murray's New Play,” *The Voice of Labour* Sept. 13, 1924, p. 7. See also a sample review from London, in *The Times* March

25, 1926, p. 14b.

³²See An Lonnubh, p. 7 and Jacques, "New Play Redeemed by Artist. An Abbey Acting Triumph," *Irish Independent* Sept. 9, 1926, p. 4.

³³(New York: Benjamin Blom, 1929, 1965), p. 192.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Micheal O hAodha, "T. C. Murray," *International Dictionary of the Theatre*, vol. 2, ed. Mark Hawkins-Dady (Washington, D.C.: St. James, 1994), p. 692.

³⁶*Modern Drama* 2 (1959), pp. 228-35.

³⁷ See also, for example, Robert Hogan's 'Since O'Casey' and Other Essays on Irish Drama (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 61; John Jordan, "Courage and Realism," *Hibernia* Feb. 2, 1973, p. 11; and William J. Feeney's entry on Murray in *The Dictionary of Irish Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 478.

³⁸"T. C. Murray," *Envoy* 3.12 (November 1950), p. 46.

³⁹"Thomas Cornelius Murray," *Studies* 38 (June 1949), pp. 195-6.

⁴⁰"T. C. Murray, The Quiet Man," *Catholic World* 190 (March 1960), p. 364.

⁴¹See, for example, Jordan, "Courage and Realism," p. 11 and Desmond Rushe, "Murray's Plays Badly Neglected," *Irish Independent* Nov. 23, 1973, p. 24.

⁴²*After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of Irish Drama since The Plough and the Stars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), p. 27.

⁴³(Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), p. 74-5.

⁴⁴Thomas Hogan, "T. C. Murray," *Envoy*, p. 46.

⁴⁵D. E. S. Maxwell, "Irish Drama 1899-1929: The Abbey Theatre." *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 2 (Derry: Field Day, 1991), p. 564.

⁴⁶Malone is quoted in T. Gerald Fitzgibbon, "The Elements of Conflict in the Plays of T. C. Murray," *Studies* 64 (Spring 1975), p. 60.

⁴⁷Keane is quoted in Albert J. DeGiacomo's "Remembering T. C. Murray," p. 307.

⁴⁸By divorcing Ellen from the openly-expressed passion of the typescript, Murray also deepens the sense that Nance and Ellen are opposites in taste and temperament. This section was omitted from Ellen's long speech toward the bottom of p. 125, immediately after, "an old hag of a beggar-woman called me this very day."

⁴⁹Michael's speech follows immediately after Nance says, "Don't Michael, don't for

pity's sake," p. 172. The striking through of the final clause is Murray's, within the text of TS (i).

⁵⁰TS (i), deleted from the published version. This stage direction in the TS occurs immediately before Owen's command to Ellen for Michael "to come to his tay" (p. 131).

⁵¹In TS (i), after Nance says, "You'll go, Michael? You'll do as the priest said?", the following stage directions are printed: "[Michael, moved, bows his head in troubled meditation. ~~His father appears silently as a spirit in the well of shadow on the upper stairs.~~]" As is clear from the quotation, Murray must have had second thoughts about this direction and ultimately deletes it.

⁵²Chiefly, Murray omits a conversation between Nance and her mother about Nance's father; Mrs. Desmond's repeated expression of the idea (reminiscent of *John Ferguson*) that everything is "the will of God"; and several superlative exclamations -- of Ellen, that "at times, indeed, no woman could be kinder," and of Nance, that "There's no woman had ever a better daughter."

⁵³Daniel Corkery, "The Genius of T. C. Murray," *Tribune* (Cork) 19 March 1926, p. 21.

⁵⁴That is, the dialect of English spoken in Ireland, including words such as "bohawn" (125), "haggart" (122), "begor" (139), and "boreen" (131). Only recently have efforts been made to trace the distinguishing features of Irish-English; see, for example, Terence P. Dolan, *Dictionary of Hiberno-English* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999).

⁵⁵Despite efforts to revive the Irish language by the Republic of Ireland's government, the Irish language is spoken by less than one percent of the nation's populace.

⁵⁶11 Sandymount Avenue, Ballsbridge.

⁵⁷The address specified in the text is: 16 S. Frederick St., Dublin.

⁵⁸The final page, the ending of the adaptation, is contained within the inside cover of MS 24843 (ii).

Chapter 5

¹Robinson studied for two months under Shaw in London before he began as manager and producer at the Abbey, and the influence of Shaw in this play seems prevalent. The Irish and English characters of *The Big House* share some significant similarities with their compatriots in Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, and perhaps more significantly, Robinson's Irish, English, and Anglo-Irish seem roughly correspondent to the pattern of dramatic characterization, classified as philistines, idealists, and realists, which Shaw discusses in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*.

²Robinson's first foray as director of an original play, in fact, was in the debut of *Thomas Muskerry* in 1910.

³O'Neill, *Lennox Robinson* (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 138.

⁴See, for example, Seamus Deane's discussion in *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, 1994), p. 205.

⁵Christopher Murray, "Introduction," *Selected Plays of Lennox Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 1982; Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1982), p. 17.

⁶The Anglo-Irish War is often referred to, alternately, as the Black and Tan War or Ireland's War of Independence.

⁷Aidan Clarke, "The Colonisation of Ulster and the Rebellion of 1641," *The Course of Irish History*, eds. T. W. Moody and F. X. Martin (Dublin: R.T.E. and Mercier Press, 1967, 1984, 1995), p. 203.

⁸Big Houses "dominated the life of the Irish countryside from the eighteenth century," according to Seamus Deane's *A Short History of Irish Literature*, p. 203.

⁹See, for example, Bill Meek, "Parnell and Gladstone," *Two Centuries of Irish History*, ed. James Hawthorne (London: B.B.C., 1966), pp. 79-80; T. W. Moody, "Fenianism, Home Rule, and the Land War," *The Course of Irish History*, p. 276; and Donal McCartney, "From Parnell to Pearse," *The Course of Irish History*, p. 301.

¹⁰K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity* (New York: Longman, 1989), p. 111.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹²Martin Wallace, *A Short History of Ireland* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1973, 1986, 1996), p. 94.

¹³Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature*, p. 207.

¹⁴Wallace, *A Short History of Ireland*, p. 94; Seumas MacManus, *The Story of the Irish Race*, rev. ed. (Old Greenwich, Conn: Devin-Adair, 1921, 1945, 1966, 1990), p. 706; Donal McCartney, "From Parnell to Pearse," *The Course of Irish History*, p. 311.

¹⁵*Selected Plays of Lennox Robinson*, p. 139. All subsequent citations of the text of *The Big House* refer to this edition.

¹⁶In the late twentieth century, for example, in the position of a writer like William Trevor.

¹⁷J.J. Hayes, "A Report from Ireland," *New York Times*, Sun. Dec. [n.d.] 1926. T. C. Murray Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 23514.

¹⁸Dalsimer, "Players in the Western World: The Abbey Theatre's American Tours," *Eire-Ireland* 17.4 (Winter 1981), p. 91. For a typical contemporary review, see Brooks

Atkinson, "Death of the Landed Aristocracy in a Drama by Lennox Robinson," *New York Times* Jan. 5, 1933, p. 19.

¹⁹*Times* Feb. 22, 1934, p. 12b.

²⁰"Problem Plays," *The Irish Theatre: Lectures delivered during the Abbey Theatre Festival held in Dublin in August 1938*, ed. Lennox Robinson (London: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 214-5.

²¹*Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, vol. 1, eds. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Dixon, Cal.: Proscenium Press, 1968), p. 17.

²²Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 206.

²³"Death of the Landed Aristocracy in a Drama by Lennox Robinson," *New York Times* Jan. 5, 1933, p. 19.

²⁴"Fading Mansions," *Hibernia* Feb. 16, 1973, p. 13; see also Michael J. O'Neill's *Lennox Robinson*, p. 169.

²⁵Malone, *The Irish Drama* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1929, 1965), p. 308.

²⁶Malone, "The Rise of the Realistic Movement," *The Irish Theatre: Lectures delivered during the Abbey Theatre Festival held in Dublin in August 1938*, ed. Lennox Robinson (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 108.

²⁷See Hugh Hunt, *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-79* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 139.

²⁸*The Irish Drama*, p. 183.

²⁹*After the Irish Renaissance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), p. 23.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹"Lennox Robinson: The Abbey's Anti-Hero," *Irish Writers and the Theatre.*, ed. Masaru Sekine (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1986), p. 123.

³²"Lennox Robinson," *The International Dictionary of the Theatre*, vol. 2, ed. Mark Hawkins-Dady (Washington, D.C.: St. James Press, 1994), p. 812.

³³Feeney, "Lennox Robinson," *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Hogan (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 561.

³⁴Christopher Murray, *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up To Nation* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 117.

³⁵*Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, vol. 1, p. 17; see also, for example, Andrew E.

Malone's *The Irish Drama*, p. 183.

³⁶"Fading Mansions," p. 13.

³⁷"Problem Plays," p. 214.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 214-5.

³⁹*After the Irish Renaissance*, p. 23.

⁴⁰"Fading Mansions," p. 13.

⁴¹*Irish Drama 1900-1980*, eds. Owens, Coilín D. and Joan N. Radner (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 1990), p. 287.

⁴²"Introduction," *Selected Plays of Lennox Robinson* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), p. 17.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*A Reader's Guide to Modern Irish Drama* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. 84.

⁴⁵Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 701.

⁴⁶Murray, "Introduction," *Selected Plays of Lennox Robinson*, p. 17.

⁴⁷*A Reader's Guide to Modern Irish Drama*, p. 85.

⁴⁸*Irish Drama 1900-1980*, p. 287.

⁴⁹(New York: Ives Washburn, 1929; rpt., 1957), p. 297.

⁵⁰Collection 91, Box 2, Folder 1.

⁵¹Robinson refers to the play's divisions as "acts" in the MS and TS, although they are called "scenes" in the published text.

⁵²Also missing is page twenty of act one, and possibly a few pages after number eleven in act two.

⁵³There are a few exceptional cases where some dialogue is simply omitted in the process of revision.

⁵⁴In the published version, p. 163, and TS 2.4, but not in MS. All subsequent quotation from the manuscript, typescript, and published versions of *The Big House* will be cited within my text as follows: page numbers alone will refer to the published version; "MS #.#" will refer to manuscript act and page number (in cases where the page numbers are marked by the author); and, likewise, "TS #.#" will refer to typescript act and page.

Chapter 6

¹Eileen Kearney, "Teresa Deevy: Ireland's Forgotten Second Lady of the Abbey Theatre." *Theatre Annual* 1985: 77-90.

²See the Critical Reception section below.

³See the Critical Reception section.

⁴Sean Dunne, in an essay in *The Journal of Irish Literature* entitled "Teresa Deevy," writes that Meniere's disease "is usually caused by interference with the function of the inner ear. At first, it is characterised by vertigo and a ringing of the ears (tinnitus). While deafness is not always a consequence, it can often be the end result" (*JIL* 14.2 [May 1985]: 3-15), p. 7.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶Temple Lane in "The Dramatic Art of Teresa Deevy," *The Dublin Magazine* 21.4 (1946), even goes so far as to declare that the public performance of Deevy's plays was "largely due to the discernment of Lennox Robinson," p. 36.

⁷Kit and Cyril O Ceirin, *Women of Ireland: A Biographic Dictionary* (Kinvara, Co. Galway: Tir Eolas, 1996), p. 58.

⁸*Ibid.* Furthermore, Sean Dunne attributes the change of direction in Deevy's career to the Abbey's rejection of *Wife to James Whelan*, which deeply hurt her and about which she seldom spoke ("Teresa Deevy," p. 11).

⁹"Introduction: The Stifled Voice," *Irish University Review* 25.1 (Spring/Summer 1995), p. 3; see also Martina Ann O'Doherty, "Teresa Deevy and *Wife to James Whelan*," *Irish University Review* 25.1, p. 26.

¹⁰O'Doherty, "Teresa Deevy and *Wife to James Whelan*," p. 25.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Dunne, "Teresa Deevy," p. 4.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵Patricia Redlich, "Women and The Family," *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension*, eds. Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha O Corrain (Dublin: Arlen House, 1970), p. 86.

¹⁶These lines are quoted from Mary Robinson's "Women and the New Irish State," *Women in Irish Society*, p. 60.

¹⁷Cathy Leeney's article, "Themes of Ritual and Myth in Three Plays by Teresa Deevy" (*Irish University Review* 25.1 [Spring/Summer 1995], p. 90), identifies the 1937 Irish Constitution and the 1930 Papal Encyclical as useful in contextualizing the issues discussed in the play, but her analysis only briefly considers the potential relationship between these two documents and *Katie Roche*.

¹⁸Official English version of *Casti Connubi*, reprinted in *The Papal Encyclicals in Their Historical Context*, ed. Anne Fremantle (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 237.

¹⁹The passage concludes that women's subjection "forbids that in this body which is the family, the heart be separated from the head to the great detriment of the whole body and the proximate danger of ruin. For if the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love" (*The Papal Encyclicals*, p. 238).

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 236.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 238.

²²Redlich, "Women and the Family," p. 86.

²³Redlich, p. 87.

²⁴"Introduction: The Stifled Voice," p. 8.

²⁵*Katie Roche* in *Three Plays* (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 113. All subsequent citations of the play's text refer to this edition.

²⁶"Introduction: The Stifled Voice," p. 8.

²⁷"Teresa Deevy" in *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, eds. Bernice Schrank and William Demastes (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 86.

²⁸Teresa Deevy makes frequent uses of ellipses in her text, so it is necessary to distinguish the ellipses which indicate pauses in the published text from those which indicate deliberate omissions for the sake of quotation. Four dots will indicate the ellipses which appear in the published text of *Katie Roche*.

²⁹*The Abbey at the Queen's: The Interregnum Years 1951-1966. The History of the Irish National Theatre in Exile* (Nepean, Ontario, Canada: Borealis, 1999), p. 288. O'Neill's list of most popular plays 1930-1950 ranks eight plays as follows: Johnston's *The Moon in the Yellow River*, Robinson's *Drama at Inish*, Ervine's *Boyd's Shop*, Deevy's *Katie Roche*, Carroll's *Shadow and Substance*, Ervine's *Friends and Relations*, Frank Carney's *The Righteous are Bold*, and M.J. Molloy's *The King of Friday's Men*.

³⁰O Ceirin, p. 58; also Brian Cleeve, *Dictionary of Irish Writers* (Cork: Mercier, 1967), p. 38.

³¹*Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995*, p. 86.

³²"The Irish Theatre in 1930," *The Dublin Magazine* 6.2 (1931), p. 6.

³³*The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 212.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, vol. 2, eds. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Dixon, Cal.: Proscenium Press, 1968), p. 52.

³⁶O'Casey to George Jean Nathan, Feb. 14, 1938, in *The Letters of Sean O'Casey 1910-1941*, vol. 1, ed. David Krause. (London: Cassell, 1975). Furthermore, J. D. Riley in *Irish Writing* 32 (Autumn 1955), called the play both a tragi-comedy (30) and a comic-tragedy (35); in a 1975 review, Seamus Kelly was impressed with the play's blend of innocently "old-fashioned ingredients of drama, melodrama, comedy, and tragedy" ("Katie Roche' at the Abbey Theatre," *Irish Times* 30 May 1975, p. 11).

³⁷"The Dramatic Art of Teresa Deevy," *The Dublin Magazine* (Oct.-Dec. 1946), p. 39.

³⁸N. Sahal, *Sixty Years of Realistic Irish Drama* (Bombay: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1971), p. 142.

³⁹For elaboration of this point, see the Contexts section above.

⁴⁰See, for example, *Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, vol. 3, p. 8 and J. D. Riley's "On Teresa Deevy's Plays," *Irish Writing* 32 (Autumn 1955), p. 35.

⁴¹*After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of Irish Drama since The Plough and the Stars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), p. 40.

⁴²"What Katie doesn't do," *Irish Times* April 26, 1994, p. 10.

⁴³David Sears's review is quoted in Hugh Hunt's *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-79* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 157.

⁴⁴*Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, vol. 3, p. 8; see also O'Faolain, "Thoughts on the Abbey Theatre," in *The Abbey Theatre, Interviews and Recollections*, ed. E. H. Mikhail (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1988), p. 148.

⁴⁵"T. C. Murray and Some Critics," *Studies* 47 (Summer 1958), p. 188.

⁴⁶"Katie Roche' at the Abbey Theatre," *Irish Times* May 30, 1975, p. 11.

⁴⁷"On Teresa Deevy's Plays," p. 35.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹Both appear in *Irish University Review* 25.1 (Spring/Summer 1995).

⁵⁰Gollancz notes that “even though [*Katie Roche*] cannot yet be called famous,” it is certainly worthy of inclusion in the volume.

⁵¹MS 29170.

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VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

John C. Kerrigan

Home Address:

2725 Augusta Lane, Apt. B
Hays, KS 67601

Degrees:

Bachelor of Arts, English, 1993
Dickinson College

Master of Arts, English, 1995
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Special Honors and Awards:

International Programs Scholarship, 2000
GREAT Assistantship, 2000
Graduate Student Award, Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society, 1999
Nevada Regents' Scholar Award, 1998
Barrick Fellowship, 1996-7
Extended Education Award, 1997
Graduate Student Association Scholarship, 1995, 1998, 1999
Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society
Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society

Publications:

"O'Connor's 'Backward Look': The Irish Writer's Struggle for Identity and an Irish Tradition," in *Frank O'Connor: New Perspectives*, eds. Robert C. Evans and Richard Harp (West Cornwall, Conn.: Locust Hill Press, 1998), pages 29-46.

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Dissertation Examination Committee:

Chairperson, Richard Harp, Ph. D.

Committee Member, Chris Hudgins, Ph. D.

Committee Member, Beth Rosenberg, Ph. D.

Graduate Faculty Representative, Robert Tracy, Ph. D.