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From the Political to the Personal: Interrogation, Imprisonment, and Sanction In the Prison Drama of Seamus Byrne and Brendan Behan

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From the Political to the Personal:
Interrogation, Imprisonment, and Sanction
In the Prison Drama of Seamus Byrne and Brendan Behan.

by

Charles F. French

A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

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Interrogation, Imprisonment, and Sanction
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Chronology of Irish History

432 A.D.	St. Patrick
1171	Henry II invades and conquers Ireland.
1845-1848	The Great Famine
~1900-~1926	Irish Literary Renaissance
1904	Seamus Byrne is born
1918	Easter Uprising
1919-1921	Irish War of Independence
1922-1923	Irish Civil War
1923	Brendan Behan is born.
1949	The Republic of Ireland is established
1950	Byrne, Seamus. <i>Design For A Headstone</i>
1954	Behan, Brendan. <i>The Quare Fellow</i> .
1958.	Behan, Brendan. <i>The Hostage</i> .
1964	Brendan Behan dies.
1968	Seamus Byrne dies.

ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, I examine the multi-leveled metaphor of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction in the 1950s Irish prison dramas of Seamus Byrne *Design For A Headstone* and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*. In these plays, I explore the development of that metaphor and how it relates directly to the prison situation in the Republic of Ireland in the 1950s.

During that revolutionary, socially, and politically stagnant decade in Ireland, these two playwrights examine the way that the Irish government adopted similar tactics in its treatment of prisoners as had England when it had ruled the island. Not only does a post-colonial subaltern circumstance exist in the legal and carceral realm, but also these plays show a connection of the Church and state and the implications of such a society on its penal system.

In Chapter One, I examine Seamus Byrne's *Design For A Headstone*. I argue that it is in the naturalistic, representational tradition of Ibsen and that through this direct portrayal of prison life, Byrne captures the irony of life and death struggles within a penal system. I argue that this play is important in the Irish canon of drama, even though Byrne is essentially a forgotten playwright.

In Chapters Two and Three, I examine Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*. I explicate Behan's movement away from representationalism to a form more closely resembling theater of the absurd. In *The Quare Fellow* he makes subtle movement away from realism, and in *The Hostage* plunges into a fluid and abstract form. In these plays, Behan satirizes the Irish government as well as that I.R.A.

INTRODUCTION

“Tir gan teanga, tir gan anum.”
(A land without a language is a land without a soul.)
-- Irish saying.

“But sure, thanks to God, the Free State
didn’t change anything more than the badge on the warders’ caps.”
-- Brendan Behan *The Quare Fellow*

The contemporary world is often a dangerous place in which wars are fought almost without interruption, genocide is committed without significant interference or outrage from the community of nations, and people, in staggering numbers, are imprisoned in many countries, often for political reasons. While some inmates are incarcerated as criminals of a particular society that views jails as the simple and pervasive solution to complex social problems, all too often many people are jailed as political prisoners, or as Amnesty International calls them, “prisoners of conscience—that is, people imprisoned solely because of their beliefs, sex, ethnic origin, language, or religion” (6). It is a salient, disturbing, and informing fact of the twentieth century that an extraordinary number of people are in prisons throughout the world, with many awaiting execution.

Upheavals, both social and political, abound throughout the world, and in some countries, art reflects that turmoil. In Ireland political violence has been constant¹. In Ireland, a nation with an approximately eight hundred year span of subjugation to England, a relatively recent history of achieved independence, a civil war in the North that is currently under a shaky, but hopeful, truce, and economic despair for most of its existence replaced by an all too brief period of economic prosperity, its drama illustrates and engages that national strife.

While the subjugation of Ireland to Britain is centuries old and has influenced the drama of Ireland, ranging in concern from the Famine to the Troubles, I focus my study on Irish drama during the decade of the 1950s. The Irish nature, imbued with words and drama, moves both ways in influence: from the society to theatre and from theatre to society. Bill McDonnell, in *Theatres of the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance And Liberation In Ireland*, speaks of this connection: “Before it was enacted the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland was first imagined, in poetry, prose and, above all, in drama. Declan Kiberd writes that ‘no previous Irish insurrection had been imagined in such avowedly theatrical terms.’”ⁱⁱ (3) The Irish dramatic awareness, heightened by the Irish Renaissance which was still occurring, imbued the learned leaders of the uprising with a sense of drama and audience as they used the post office on O’Connell Street as their staging area. They saw all of Ireland as their audience, indeed, perhaps the entire world.

Irish Literature, as a whole, is political. Heinz Kosok, in “Doomed Volunteers: Two Great Political Plays From Ireland” quotes Frank O’ Connorⁱⁱⁱ who says “I know no other literature so closely connected to the immediate reality of Politics” (77). In the broader overview, Irish Literature is intimately connected in a myriad of ways with politics. Irish drama, in particular, is the most immediate of that political expression. Dawn Duncan, in *Postcolonial Theory in Irish Drama From 1800-2000*, speaks to that immediate connection and argues that drama is the form most useful in that theoretic discussion (1).^{iv} I suggest drama is the literary form most useful in Irish political expression.

Irish drama^v, especially in the 20th century, often deals with political turmoil, sometimes expressed as internal or personal strife. It often uses prison as a setting as well as the actions of interrogation and sanction within that drama, creating a dramatic sub-genre of

the larger genre within Irish political theater. The actions of interrogation and sanction, often including executions, are central parts of this dramatic sub-genre. These actions extend into the world of political imprisonment, including both that of the government and of the revolutionaries, encompassing many aspects of the Irish existence. The stage represents Ireland and its turmoil as a quasi-police state in which people are under threat from the government of the Republic of Ireland, from the United Kingdom in the North of Ireland and from the revolutionaries who oppose the British presence in Northern Ireland. This potential to be captured or arrested, questioned and perhaps tortured, imprisoned and even executed was, unfortunately, an ever-present possibility for many people in Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century, and that threat is reflected in much of its drama.^{vi} The entirety of the nearly 800 years of British domination of Ireland is omnipresent in Irish history, myth, culture, literature, and drama.

These plays, set in the politically and culturally static 1950s, represent the continuing experience and consequences of that eight century long domination. At the beginning of the 20th century, an explosion of dramatic writing occurred during the Irish Renaissance. Playwrights such as Yeats, Lady Gregory, O'Casey, and Synge produced work that reflected a resurgence in Irish cultural exploration as well as coinciding with a vibrant revolutionary movement. After the slow end of this period of writing and before the proliferation of writing during the Troubles in the late 1960s to the 1990s, Irish writing, like revolutionary activities, slowed. The influence of the Irish Renaissance, while dormant, never completely vanished. It was in the seemingly quiet period that Behan and Byrne produced their work. The three pronged structure of this examination—interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction—refers directly to this Irish experience. Ireland itself became an actual prison for many of its people.

The prison theatre of these three plays—*Design For A Headstone*, *The Quare Fellow*, and *The Hostage*—in their nearly claustrophobic settings create a microcosmic representation of the macrocosmic experience of colonized, dominated, and conquered Ireland.

While I examine Irish work in particular, it is important to note that the playwrights of the world theater who treat this issue form a multicultural, multinational group connected not by a specific ideological or theoretical basis but by their shaping of these plays to engage their audience with powerful and compelling works that speak to the conscience and psyche of the world.^{vii} In making such an examination, the very nature of drama must be considered. While art, in general, often reacts to the immediate conditions of the artists' environment, some art forms respond more rapidly to such circumstances and with more immediacy than do others. Drama, a transitory art,^{viii} is one of the most immediate of the arts to respond to specific social, cultural, and political conditions. Examples of playwrights who respond to particular political or social problems in their societies can be seen from the 19th century to the contemporary world. Henrik Ibsen, in his plays *An Enemy of the People*, *Ghosts*, and *A Doll's House*, moves drama squarely into the world of social justice. In the 20th century, drama's response to such socio-political problems amplifies as the world theater becomes a significant force in the revelation and examination of powerful issues. The following are a few examples of plays dealing with social ills and injustices: Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* which to a great degree, creates a metaphor for the McCarthy Trials during the House Un-American Activities Committee Hearings, Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* deals with the A.I.D.S. epidemic, and Athol Fugard's *Statement After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*, which examines of the impact of apartheid on human beings. In Ireland, playwrights often treat concerns about

political repression, human oppression, and wrongful imprisonment through the metaphor of Ireland as part of a system of incarceration.

Certainly, the idea of political theater is neither a new one, nor has it lacked examination from a critical perspective. Within the criticism of contemporary world drama exists a substantive body of work on political drama, including, as a small sampling, Eric Bentley's *Theatre or War*, Robert Brustein's *The Theatre of Revolt*, and Catherine Hughes' *Plays Politics and Polemics*. Additionally, the connection of politics to theater and drama is a current critical concern for Irish Drama. Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, examines the issue of the reinvention of an Irish identity in terms of a post-colonial setting; David Cairns and Shaun Richards, in *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* also examine Irish Nationalism in terms of a post-colonial society; and Mary Karen Dahl, in "State Terror and Dramatic Countermeasures" examines the impact of official oppression of a people and reaction to that suppression in drama.

This development of the dramatic theme of imprisonment is not a unified statement against incarceration, nor is it a centralized doctrine of a particular political stance. It does not reflect a single political point of view or an artistic or critical "school of thought." As tempting as it might be for many critics to examine contemporary literature and drama as expressions of a postmodern world, it would be a mistake to see this drama in those restrictive terms. In my examination of the plays, I will not be constricted by following a particular camp of critical or theoretic thought. While I understand particular ideas can inform the discussion of these plays, no single theory is adequate to serve as a complete and unifying foundation for this exploration. Some ideas, such as those posited in *Imperialism and Theatre* and post-colonialism^{ix} are applicable, but I will also use many approaches that are not based solely on

this theory. Other schools of critical thought, including Feminist, Marxist, Existentialist, and Dramatic theory also have application to this study. Rather than focus on one school of thought, I will attempt to be holistic, incorporating critical approaches and extra-theoretic consideration as needed. This approach to examination is similar to that of performance of drama itself.^x Certainly post-colonial theory has direct application to this dissertation. Elena Doyle, in “Strangers in Her House: Staging a Living Space for Northern Ireland” explains the importance of theatrical immediacy to a post-colonial approach to the examination of theater: “The immediacy of performance has an even greater potential to heighten an audience’s reaction in Colonial and Post-Colonial situations when territory—space—is already at issue: in ‘post-colonial theater [...] space becomes a force that potentially determines [...] relationships rather than affecting them.’^{xi}”(110) For example, Vic Merriman speaks of the incorporation of the values of the colonizer onto the recently freed colony and the establishment of a “nascent bourgeois class” (305). This new class “typically results in disillusion, voluntary exile or *even incarceration* [emphasis is mine.] for some of the most radical persons and groups in the new social order” (305). While gaining political freedom, Ireland accepted imbued English values into its ruling system and often jailed those who opposed the new way, as well as ordinary criminals.

These pieces must be understood to be artistic expressions that transcend simple intellectual consideration; they are for performance and experience by an audience. Playwrights working in this area are dealing with a specific human situation and a communicable rendering of that situation, and not merely theater exploring the idea of meta-theater. Rather, prison drama is an eclectic and varied reaction to an extraordinarily complex problem of human society. As Michael Etherton says in his chapter “The Plays of Thomas

Murphy,” in *Contemporary Irish Dramatists*, when speaking to the importance of recent Irish drama “. . . in the last quarter of this century, drama needs to be able to communicate more about the human condition, and to more people, than it has previously done, even under the influence of the founding members of the Abbey theatre. *Dramatic art-- as opposed to other forms of artistic expression-- must, above all, be about people communicating with each other* (107-108, emphasis is mine).” I do not mean, however, that because contemporary drama, as Etherton says, needs to be about human communication and to communicate in performance with actors and an audience, that it also needs to be polemic. While Brechtian epic theater emphasizes education, that approach is only one of many and suffers from the limitations of following a specific method or theory. Rather, the plays I examine span a range of approaches and ideologies. Additionally, these plays are about communication of the actors with the audience and in film of the director’s vision with the audience. Etherton’s point about the value and power of plays derived from the rural west of Ireland is applicable to drama and its performance which “goes beyond the written text: a new text is made, collectively, in the imagination of the watching audience. Such performances reassert the art of a much more ancient and effective theatre: one in which audience and actors, together, can suddenly perceive a deeper truth, way beyond the established text, and through an active imagination gain confidence to act -- socially and politically -- upon this understanding” (3). The play truly lives in active imagination of the audience. “Certainly if we focus upon the drama as a text created with performance in mind,” (318) then we will understand its possibilities for immediacy that go beyond the written word. The playwright “must recognize that his characters are in a much more radical sense only partly his own, since in the theater they will be by persons whose views of reality will be necessarily different, even

if these are actors of his own time and culture (Carlson 319). When the myriad of audience' viewpoint is added, the play's performance itself becomes a hybrid, living, and briefly existing entity, each performance different from the previous one. These plays must always be understood as artistic expressions that transcend solely intellectual consideration; they are pieces of art designed for performance and experience by a live audience^{xii}.

The particular type of drama with which I am concerned is that of prison drama. Prison theater is a compelling topic. Thomas Fahy, in *Captive Audience: Prison and Captivity in Contemporary Theatre*, says:

The theatre of imprisonment rectify this invisibility [of inmates and their problems] by putting the prison experience into a palpable and confined space (onstage) with real people (actors). It creates an intimacy between audience and actor that forges a personal investment in the topic and can become the starting point for social change. Perhaps it is the space itself that makes this possible. Enclosed within the walls of a theater, it is easy to sympathize with those held captive on stage. (1)

While Fahy speaks to actual theater in prisons, the effect of prison being replicated on stage in these Irish plays has much of the same result. The audience is forced to see the characters and their situations in a far more immediate way than in a so-called normal setting.

Prison, itself, is a powerful symbol in Ireland. Liam Leonard, in "Introduction: The Significance of the Prison in Irish Nationalist Culture," speaks to this carceral power that results from a direct post-colonial reality in which not only does Britain still hold power over Northern Ireland, but also the Republic takes much of its system directly from its dominant colonial controller in the past. Such incorporation of post-colonial influence has "led, in turn,

to the use (and abuse) of imprisonment by forces opposed to the independence project. Thus, a sentimental residue of tacit opposition to the prison system has remained a salient characteristic of contemporary Irish life” (3). While there might still exist a degree of opposition to the prison system, in 1950s Ireland, most revolutionary thought and action was dormant, and many in Ireland, especially the bourgeoisie, saw no problem with the prison system. For playwrights Seamus Byrne and Brendan Behan as well as the small remaining revolutionary community “the prevailing system of justice (and the prison system in particular) became a symbol of injustice and oppression throughout the history of British rule for Irish nationalists in either jurisdiction” (Leonard 3).

Given the impact of prison in Ireland, it is odd that there is little specific critical work on prison drama in Ireland. Furthermore, seeing the idea of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction as a metaphor for the political situation in Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century, I realized that there is even less direct critical material available on this metaphor. This particular dramatic metaphor and sub-genre not only can be examined from a fresh perspective but also deserves to be explored and explicated because of its powerful reaction to a world situation that was often a hot point and still remains a place of potential explosion and repression.

I examine how and why playwrights in Ireland use this metaphor of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction to demonstrate conditions, political and social, within Ireland. Among the issues I examine, but am not limiting myself to, are the use of prison as a setting, the various kinds of places that can be used as prison settings; the effects of such a setting on both the drama itself and as an inclusive device bringing the audience into direct examination and experience of this setting during performance; the power structures and enforcement of

authority in the acts of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction; the functions and the themes that these settings represent; the condition of existential absurdity for the prisoners—especially in terms of Brendan Behan’s work; the use of prisons by a central authority to repress a given people; the recreation of such interrogation and imprisonment by revolutionary forces; the existence of unplanned confinement in unexpected settings as a consequences of the external social and political forces at play in Ireland; and the effects of these issues on the people of Ireland.

These events have established a cultural, political, and esthetic foundation for the creation of much writing, especially drama. These foundations can be found specifically with Seamus Byrne and Brendan Behan. Given the personal experiences of both playwrights, that both Seamus Byrne and Brendan Behan spent time in prison for among other offenses, revolutionary activity, it is, therefore, logical that the setting for the Byrne and Behan plays are prisons in the Republic. It is often difficult and problematic to connect a writer’s personal experience directly with his/her writing, but in the cases of these two playwrights, this connection of their incarcerations to these plays is both obvious and clear.

The narrative arc of my dissertation covers the dramatic changes in these three plays. The plays move from pure realism and representationalism in *Design For A Headstone* to that of increasing fluidity in *The Quare Fellow* which mixes Ibsenian social critique with a new fluidity to a fully flexible and highly syncretic form in *The Hostage*. I show that elements of these plays create the metaphor of imprisonment, interrogation, and sanction that can be seen in much Irish drama since the Irish Renaissance.

In all three chapters, I explore the relationship of the audience to the play being performed and its impact on that audience. I examine this audience relationship both in the

context of Brechtian epic theater and its intellectual messages to the audience and in terms of the direct social connection of performer to audience to society. In these plays, the playwrights use audience interaction both to make the theatrical experience immediate and to confront the audience and interrogate its political and social assumptions and beliefs. I delve into this theatrical technique in depth.

In Chapter One, I focus my examination on Seamus Byrne's *Design For A Headstone*. In this play that predates the Troubles and is set firmly in the stagnated political situation of the early 1950s in Ireland, I look at the way the Republic of Ireland used capital punishment as a way to control a specific part of the population. In the Irish government's use of execution for prisoners not seen as political in the context of the then only simmering struggle in Northern Ireland to remove the British presence from the island, they ironically use similar tactics to those that were used by the British Government while they still had control of the entirety of the island. The nationality of the executioners has changed, but the reality of life taking has remained a constant in the lives of the Irish.

Additionally, I examine the connection between *A Design For A Headstone* and Behan's plays. In an article in *The Irish Times* Fintan O' Toole suggests a deep relationship between Behan and other Irish writers: "But he [Behan] was not quite so innovative in an Irish context. *The Quare Fellow* came four years after Seamus Byrne's remarkable prison-based drama *Design for a Headstone* was staged at the Abbey in 1950. Behan's play owes a great deal to Byrne's, not least in its use of a huge cast with no conventional central character. *The Hostage*, meanwhile, is uncomfortably close to Frank O'Connor's brilliant 1931 story *Guests of the Nation*, of which it is virtually an unacknowledged dramatization."

I not only look at the plays as political theater but also as examples of the drama that will later emerge on the European stage as theatre of the absurd. Especially in Behan's writing, there is a clear relationship to what Albert Camus called "The absurd condition of life." The changing form of this drama reflects the changing conditions of the political Irish reality, from the heroic view of the IRA in the early part of the 20th century to an organization in the mid 1950s that seemed dated and whose purpose was no longer clear. None of the plays shows the IRA in a positive light; rather, it is the changing narrative form in which similar themes are treated that reflects this historical evolution.

One aspect of Behan's plays that I examine in Chapters Two and Three is that of his use of Bakhtinian heteroglossia or a text made of numerous voices. Marvin Carlson, in "Theater and Dialogism," says of the appropriate application of this idea to drama: "Often in Bakhtin's description of these concepts the drama seems a more apt example than the novel" (314). I do not wish to argue that one form is more fitted to heteroglossia than the other, but that it is deeply applicable to drama and to Behan's plays in particular.

In Chapter Two, I examine Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*. The issue of class as well as prison permeates Behan's plays. Alan Simpson, in "The Unholy Trinity: A Simple Guide To Holy Ireland c. 1880-1980," says "All of Behan's [plays] are urban and reflect the environs of Dublin and its working class" (190-191). In this play, Behan establishes his primary concern with the working class of Ireland, a focus that supercedes the political and the revolutionary. Behan shows that regardless of who is in control, the proletariat is at the mercy of the entrenched power structure.

Structurally, I explore this play as the midpoint in the transition from Byrne's representational/realistic approach to theater to the more abstract and fluid form that Behan

embraces fully in *The Hostage*. I examine how Behan incorporates elements of Byrne's preceding realism as well as details suggesting the fluidity and formality of Behan's later work *The Hostage*. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd speaks to the influence of absurdist theater on Behan's plays: "Ultimately, they owe more to the absurdist theatre of Ionesco, Genet and Beckett than to their forerunners in the Irish dramatic movement" (513). While the importance of the absurdist is certain for Behan, Kiberd misses the extraordinary connection to and impact of Byrne's *Design For A Headstone* on *The Hostage*, a point I will examine in detail.

In Chapter Three, I examine Behan's play *The Hostage* which provides excellent opportunities for examining the various aspects of this study: the importance of the set as prison, both actual and covert, interrogation by both the government and the IRA, and the act of ultimate sanction in the death of the Quare Fellow. Additionally, Behan establishes a tone that reflects his complex and pessimistic world view and connects to existentialist and absurdist theater. He combines elements of British pantomime with Brechtian epic theater as well as absurdist imagery to create a hybrid, syncretic theater, a form that is uniquely his.

I examine Behan's scathing critique of the then nearly defunct revolutionary movement, a system that held to romanticized views of its actions from earlier decades. In *The Hostage* the representatives of the IRA are satirized and shown to be without substance or historical weight. They chose as the symbol of their battle a criminal in Northern Ireland, someone who is not a political prisoner and in return threatens the life of an ordinary British soldier, who is himself apolitical. This casual exchange of executions is a chilling and prescient view—I am not suggesting in any way that Behan could know what was coming—of the horrors of the tit-for-tat killings that would torment Northern Ireland during The Troubles.

In my explication of the play, I spend a considerable amount of time examining various critical views of the ending as well as my own reading of it. The ending is a crucial component of *The Hostage* because of both its unusual occurrence—the dead hostage returning to life to perform a final song and dance routine—and its possible multiplicity of meanings.

In my conclusion, I pull together the various threads of examination of contemporary Irish theatre that I have explored. This Irish drama that creates a metaphor of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction is not a simple sub-genre of contemporary world drama; rather it is a complex interweaving of dramatic writing and performance; the writing represents an eclectic panpolitical collection of playwrights; the enormous flexibility of staging has emerged as a major characteristic of Irish drama; this drama continues to react quickly and powerfully to its immediate world; this art reflects real communication between performer and audience; and this drama incorporates ideas from such theorists as Beckett, Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski. It then moves beyond them in creating a powerful, dynamic expression about an extremely important condition of contemporary Ireland—a place in which during the second half of the 20th century many people found themselves under interrogation, in prison, and some awaiting their executions.

Chapter One

Design For A Headstone:

Religion/Politics, Understanding/Confusion, & Innocence/Guilt

Seamus Byrne's *Design For A Headstone* is set in 1950 in a prison that is suggestive of Mountjoy Prison in Dublin. For readers unfamiliar with the play, a summary appears in the endnotes.^{xiii} *Design For A Headstone* is a direct influence on Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*. Heinz Kosok, in "Doomed Volunteers: Two Great Political Plays From Ireland" examines this connection, and he argues that the two plays' tone and setting are similar, but that a significant difference exists in their plots—that Behan's is simplistic, while Byrne's is complex.(88) While Kosok draws a clear structural distinction between *The Quare Fellow* and *Design For A Headstone*, he misses their connective thematic and metaphoric points; the connection between the two plays goes beyond the superficiality of structure to the creation of the triadic metaphor of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction.

What is more important, however, than the dissimilarity between Behan's and Byrne's establishment of character and complication of plot, is the understanding that *Design For A Headstone*, although largely forgotten on the world's stage and in the academy, is important for its theatrical quality, its influence on *The Quare Fellow*, and its establishment of prison drama as a new genre in Ireland. In her dissertation *Beyond The Trilogy: The Urban Repertoire Of The Abbey Theatre (1904-1951)* Elizabeth Mannion speaks to the play's significance. She argues that this play is the most important Irish urban play since O'Casey and that it marks the first appearance of prison drama, in which the IRA features centrally (24). Additionally, Mannion identifies the importance of the

connection between the Catholic Church and both sides of the Irish power struggle. (24) *Design For A Headstone* confronts these difficult problems and compels the audience to participate in this national interrogation. Byrne obliges his audience to engage in this Irish national discussion by becoming tacit and complicit witnesses to the play's plots and themes.

Seamus Byrne's *Design For A Headstone* is overshadowed by Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, on which it clearly had significant influence. Scholars have focused their attention on the better known work and the often flamboyant and larger than life figure of Brendan Behan—who is himself sometimes seen as similar to the hard-drinking Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. Yet Seamus Byrne's play, while now nearly forgotten and obscure, is still important in Irish drama and deserves criticism. In an article in *The Irish Times* (2010) Fintan O' Toole suggests a deep relationship between Behan and other Irish writers: "But he [Behan] was not quite so innovative in an Irish context. *The Quare Fellow* came four years after Seamus Byrne's remarkable prison-based drama *Design for a Headstone* was staged at the Abbey in 1950. Behan's play owes a great deal to Byrne's, not least in its use of a huge cast with no conventional central character." Not every critic saw Byrne's play as on the same level as Behan's. Stanley Weintraub of Pennsylvania State University says, "Seamus Byrne's *Design For A Headstone* (1950) is an effective cell-block drama, but not up to the level of the play it may have influenced, Behan's *The Quare Fellow*" (281). Certainly such a dispute on the quality of both plays is a natural critical issue. Both plays, written in the same approximate time period, center on the same issues.

Byrne's play, in its use of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction, fits the historical circumstances of the Republic of Ireland in its zeitgeist of political stasis in the 1940s and the 1950s and in its post-colonial overtones of a society that has both not moved past the effects of being a colony and that has actively incorporated numerous aspects of that colonizer in its culture and government. *Design For A Headstone* created an uproar from the general public as its messages disturbed the status quo, the forgetting of the continuing post-colonial influence of the former control by Great Britain. In *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999*, Robert Welch explains that this play deeply disturbed the Irish audience: "If Johnston's line, from *The Moon in the Yellow River*, that the birth of a nation is 'no immaculate conception' was a view that struck a nerve in the 1930s, then Byrne's difficult, recalcitrant, and uncompromising play of 1950 showed that the aftermath [of the war for independence and the following Civil War] was, in many respects, savage and sordid" (150). Byrne's unrelenting and extraordinarily honest portrayal of the nonromantic effects of the revolution is one of *Design For A Headstone's* critically most important qualities. This honesty imbues this play with great focus and emotional power and connection to the revolutionary ideas dormant in the collective psyche of the audience. Robert Hogan speaks directly to Byrne's honest portrayal of the IRA men and asserts that the IRA men in *Design For A Headstone* are sincere and believe completely in the rightness of their cause. He also shows that Byrne avoids the trap of romanticizing them, of making them into mythic heroes. Byrne achieves this portrayal while directly confronting an enormously divisive issue. "That is a rare quality at any time and in any country; it is especially rare in Ireland" (76). Byrne's ability to create realistic characters while remaining impartial about their cause and the

consequences of their actions keep this play from sinking either into one-dimensional melodrama or over-drawn and cartoon-like political polemic.

Design For A Headstone is an extremely important Irish play for several reasons. This play continues in the strong Irish tradition of playwriting that was established by the writers during the Irish Renaissance—Synge, O’Casey, Lady Gregory, and Yeats. Byrne’s play deviates from that group in that he puts the politics that he directly foregrounds the politics of the situation. Byrne treats the prison play as a metaphor for Ireland, what will later in the 1970s-1990s, become a central feature of Irish drama. While O’Casey certainly treated politics to a degree in his plays, Byrne is far more direct and less oblique in his approach. The ideology that is suggested in O’Casey is clear and direct in Byrne. In Byrne, there is a powerful emphasis on concrete reality and its representation on stage. A second point of importance is that *Design For A Headstone* is essentially a recovered play, one that had a small period of notoriety but then sunk into obscurity as Byrne decided to return to his career as a lawyer and to abandon the theatre. As I will detail later, his plays received a less than enthusiastic response, especially from the Church. The play fits extraordinarily well into Irish history, however, in its representation of the state of Irish politics in the 1950s and in the use of prison in Ireland. Prison, especially in terms of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction, functions as a metaphor for the largely ignored revolutionary aspects of Irish political life. Thematically, structurally, and metaphorically, *Design For A Headstone* influences *The Quare Fellow* and establishes the first example in contemporary Irish drama of the larger prison metaphor—the subject of this dissertation.

Byrne also includes in his political examination an assumption that his audience understands Irish history and that they will agree with the view that Irish history is never forgotten, that what happened eight centuries ago in the invasion of the British is as pertinent now as when it happened, that they would agree that the circumstances that drove the Irish to several rebellions culminating in the War for Independence and the Irish Civil War imbue the politics of Ireland of the 1950s with its meaning. (See the charts at the end of the dissertation for an Irish timeline of history and literature.) Frank Delaney, in his extraordinary historical novel *Ireland* comments on the particular nature of Irish history and the Irish people's relationship to it. The novel focuses on the last seanachai (Gaelic for oral storyteller) and his stories of Ireland: "I've never separated history from myth," said the great man. "I don't think you can in Ireland" (151). Ireland's stories, mythology, and history are not only intertwined, but they are also constantly contemporary. They are also demonstrative of Ireland's subaltern condition and its fluidity of form and story, especially well-illustrated by the storyteller when he speaks of "the ambiguity of all things Irish"(231). This uncertainty surrounding Irish history is a consequence of the fact that "the history of Ireland was also written by the vanquished—the repeatedly defeated, the hung, drawn, and quartered, the kicked and beaten" (231). This speaks to the main argument of the dissertation—that these prison plays of the 1950s, in their use of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction, represent the political climate of Ireland in the 1950s, one that is ambiguous, connected to the past, mythologized, and characterized as post-colonial in its circumstances and irreducibly connected to the 800 years of British rule.

Design For A Headstone is a powerful and troubling play, one that seems to be a natural product for a playwright like Byrne who already had established a reputation within Ireland for dealing with issues that were considered virtually untouchable. In discussing the stage history of Byrne's plays, Kosok explains:

In the year following *Design For A Headstone*, the Abbey company (which had just moved into the huge and shabby Queen's Theatre), produced Byrne's *Innocent Bystander* (unpublished), apparently a play about embezzling solicitors in the provinces (Hogan, *Seven Irish Plays* 97) and thus another criticism of contemporary Irish society. Byrne's second published play, *Little City*, written soon after the Abbey fire, was so controversial that it had to wait until 1962 before it could be staged in Ireland. (79)

Hogan clarifies the topic of *Little City*, which seen in the context of the Catholic Republic of the 1940s and 1950s, would clearly horrify many people in Ireland: abortion.^{xiv} Byrne, a courageous writer, did not shy away from dealing with the most taboo of subjects in the Republic; *Design For A Headstone* required fortitude and bravery. Clearly, Byrne had great success in antagonizing parts of the Irish citizenry with his uncompromising interrogations of "sacred parts" of Irish society.

One element of the invisible turmoil Byrne's play illustrates is the paradoxical treatment of the IRA men, who not long before had been perceived as national heroes but who were now labeled common criminals. In their attempt to gain political status, at a time when being a member of the IRA in the Republic was a criminal activity, the prisoners resort to a traditional Irish technique to make their fight: the hunger strike. This

technique of political protest is ancient in Celtic culture and informs the seemingly contradictory power of slow self-execution into public accusation. Like Socrates taking control of his death ordered by the state by drinking hemlock and continuing to teach until his death, the hunger strikers amplifies the circumstances of the prisoners by making a public declaration of status—by declaring his status as a political prisoner, a fighter for an ideal. Two important aspects of the prisoners’ confinement and punishment must be considered: their imprisonment is not simply that of a physical nature but also of a socio-political character and opposes the element of the Church’s covert and overt involvement in their imprisonment. Kosok speaks to the first consideration when he discusses the importance of the characters, recognizing that they are imprisoned not only in a physical building but also by a national condemnation of the Irish population. (83). This point exemplifies the IRA’s conundrum of supposedly representing the real interests of the Irish nation while being denied legality. The Republic enforces a paradigm shift on the consciousness of the country—it is as if the post-independence Civil War had not ended at all—eventually leading to the Troubles.

The religious nature of the Irish dilemma, which will be a salient characteristic of the later occurring Troubles in Northern Ireland, is one of the most dominant issues in *Design For A Headstone*. Hogan explains that this is, indeed, the overriding power of this drama, in which Byrne is able to show how the Church opposes the Republican movement, while at the same time, being embraced by some in the IRA.

The IRA inmates assert that they should be political prisoners and not mere criminals, and to that end they call a hunger strike. This tactic is opposed by the Church

as a mortal sin. “The conflict is not hedged; the priest is not treated with kid gloves, but even roundly abused by one of the prisoners. Byrne really offers no solution, though he states a central problem of modern Ireland with rare strength and clarity” (75). Several points are important to examine. The idea of the hunger strike is based on Celtic tradition that goes back before England’s invasion of Ireland in 1170-1171 led by Strongbow; indeed, the Troscaid predates the arrival of Christianity with Saint Patrick in the 400s.^{xv} It is significant that in a nation that has experienced so much political upheaval, including the forced changing of religion from pagan to Christian, that an ancient pagan tool for the assertion of justice plays a major role in the Irish struggle against English colonialism. Although contemporary IRA members are not necessarily aware of the origins of the hunger strike, the influence of ancient beliefs has survived nearly a century of British domination and almost two centuries of enforced religious change.

Much of the play’s tension is not based on Irish-English opposition but on internal Irish religious struggle: not the contemporary Catholic/Protestant dichotomy but Catholics against a holdover from the old Pre-Christian Celtic ways. This religious tension exists, of course, in addition to the unspoken and obvious tension in the North of Ireland, always a backdrop to this play of the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism. Navigating the various threads of the oppositions in Ireland is similar to going through a labyrinth that keeps changing its walls.

No one theory is adequate to explain all of the issues in Ireland. Certainly in the expression of the hunger strikes in the prison in *Design For a Headstone*, the post-colonial British influence is felt in the stated reason of attempting to gain political status

for IRA members. It is fascinating that the active opposition to the hunger strike comes from the Priest, a representative of the Catholic Church first and the Republic of Ireland second—remembering that the Republic of Ireland was in that time a theocracy—but it is oddly passive. The strike seems to have little effect. The post-colonial Republic's government ignores the actions of the prisoners, implicitly denying them their goals.

In Design For A Headstone, the imprisonment is clear; the action takes place sometime before 1950 in a prison suggested by or actually set in Mountjoy. The very setting establishes that incarceration has occurred. The other two components of the larger metaphor of the study, interrogation and sanction, exist but are muddied by uncertainty in the characters. The interrogation of the prisoners is multi-layered and complex like a honeycomb. The IRA, which demands complete, unquestioning obedience and loyalty to its cause, conducts its own inquiry about the identity of the informer. They arrive at erroneous answers; as a result, innocent people are executed. The Catholic priest, representing the official Catholic element of the Republican theocracy, interrogates the religious nature of the prisoners' hunger strike and condemns this action as against the wishes of God, via the Church.

This question of loyalty is central to the Irish view of revolution and politics. Kosok explains how this need for loyalty can have disastrous consequences when, in failed attempts to discover the true identity of the informer, three innocent people are executed by the IRA: George, Geraghty, and Jakey, even though we discover that Mrs. Egan is the guilty party (84). The point of the mistaken killings is interwoven carefully with the idea of unwavering and unquestioning loyalty to a cause, which Byrne shows in the attitudes of both the IRA men and the church.

Especially during the politically stagnant period of the 1950s, the Republic of Ireland was unable to slough off the clinging effects of having been a British colony. The nation had achieved political freedom, at least in the south of Ireland, but it had not altered significantly, especially in certain judicial areas, the lessons taught to it by nearly eight centuries of British domination. In other ways, internal national tensions existed outside of the realm of post-colonial experience because they were founded on cultural realities from the times many centuries preceding the invasion of England, before the hated Strongbow first made his British expansionist threat clear—that of the introduction of Christianity to Ireland from Saint Patrick. Christianity replaced the island’s Druidic religion and was then woven into the cultural and governmental fabric of Ireland. In effect, the Republic not only copied laws of Great Britain but also became more repressive by maintaining a direct religious component in the government, becoming, in essence, a Catholic theocracy.^{xvi}

This ancient theocratic-nationalist connection continues unabated into the Irish Free State’s transition into a Republic in 1948, and it establishes one of the primary themes and tensions within *Design For A Headstone*. Robert Welch, in “Sacrament and Significance: Some Reflections on Religion and the Irish” presents, on the whole, a positive perspective on the nation’s relationship with its official religion, but even in a political, not a literary, essay, the seeds of the tension between the church and elements of the IRA exist. He discusses a movement towards secularism in the 1990s but directly addresses the integration of church and state: “That secularism, the phase which we’re still probably in in 1996, was an inevitable reaction against the theocratic tendencies of the Irish Free State and (after 1947) Republic which identified the Irish nation with the

Catholic church, famously encoded in the 1937 constitution written by Eamon De Valera, recognising that church's 'special position'" (102). This oppositional dialect is only one of several binary oppositions in the play: the proletariat against the middle and upper class; gender tension between men and women; socialist materialism against capitalist materialism; the split between the regular and the political prisoners, and conservative Republic acceptance of post-colonial status pitted against the IRA and its continuing attempt to overthrow the British in Northern Ireland to achieve a united Ireland. Byrne skillfully interweaves these conflicts into his plot of attempted escape, hunger strike, and mistaken IRA ordered executions. Lionel Pilkington, in *Theatre And The State In Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating The People*, speaks to this specific problem that Byrne addresses: "In *Design For A Headstone* and *This Other Eden*, for example, there is an impression that Ireland's existential development is hindered not only by sanctimonious nationalism, but by the overbearing influence of Catholic social dogma" (150-151). In *Design For A Headstone*, Seamus Byrne combines the themes of post-colonial British realities along with Irish religious tensions to create a play which directly challenges Irish assumptions about the place of the revolutionaries in the established ruling power—both secular and sacred. Byrne focuses his critique on both the church and the now out-of-date IRA. Wilkington asserts that Byrne's play, along with several others, "show the motivating forces of militant republicanism as dangerously anachronistic and as urgently in need of revision" (145).

In creating this conflict and open examination of these issues, Byrne writes in two theatrical traditions, that of the critique of social ills exemplified by Henrik Ibsen in such plays as *A Doll's House*, often viewed as one of the first feminist plays, *An Enemy of the*

People, focusing on the strength of individual truth in the face of the masses, and *Ghosts*, which focused on the curse of syphilis in late 19th century European society. George Bernard Shaw also critiques society in his plays *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, which examines Victorian society's hypocrisy about sexual attitudes, *Major Barbara*, which interrogates the workings of charity and moral righteousness, and *Arms and the Man*, which exposes the hypocrisy of war. Dramatic naturalism such as Ibsen's and Shaw's, in which the physical and psychological reality of their characters is of paramount importance, clearly influences Byrne in not only this play but also in others, like *Little City*, where he dealt with the then Irish taboo of abortion. Although this time period, especially in Ireland, was not one that fostered great courage or creativity in its playwrights, this lack of foresight by the Irish Republic did not keep such playwrights as Byrne and Behan from dealing explicitly and implicitly with these issues.^{xvii}

Another dramatic tradition that clearly influences Byrne was that of O'Casey and his treatment of the Irish people. Myron Matlow, in *Modern World Drama An Encyclopedia*, points out O'Casey's use of both realism and non-traditional techniques in his plays. "*The Silver Tassie* (1928) marks the turning point of his dramaturgy by its departure from representationalism" (561). This point speaks to O'Casey's influence on Behan, emphasizing his use of Naturalism in portraying realistic Irish people and successfully avoiding romanticizing them. O'Casey, who lived much of his life as a member of the proletariat, often employed as a common laborer, achieved this realism through "his unsentimental depiction of the Irish"(Matlow 560). O'Casey's early plays show lower-class Irish people in their life struggles with accurate linguistic representation; indeed, it can be argued that he is the first Irish playwright to represent the

Irish poor and working-class with accuracy and empathy. He also dealt with similar issues that Byrne would examine in *Design For A Headstone*; in *The Plough and the Stars*, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, and *Juno and the Paycock* O'Casey interrogates the Republican movement and the consequences of its struggle on the poor in Ireland, as well as examining the unethical use of power by both government and the IRA. The combination of the Ibsenesque focus on social issues and O'Casey's concern with Irish lower-class people and idiosyncratic Irish concerns combines to form a powerful synthesis in Byrne's play. This hybrid characteristic, a significant element in *Design For A Headstone*, is easily overlooked in Byrne's drama.

Design For A Headstone was controversial for several reasons, not the least its implicit critique of the continuing form of Republican struggle. While Byrne sides with neither the Church, the Republic, nor the old British ways, he also does not favor the IRA's then stagnant struggle to attempt to unify the island into one country. In his *Theatre And The State In Twentieth Century Ireland*, Cumann na nGaedheal examines the Abbey's productions in the 1940s and 1950s and speaks to the theatrical response to Republicanism in general and to Byrne's play in particular: ". . .Seamus Byrne's *Design For A Headstone* (1950). . . [demonstrates] the motivating forces of militant republicanism as dangerously anachronistic and as urgently in need of revision" (145). Byrne incorporates this critical examination of republicanism as being outdated, one of the salient and most important themes of his play. He not only interrogates the techniques by which the Republican movement continued to function in the 1940s and 1950s, but he also questions the efficacy and ethical nature of that movement.

While Byrne forges into potentially taboo territory in his plays' themes, he is more traditional in dramatic form. *Design For A Headstone* drives deeply into the collective spirit of the Irish, forcing a Freudian or Jungian deontological discussion of what can and should be done in society but without any of the experimentation in form that Behan shows in his work. That does not lessen *Design For A Headstone* in any way, but I think it is important to distinguish that this play falls easily into the earlier Naturalism and Realism traditions but in a way that irritated ethical and religious nerves in Ireland.

This portion of Chapter One examines the varying forms of interrogation that Byrne employs in his play and the various themes he explores by means of interrogation: of the audience; of the relationship of class to government and religion; of Jakey as O'Caseyesque proletariat figure; of religion's relationship to revolutionary politics and the state; of the government in the struggle for political status; of strategies to fight for political status; and of characters and their guilt or innocence.

In *Design For A Headstone*, where political prisoners fight for recognition of their status—a condition that would force The Republic of Ireland to confront the reality of their cause—the audience must become witnesses to the political conflict. Kosok speaks directly to the political realities during the 1940s-1950s in the Republic: “It must be remembered that in the 1940s when the action [in *Design For A Headstone*] is supposed to take place, the IRA was proscribed in Ireland, and membership was considered a criminal offense” (81). The IRA was seen officially as a legally forbidden criminal organization not only in the British controlled province of Northern Ireland, which would have been expected, since that was the territory under dispute as to its true character as a

member of Great Britain or a part of Ireland, but also in the Republic of Ireland itself. Rather than being perceived, as they had been earlier, by the Irish—both citizens and the government—as freedom fighters or national revolutionaries, they were now viewed through the legalistic prism of the justice system, and in that paradigm, they were judged as mere criminals. That situation in the Republic, of the branding of political revolutionaries as common lawbreakers, is that of a post-colonial holdover, continuing the political policies of Great Britain. It is also possible that De Valera saw this legal condemnation of the IRA as a political opportunity to strengthen his own national standing as well, finally to quash forever, even if this action did not ultimately have that desired effect, the lingering aftermath of the post-independence Irish Civil War. De Valera had consolidated his political power after the end of the Irish Civil War, which had immediately followed the War For Independence. De Valera attempted to unify the emerging Free State and later the Republic by silencing and disempowering the remaining political/Republican dissidents. “Consequently, in 1931 the IRA was banned in the Irish Free State, and when it was proscribed in 1936, its members became outlaws who, however, saw themselves as the only true defenders of Irish interests” (Kosok 81) DeValera’s criminalizing of the IRA effectively weakened, for a period, its political agency.

Either way—as post-colonial hangover or Celtic national infighting—the official act of making the IRA illegal, first in the Free State and then in the Republic, criminalized political revolutionaries, although not in the minds of the majority of the Irish population. While the legalistic reduction of the political insurrection had an impact on the people of Ireland’s perception, the IRA retained, albeit in a lesser status –

representing a significantly smaller portion of the Irish population's viewpoint – its image as a romantic, revolutionary force that spoke for the “true” Ireland.

With Seamus Byrne's personal history of imprisonment for revolutionary activity, it is logical that the setting for his play would be a prison in the Republic. Inmates who are members of the IRA struggle to achieve recognition as political prisoners, a status that would elevate their actions to a justifiable political movement. This official designation would provide a legal justification for the movement, if not to their actions, which is what the Republic avidly wished to avoid. Normalcy, as seen by the government of the Republic, could only be maintained if the IRA was officially reduced to an outfit of lawbreakers.

Byrne posits a situation in which the audience becomes a passive, but still present, observer in the prisoners' struggle for political recognition and autonomy; indeed, through this incorporation of the audience, Byrne interrogates the standard audience paradigm in a live theatrical performance. The audience becomes more than simply theatrical patrons; it witnesses the rendition of the country's political struggles, even at a time when these struggles seem to be almost nonexistent. Like witnesses at a state sanctioned execution, who are present to legitimize the official killing, audiences are confronted directly by the reality of the simmering conflict. Byrne creates a layer of implicit guilt and entanglement, which makes it difficult for the audience simply to feel that all they have done is watch a play or an entertainment; instead, they have, by their very presence, through a dialogic and experiential process, been implicated in the official actions. Byrne forces the audience to experience vicariously the sublimated but very real political tensions surrounding the partition of the island that many in ordinary life had

forgotten or pretended to forget still existed. The political stasis of the Republic was real, but the conflict about the division of Ireland into two entities—The Republic and Northern Ireland—was ubiquitous, while the apparent actions surrounding the tensions were dormant.

Theater is inherently a voyeuristic experience; it is also a social event: plays, in order to be complete, must have a script, actors, and audience. Through this merging, the skeleton of a play—its script—becomes a living body of art, a performance, temporal as it is, that embodies the whole of the idea. As these live audiences witness the events in the plays, they are drawn into the political struggle even if, during the 1950s, the majority of those audiences, either through choice or ignorance, seemed unaware of them. The plays foreground an otherwise seemingly forgotten or abandoned political and societal struggle. The lives of Behan and Byrne can shed light on the plays. Their experiences in Ireland and the often-shadowy world of the IRA serve as a basis upon which they could create a foundation for these plays. Robert Hogan, in *After The Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of the Irish Drama since The Plough And The Stars*, speaks to Byrne's life and explains that Byrne began his adult life as a solicitor and then became involved with the IRA. Byrne served nine months in prison during which he conducted a hunger strike and was subsequently released (74). Clearly his involvement with the IRA and his personal hunger strike inform the action and themes of *Design for a Headstone*. As pointed out in a note by Heinz Kook, Byrne's specific involvement with the IRA is small, or at least, not well documented (97). Despite the limited amount of Byrne's revolutionary involvement, his life experiences still impact his writing. As Kook accurately claims, Byrne's life was an essential part of the creation of his play, a drama

which benefits from the verisimilitude of his depiction of prison life. (80) The specificity and accuracy in demonstration of confinement forces the audience to confront both its reality in society and their relationship to the criminal justice system.

A characteristic of *Design For A Headstone* is that of interrogation of the live audience. In *Captive Audience: Prison and Captivity in Contemporary Theatre*, Thomas Fahy speaks to the interrogatory nature, critically important, of the audience-performer relationship:

The theater of imprisonment . . . creates an intimacy between audience and actor that forges a personal investment in the topic and can become the starting point for social change. Perhaps it is the space itself that makes this possible. Enclosed within the walls of a theater, it is easy to sympathize with those held captive on stage. The dynamic of live performance creates a sense of obligation and entrapment for the viewer—even if of our own choosing.(1)

Fahy specifically examines prison theater from a later period, but his analysis is completely applicable to this study. In *Design For A Headstone*, the live audience represents the public's eye, seeing IRA inmate's struggle to achieve both political status as prisoners and to escape from that prison. In our voyeurism, we, the audience, lend implicit acknowledgement and guilt to the events. The audience bears witness to the theocratic nature of the Republic and the IRA, the legal effects of the establishment of post-conquest British justice, and the theatrical representation of judicial and extra-legal executions. The audience watches and, in its silent observations, condones the actions

and imbues them with potency. By having citizens witness such judicial events—through the extension of seeing them on stage—these actions gain legitimacy. The viewers serve both as participants to the actions and also as observers, forced to connect emotionally and intellectually with the imprisonment.

Now I will move into a specific examination of the play through close reading. A post-colonial conflict exists at the very opening of the play, when one of the prisoners, Micheal, is conducting a lesson on Irish Gaelic, and the audience, presumably in Dublin, would be left uncertain about the meaning of the words that, once the Irish native language, have now been supplanted by English. Because Byrne provides no translation of the Gaelic dialogue, he subverts audience expectation about linguistic understanding, and he disturbs their normal relationship with the production. The audience's acceptance of the 1950s stagnant political situation is jolted; the play interrogates the audience and foregrounds the importance of the rapidly fading original Irish Celtic culture.

Ructions, a convict who is a member of the IRA, is the central oppositional character and brings a materialist understanding to the class conflict. He is the one who most forcefully challenges the entirety of the status quo and who might be seen to be Byrne's voice. He sees the class divisions that exist in the external world of Ireland also coexist in the internal closed society of the prison. Outside the prison, the "gentlemen," who are Irish but who model themselves in a post-conquest fashion on the British upper-class, control the economic and political power of the Republic. The world of the prison mirrors and exhibits the same kind of social strata and power distribution. Even in prison, the "upper-class" of the inmates maintains privilege over the lower classes.

RUCTIONS: (*provocatively*): Chess in this jail is as much an instrument of oppression as wealth is outside it. (102)

The emblem and expression of the control of capital and wealth in the external world differ in form from that inside the jail but not in importance. Those class divisions, as well as other partitions of political status and religion which exist externally, also exist internally. They serve to separate people who might otherwise band together in common cause. Status, hierarchy, and a power structure are inherently embodied within the prison—parallel to the hierarchy outside the prison in the government that denies acknowledgement of political status to the same brand of revolutionaries who fought for the existence of Ireland only a few decades earlier. Now they are taught the hegemonic lesson of ruling and elite class structures through the seemingly benign distribution of boards for draughts (checkers) and chess. Byrne uses Ructions to disrupt the prisoners' easy acceptance of the class and political status quo. While the actuality throughout most of Europe is that chess is egalitarian in its opportunity to be played and is, indeed, a major sport throughout Europe, it is still often perceived to be a game of the upper-class and draughts is seen to be a game of the proletariat. This is the context that Byrne utilizes about the game. Throughout the play, Ructions interrogates these issues, just as surely as the inmates were themselves interrogated before being imprisoned. Ructions, however, functions as the intellectual and emotional tool with which Byrne deromanticizes all aspects of this power struggle.

Byrne establishes early that Ructions is both a man of political awareness and one who believes in decisive, aggressive action against the oppressor and not passive

symbolic gestures. He is the one who believes in the importance of active resistance against the post-colonial power holdovers, not any kind of passive civil disobedience. Byrne foreshadows that Ructions, doomed to failure in his opposition to passive resistance, will be firmly against the idea of passive hunger-striking as an effective tool of political struggle and establishes what will be a magnificent irony at the end of the play when Ructions decides to continue the hunger strike himself, albeit for a significantly different reason than Conor had. Ructions believes in forward action as a tool for political progress and not in passive self-destruction. Ructions might be viewed as emblematic of Byrne's call for not accepting any status quo, regardless of its origination—government, church, society, or the struggle itself. Byrne creates a dialectic between Ructions and Aiden in their views of how to proceed which mirrors the internal divisions in the revolutionary forces in Ireland in the 1950s.

Ructions stands for direct practical action, resistance to authority, the use of violence against the enemy, no compromise in his basic core political beliefs, and has a virulent anti-Church attitude; Aiden supports the passive self-directed aggression of hunger strikes, following orders, being part of an established hierarchy of the IRA, and is pro-Church. The differences in the approaches of the two men are as diametrically opposed as they are similar in their ultimate hopes for the country.

Aidan believes in rigid obedience and military discipline in following the power structure of the IRA as much as if he were a commissioned officer in the official Army of the Irish Republic. Ructions sees blind obedience and passive resistance as futile—as playing into the hands of the oppressor. Ructions has asked Tommy to make him a ring with a dragon on it, bearing the image of the dragon eating its own tail, but not to

illustrate the ancient symbol of the snake as wisdom. In this case, Ruction intends the self-consuming image to represent futility. Aidan is shocked by this symbolic inversion.

Ructions explains to Aidan:

RUCTIONS: (*denunciatory*): He [the dragon] is the symbol of passive resistance – the sufferer unto death – the Christ-like worm who never turns – the monster consuming his own tissue. . . . [It is the] Symbol of the hunger striker, who turns his violence against himself – whose mortal wound is self-inflicted – the warrior who raises his axe, only to cleave his own skull. (106)

Aidan's reaction is of horror and disgust. He sees Ruction's sentiments as openly defiant of the IRA executive, which, of course, they are.

AIDAN: (*furious*) You –! You –! Terence McSwiney! Thomas Ashe! Jack McNeila and Tony D'Arcy! Condemn *them*? Are these the men symbolized by your – by your obscenity? Tommy! You're not to do that, do you hear? I say, you're not to. . . It will be news to the executive to hear that you share the view of the bishops that hunger strike is suicide. (106)

Of course, Aidan's strike at Ructions is emotionally driven, and Ructions, certain in the soundness of his argument and position, easily swats Aidan's objection aside. Ructions realizes that both the Republic and the IRA executive are deeply rooted in Catholicism:

RUCTIONS: Let him fire away with his heresy hunt. Let him call his

Inquisition. Maybe Mister Adjutant Aidan O'Leary will find he has more`
in common with the bishops of Ireland than I have. (107)

Ruction amplifies his attack on the power structure and influence of the Catholic Church:

RUCTIONS: [its purpose is] Protecting the oldest civilization in the world
from the infiltration of social justice. (107)

This point is crucial to his argument. It is not only England in its postcolonial influence on the legal system and culture of the Republic but also the stultifying canopy of the Church that keeps Ireland from transforming into a modern society complete with social justice and social advances such as contraception and abortion that are paradoxically more available in Great Britain. Ructions is frustrated at being hampered by all of the power structures in Ireland, including those within the revolutionary forces.

Completely frustrated with Ructions, Aidan demands to know why Ructions joined the IRA. Ructions' answer is simple but illustrative of his approach, based on the ancient Celtic warrior way: "To fight!" (107) Ructions' views are actively revolutionary, with a focus on direct attack on the enemy.

RUCTIONS: You better know what my views are: that the state is built on violence – and only ousted by greater violence – the Church pronounces as lawful the government which can maintain order – thereby rationalizing the greater potential of violence. As for hunger strike, and passive stuff, the

psychology is lousy! (107)

In Ruction's words is an historical echo of Michael Collins' view of the battle against the British in the War for Independence. In *A History Of Ireland*, Peter and Fiona Somerset Fry explain: "Michael Collins was a militant revolutionary; he believed war was necessary if Ireland was ever to be free. And he knew that revolution cannot be achieved democratically; the majority is always too passive to accept violent upheaval, whatever vague sympathy it may have for revolutionary aims" (305). Collins' militant style of political resistance as well as the ancient pre-Christian Celtic warrior spirit is what flows in Ruction's heart and soul. He sees nothing but weakness and defeat in passive resistance.

Ruction interrogates Conor's coming hunger strike:

RUCTIONS: This [the break out] is something we can do. Do, Conor! – not suffer. Fight, Conor – shoot our way out – not just present them with a martyr – a gift on a silver salveer – a body on a marble slab. (136)

Ruction's disagreement is not with perishing for a cause but with the method of that death. He opposes completely the idea of martyrdom that would result from passive sacrifice, but he approves completely of dying in action if needed. He, again, resonates with the heroic figure of Cuchallain, aching to battle his enemies, but not to lay down and die without a fierce struggle. This debate of battle versus the hunger strike, or the troscad, is as ancient as the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, one of the Gaelic epics, in which conflicts

are settled by battle among soldiers. Ructions' vehement argument is in vain—Conor will continue with his plans.

Ructions' disagreement with Aidan is not the only crack in the power structure of the IRA. After Conor is sentenced to two years of hard time to be served in the criminal section of the prison, he decides to abandon the planned prison break and to wage a solitary battle against the Prison authorities—who represent the amalgam of official Irish and lingering British sentiment, that odd combination of repression. Since the Irish government has banned the IRA, they make Conor an offer that could strike a serious blow to the existence of the revolutionary force:

CONOR: Two years – hard. To be served here – in the criminal section.

AIDAN: The criminal section?

CONOR: (*smilingly*): The sentence not to take effect – if I enter into a recognizance – to break my army connection.

AIDAN: The curs! So that's the game. To abolish political treatment. (113)

Conor understands that he could be a symbolic fulcrum upon which the legal lever of the Republic rests and waits to exert its power in order to undermine the already officially denied IRA. Conor recognizes the inherent power of the symbol in such a battle – he decides to engage the Republic in a dialogic and culturally significant struggle:

CONOR: I'm going on hunger strike – against criminal status.

AIDAN: But Conor, the escape? We're getting eight revolvers.

CONOR: I'm not going with you. (113)

He will sacrifice his life to place the burden of the blame on the Republic for not officially acknowledging the political status of the prisoners who were incarcerated for their actions as members of the IRA. The semiology is clear – Conor's denial of food in response to the government's denial of political status, an inversion of the typical revolutionary tit-for-tat killing that will be seen all too often in the coming Troubles in the latter part of the 20th Century. Instead, he will slowly and very publicly, itself an irony, since he is incarcerated, kill himself in response for the legal execution of the prisoners' political status. He hopes that the outcome will be similar to the Irish citizens's horror at the British executions of the leaders of the failed Easter Uprising of 1916 – the British successfully united a horrified populace, one that had previously been near unanimous in its disapproval of the rebellion, to near full support for their actions. The power of the symbol to unite a people is potentially enormous; Conor hopes its strength is enough to overturn the Republic's denial of the prisoners's political rights as interred opponents and not mere criminals. The Republic is not, however, the only force that is moving against the political prisoners.

Ruictions recognizes that Conor sees no other way than to make a symbolic strike against the Republic's non-recognition of their political status as prisoners in the form of a hunger strike. "To him [Ruictions], the passivity of a hunger strike is not only ineffective, but irreconcilable with the objects of the organisation which, in his view, can only be achieved by positive action" (Kosok 86). Ruictions needs and demands active resistance against the Republic's position. The hunger strike, what he sees as passive

opposition, is entirely antithetical to Ructions' view of what constitutes correct political struggle.

RUCTIONS (*desperate plea*): Conor, it's suicide – suicide! (147)

Several of the thematic binary oppositions come into play soon after Conor's decision: sacred vs. secular, active fighting vs. passive resistance, and lower class vs. bourgeois approaches to life. Ructions voices his class-based distrust of Aidan O'Leary, a man who does not come from the working class as do many of the IRA insurgents. As a distinctive other to the revolutionaries, O'Leary is viewed with suspicion about his loyalty to the cause and his motivations.

RUCTIONS (*shortly*): . . . I don't pretend to like O'Leary – not many of us do. He's not one of us, whatever he is. Not a tradesman – not a farmer – what is he? not a working man. A rebel against his own class? Bourgeois outcast, of some kind – making common cause with republicans? (140)

Ructions' distancing of O'Leary on the basis of class differentiation suggests that the split caused by this societal structure is perhaps as damaging to any future Irish unity as are the other binaries Byrne explores. Regardless of their common goal of reuniting the entire island as one nation, splits will still exist, separating the Irish and driving deep wedges into an already fractured society.

Throughout the majority of the play, Ructions consistently opposes Conor's plan to conduct a hunger strike. He is just as consistent with his disagreement over the

government's post-conquest refusal to grant political status to the IRA inmates. As Ructions learns of the official ruling on Conor's status, he is in disbelief:

RUCTIONS: They can't just chuck you in with a lot of housebreakers, abortionists, sex perverts, scum. (119)

Conor though, has come to terms with the specifics of the sentence but not acceptance of its validity.

CONOR: They can! That's going to be the fate of every political prisoner from now on. (119)

Micheál, another prisoner, recognizes the inherent injustice. He states what the others are thinking about how political status was originally gained:

MICHEÁL: Political was won very many years ago – by hunger strike: do they think we'll let it go easily as that? (119)

Byrne never tells us the official response to such a question, but it is easily assumed that the government did, indeed, believe that the prisoners would simply capitulate. After all, the people of the Republic were seemingly unconcerned about the revolutionaries as they went about their lives, much like the majority of the Irish population pre-Revolution in 1916.

Ructions, as would be expected by this point in the Act, is angered about the situation, while Conor quietly asserts his commitment to his solitary strategy of resistance.

CONOR: (*quietly, wearily*): Political treatment was won – a long time ago – by hunger strike. . . There’s no other weapon, lads. I am. I am going on hunger strike. . . Hunger strike is a one-man job. The general resistance will have to take another form. (119)

Ructions, who is awaiting his sentence, battles with his conscience over what form of resistance to take. He does not agree with Conor’s choice, but he respects his courage; Ructions wants active resistance, but he is not sure what to do.

RUCTIONS: (*To Conor*): I’m next to be convicted, I know. On Thursday next, with you, I’ll probably be convicted. But I’ll never do a hunger strike – not even if I’m ordered. (120)

The implication of Ructions’s statement is that he is ready to stand alone if need be, against the Republic, against England, against the Church, and against the IRA—if it ordered him to perform passive resistance. While Conor assures him that “No man has ever been ordered” (120), it is Ructions’ courage and arrogance that stand out. Echoes in Ructions words can be heard by the attentive audience – bringing to the cultural memory both Michael Collins and the Celtic hero Cuchullain – one man of history and one man of

myth, but both heroes in the Irish memory, specifically remembered not only for their bravery but for their action in the face of repression.

CONOR: If there were – I should stay; not to lead it – but to stop it!

RUCTIONS: Stop it! Are you mad?

CONOR: Until we know beyond a doubt who informed, and caused the raid.

(With relief.) However, he'll bring no guns; and you can't escape on promises – I'm going on. (147)

Byrne presents another perspective on the efficacy and efficiency of the debated tactics for political struggle by giving Jakey's common sense view, one of an ordinary man, an O'Caseyque figure. In this way, Byrne moves from a philosophic approach to a pragmatic one. Jakey interrogates not only the technique for political struggle, but he also challenges the legitimacy of the revolutionary movement itself. But just as Jakey distrusts anyone from a class other than the working-class, Ructions distrusts anyone in the proletariat that is not actively involved in the struggle. This intra-class distrust suggests the surrounding ubiquitous nature of the tribal dispute.

RUCTIONS: The fight goes on, until it is won.

JAKY: The fight may go on, as you say; but the revolution is over. (*To Geraghty.*) Isn't that the sacred truth, Mr. G?

Geraghty, absorbed in his own troubles, makes no reply.

JAKY: As for hunger strikin', it's played out! (130)

Jakey, in favoring the political movement from the previous generation, reflects the common attitude in the Republic towards the revolutionaries—they have seen their day; what matters now is economic survival, which is tenuous at best. Ironically, Ructions, the other fervent member of the proletariat, belongs to a movement that is marginalized from mainstream Irish society in the 1950s while it is historically honored, making him more of a living statue, a reminder of the glory of the fight for independence, than an active hero, who would continue to lead the struggle to unite Ireland. In 1950s Ireland, the struggle for most people is economic survival not political revolution.

Woven within the Ibsenlike tension of the political problem, Jakey, a long time prisoner who has no apparent overriding political allegiance, except to his own survival, illustrates O'Casey's influence. He is coarse and from the lower class, complete with the venacular. He sees no good in the fighting, especially for himself:

JAKY: Oh, yez can laugh. But I did me bit, me oul' seotia: don't forget that. I'm none o' yer peacetime soldiers. Jakey was in the thick of it, right up to the split [the Civil War]. Yez know the rest: internecine strike, brother's hand turned against the brother. But no more fightin' for Jakey! It's one thing to bate the lard out o' the foreigner; but when it comes to civil war, it couldn't be good nor lucky. . . I fought for Ireland, and not a pension. (104)

As an ordinary man, Jakey is deeply proud of his actions against the British, but he saw the horror of the Civil War, in which more Irish were killed by their fellow Irish than by

the British in the struggle for independence. His words may not be educated, but his meaning about the insanity of civil war is lucid and clear. Those around him do not, unfortunately, hear this meaning. In this legal/political structure, just as the government reduces the IRA revolutionaries to mere criminals, so the IRA reduces Jakey, who is a criminal and not a revolutionary, into an almost comic old man seemingly not to be taken seriously.

Byrne, however, uses Jakey as a Greek chorus figure, or perhaps a Cassandra, commenting on the action, but without anyone either noticing or caring. Byrne suggests that in all of the various fighting and revolution that no one spoke for the common man and woman in Ireland, that the struggle was between the Irish revolutionary elite against the British controlling elite. Jakey's quiet indictment of the inherent class structure might stand as one of the most powerful statements in the play.

In Ireland the political and the religious can rarely be separated. In *Design For A Headstone*, Byrne, in addition to illustrating the political nature of interrogation in terms of the IRA prisoners, also focuses on the Catholic Church's inquiry into their belief about the sinful quality of a hunger strike. I recognize that this play's examination of the relationship between the Church and the Republic is multi-faceted, but for the purposes of this study, I will restrict my analysis solely to that of the Church's stand that a prisoner's hunger strike is tantamount to suicide and, therefore, it is a mortal sin. Welch explains, "A priest, Fr. Maguire, puts the Catholic church's point of view to the republicans that hunger-strikers are guilty of suicide, and of sinning against the sanctity of life. . ." (151).

In his discussion of the play in its introduction in the collection *7 Irish Plays*, Hogan asserts that Byrne's honesty and clarity in examining the delicate Irish issue of the power of the Church is one of the play's foremost strengths:

What Byrne says in this play is valuable in itself, and it is also courageous. This is one of the rare Irish plays that coldly analyzes the motives and practices of the Church in Ireland, and the analysis is both accurate and unemotional. The priest here is no O'Caseyian boob or tyrant, but a literate spokesman for his point of view. Even more interesting is that Byrne has opposed the priest's view with force and clarity. (98)

The prisoners' doubts about these questions extend past the issue of the veracity of their "victory" to that of the actuality of the justice of the executed men on the outside. Byrne forces the IRA men to question the reality of their information and the substance of their belief system and how religion affects those beliefs. Indeed, he forces them to confront the function and fairness of their revolutionary paradigm. The eventual understanding that the executed men on the outside were innocent of their so-called crimes compels them into a transgressive understanding of their mistakes, a questioning of their underlying assumptions, and a confrontation with the most basic issue: have they committed injustice in their attempts to redress a perceived injustice? Byrne's plays answers unambiguously "yes."

In *Design For a Headstone* he combines explicit critique of both the political system that refused to recognize the condition of the IRA as political rather than criminal

and of the inherent theocracy that was the Republic. The church, itself, is a target of Byrne's critique. In *The Abbey Theatre: Ireland's National Theatre The First 100 Years*, Christopher Fitz-Simon speaks of the criticism of the play by the far right wing Catholic organization Marie Duce, which perceived the play to be a direct attack on the Church. Ironically, the IRA, nearly at the same time, rejected the play for being socialist (93). One of the issues that Byrne addresses in the play is the ideological connection between the Church and the IRA. This visceral response to Byrne's play demonstrates the power of its message and the sensitivity of the audience to that meaning. His treatment of the official religion of the Republic in its complexity, in many ways, foregrounds the coming multi-layered, binary nature of the conflicts in the troubles: Protestant/Catholic; British/Irish; Northern Irish/Southern Irish; and violence/victims. As in the soon to arrive Troubles, these binary oppositions underscore and amplify, in a similar manner, but with a quieter tone than the drama of the Troubles, the seething, unseen ferment bubbling under the 1950s Irish society.

In Act I, Byrne foregrounds the tension between the prisoners and the Church that develops later in the play. Father Maguire's claim – "The state holds power under God; and an act of rebellion is a sin" (115) establishes the theocratic nature of the Irish Republic and the doubly powerful hold on the minds and soul of the Irish that it wields. A citizen must obey the government, in whatever it wishes, or that person is deemed not only a lawbreaker in secular terms but also an offender in sacred terms. Aidan, who has maintained his Catholic beliefs, nevertheless sees the priest's claims as mere trappings, no more than the government's wishes being played out by their toadies in the Irish

Catholic Church. To Aidan, this hand-in-hand connection is the real heresy, the actual obscenity at work.

AIDAN: If spiritual pride be my damnation, it will have been erected as a barrier against the rubbish masquerading as Catholic doctrine. The word of God has been mangled between the teeth of His bishops. Yet, I have kept faith in the Church. I claim it as her triumph that she survives all opposition; and as a sign of her divinity, that she even survives the devoted efforts of her ministers. (116)

Here Aidan opposes Ructions, who has clearly severed ties with the Church, and sees religion as equally an enemy to the movement as are the governments of the Republic and England.

Aidan still holds fast to his sacred beliefs. He is unwilling to go as far as Ructions and view the revolution in solely secular terms; this opposition forms the basis for the tension between the IRA and Ructions. Ructions sees O'Leary as supporting a Catholic Ireland, one which Ructions has previously opposed, especially in light of his Marxist leanings.

RUCTIONS: I don't want his Catholic Ireland – nor his hierarchical society – and all that Thomas Aquinas stuff. (141)

Ruictions might deny any desire for establishing a stratified culture, but his public pronouncements about an idealized egalitarian nondiscriminatory society are undercut by his own proclamation of O'Leary as an other. Ruictions proves to be as aware of differing class status as are others of the political and religious divides.

In a condescending way, Ruictions also claims that all political messages must be made on a level that the uneducated, the O'Caseyesque characters, would be able to understand and endorse. He asserts that in order for the men to support and win the battle, the average Irish man and woman must grasp the message and then embrace it.

RUCTIONS: . . . [the] Republic must be given a meaning the Jakeys understand.

The vision of God is not enough. Pie in the sky tomorrow won't do – it must be edible, here and now. (141)

The deeply anti-Catholic Marxist view of politics is not one that was likely to be embraced by any significant segment of 1950s Irish Catholic society, even though Ruictions strongly claims its necessity.

RUCTIONS: Live, horse, and you'll get grass, in the pasture land of paradise.

But Karl Marx preached it, here and now. The Christian churches have had their chance – wasted their talents. Not until Marx came, like a thief in the night, did Mother Church bestir herself . . . (141)

Byrne presents a passionate and dialectic argument about a religious vs materialist view of the world. His paradigmatic political stance argues that when reality, as per his

worldview, is revealed to the masses, they will necessarily convert to that perspective.

Ructions argues that for the ordinary Irish, when they realize that they can gain practical, economic benefits, rather than hope for a reward in heaven, that they will inevitably move to support the Marxist materialist position. A full belly and a roof over one's head win the minds and support of the proletariat.

Father Maguire overhears this argument and furiously rejects Ructions' position. Given the ideological intertwining of the Catholic Church and the Government, it is logical that the priest would denounce Ructions. How else can the status quo be maintained? He is compelled to denounce Conor's hunger strike as suicide in religious terms, which then undercuts the revolutionary thrust of the action. Maguire does cast doubt in Aidan's mind but ironically reinforces Ructions' argument.

Because Ructions rejects the efficacy of the hunger-strike—but not for religious reasons—he sees the action as nothing more than wasting a good man's life. Ructions believes that Conor can still be useful as an active leader in the prison. Ructions attacks Maguire's religious argument by going to the heart of the crucifixion of Christ. Ructions angrily questions if Christ accepted the status that Rome imposed on him and if His death was an execution or suicide (147).

By making a statement that was designed to upset Father Maguire's thinking, Ructions converts the disagreement from religion to a politics. He argues that Christ's life and teachings were themselves revolutionary and that Christ did not accept the status quo of the time. Of course, Father Maguire is shocked at what he views to be heretical speech—he cannot see or acknowledge Ructions' logic. If he did, he would be forced to admit that his stance is as much political and ethical as it is religious, and that he is a

functionary of the current theocratic Irish government as well as a member of the Catholic Church.

As the confrontation progresses, Maguire's incomprehension at Ructions' religious views impels the priest to threaten Ructions with being struck down by God for his words, a threat that not only does not frighten Ructions but also reinforces his righteous indignation towards the Church (147). Ructions, hearing that Father Maguire has pronounced a hunger strike to be the same as suicide, becomes infuriated and modifies his position. His frustration with the Church's complicity with the views of the Republic metamorphizes into outright anger. Ructions sees that Maguire's views prove the government/church complicity against the IRA. Because of the interweaving of church and state, Maguire's views do represent the actuality of the Government's and the Church's position on hunger strikes. Their dialogue ends with Ructions denouncing this connection:

RUCTIONS: The end may justify the means.

MAGUIRE: No, no. Sin is an act of will. The object of volition is not only the end in view but also the means chosen.

A few prisoners stand nearby, openly listening in.

RUCTIONS (*angrily*): More subtleties! More snares! Church and state, moving, hand in hand, to crush the soul of a single man – because he rose up from his knees – because he struggled to his feet, and dared to raise his eyes to the light! And this you call your sacred, bounden duty. Toward whom, toward what? Toward God or man? Is this the tribute due to Caesar by

Holy Mother Church – or the Scarlet Whore of Babylon giving the beast his money’s worth? (148)

Ruictions sees the Church and the Republic as enemies of a true united Ireland; hence, “The discussions on the justification and the effectiveness of a hunger strike are directly linked to the role of the Church in this matter” (Kosok 86). This last bit of dialogue caused an uproar among extreme Catholic fundamentalists in the form of Maria Duce, seeing the lines as a direct attack by the playwright on the institution of the Church itself. Kosok points out that Ruictions’ views would be more easily accepted in the current political and religious climate in Ireland and that it is not certain that this piece of dialogue was actually kept in the production at the Abbey Theatre:

However much one might agree from a present-day position, it is hardly credible that the last sentence^{xviii} was actually spoken on the Abbey stage in 1950, and it may well have been gently removed from the script. Like the discussions on other subjects, this controversy remains unresolved, underlining the play’s quality as a true platform of conflicting views. What renders all this eminently political is the prominent role the Church was given in the Free State and the early Republic, as fixed in the Constitution of Eire of 1937. (87)

Whether or not this dialogue remained intact in the performances at the Abbey Theatre, it clearly demonstrates the extraordinary power that the Church had in the Republic of

Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s. The confrontation between Father Maguire and Ructions—Ructions’s Marxist rebuke of Maguire’s Irish Catholicism—builds to a near physical battle, which would certainly have been deeply shocking in Ireland in the 1950s. As a result of this symbolic near confrontation (frighteningly foreshadowing one component of the violent Troubles of the 1970s-1990s), Conor diffuses the tension and denies both men their political and philosophic stands (147).

Byrne’s appeal to the core of the Irish Catholic dogma in contrast to the Republican attempts at revolution is one of the most important themes of the play. Hogan explains, “The strength of the play is in its theme – a discussion of how the Church is at odds with Republicanism . . . The prison priest opposes the [hunger] strike as a sin, and just before Egan’s death refuses him absolution and breaks him down”^{xix} (75). It is the Church’s counterrevolutionary stance that instills deeper conflict into the play, one that reflects the simmering political issues that would erupt in two decades time.

A consequence of the nearly eight hundred years of control by Britain is the development of the attitude of tribal loyalty, of a mandatory loyalty towards the Irish by the Irish. One of the worst unofficial offenses that an Irish man or woman could commit was the act of informing to those in power; this extralegal act was seen as the most extreme act of infidelity that was possible. It was a profane mortal sin. To even be suspected of being an informant was often enough to carry with it serious and possibly fatal consequences. Geraghty, a guard who has been brought into the fold to supply weapons, falls under suspicion as a potential informer. After telling Geraghty that Ructions also has received two years in the criminal section, he informs the guard that they need to discuss the escape (124). For Ructions, the man of action, this is business as

usual, but tempered with the need to check on the guard who the IRA uses for information and supplies to ensure that he has remained loyal to the cause but not to the Republic. Byrne foreshadows the danger Geraghty faces by acting as a double agent for the IRA. The IRA demands a higher loyalty to their image of Ireland than to the Republic, which they view as a sham. To the IRA Ireland is not a national entity represented by the Republic—to them the current government might as well be the English government. To the Republicans, Ireland is a larger paradigm than the Republic; it is a cultural and historical construct that incorporates all of the island, not solely the southern Republic formed from the partition and seen by the IRA as being weak and formed in the image of their former conquerors, Great Britain.

When Ructions takes the opportunity to question Geraghty, he acts as the official representative, albeit of the IRA, but his interrogation techniques mirror those of the government. His implied threats, however, carry far greater import than a possible jail sentence from the government. If viewed an informer, Geraghty will be sanctioned and killed. Geraghty is aware of the risk.

RUCTIONS: (*adamant*): When and how are you going to get the stuff up to them?

GERAGHTY: Ye mean—the guns? Ye know bloody well they're [the prison authorities] watchin' me. (127)

Geraghty feels pressure from both sides. No matter what he does now, he will be observed, in the prison and on the outside. He has forfeited all privacy by becoming part

of the supply chain for the prison break attempt. He is under watch as much as any prisoner in a Foucault-like panopticon. Either the authorities or the IRA are likely to catch him; no matter who, the results will be terrible.

Ruictions emphasizes that Geraghty's risk is from the Republicans and the struggle is to maintain his loyalty. While a danger of being discovered by the government authorities remains, the consequences would be far less than if the IRA deems him to be an informer. Ruictions even denies the existence of any danger to Geraghty from the officials, thereby emphasizing the extremity of his risk from the IRA.

RUCTIONS: There isn't a single danger to you—except the one.

GERAGHTY: (*apprehensively*): Danger?

RUCTIONS: (*grimly*): Our lads. (128)

Byrne shows interrogation and implied sanction at work. Geraghty knows that the very worst that would happen to him would be to be considered an informer, bringing a sentence of death, perhaps after torture, typically in the form of knee-capping. After applying emotional pressure, Ruictions employs an ironic religious reference to further amplify Geraghty's plight:

RUCTIONS (*turns away*): Please yourself.

GERAGHTY: Now look! [pleading his loyalty] I swear to God.

RUCTIONS (*washing hands of it*): You haven't got to convince me! I think you're the soul of honor! (129)

Byrne's irony is double layered: Ructions plays the part of the good cop as he attempts to convince Geraghty he is on his side, a position that Ructions certainly experienced in his own interrogations by the Republic's authorities. The second irony is the Christian reference to Pontius Pilate washing his hands of the execution of Christ—for Ructions who has disavowed the Church, it is interesting that he is willing to use the same tactics on Geraghty, who is obviously still a good Catholic.

In Act III, the IRA interrogation of innocent men continues as they turn their attention to Jakey, again a mistake assumption of guilt, but this new belief throws light on their previous mistake about the identity of the informer.

TOMMY: If it was Jakey who gave us away – Geraghty was – a murder!

RUCTIONS (*indignant horror*): Mistake! What a word for murder!

KEVIN (*reproof*): Not Murder! It was an execution. (161)

Kevin is unable to place personal responsibility for this death on the people who ordered it. Instead, these deaths are more like collateral damage, the present international euphemism for the all too frequent deaths of innocents in a military action. In this action, by abandoning responsibility for the actions ordered from those above in the structural hierarchy, Kevin essentially abandons personal autonomy, and blames all consequences on the orders he has to follow. This kind of voluntary relinquishment of personal agency, especially in the 1950s, would resonate in a European audience of being disturbingly similar to the excuses given by the Nazis who claimed that they were only following

orders. In these actions, if agency is relinquished, then moral responsibility, ironically, is amplified, not eliminated.

Ruictions will not go along blindly, refusing to assign external and internal responsibility and guilt without verifiable evidence. His personal code of honor dictates that he faces head on whatever happens and not avoid responsibility for mistakes. While perhaps the most committed revolutionary, Ruictions is also fiercely independent in his thinking.

RUCTIONS (*appalled*): Then – it *was* – our lads! I thought it was the specials.

My God! Do you realize that he brought them in – Geraghty! – gave me six guns?

KEVIN (*defensively*): We're not responsible for decisions made outside in HQ.

(161)

Ruictions relentlessly interrogates his fellow IRA men, refusing to give them or himself absolution from these crimes. Responsibility must be assigned and acknowledged or taint the revolution. The IRA would be conducting itself in the same post-conquest manner as the government.

RUCTIONS: And George? What about George? (*In default of reply.*) Well?

Was he – ? Was he – ? (*Nobody answers.*) I see – another mistake!

KEVIN (*low voice, guiltily defensive*): HQ.

RUCTIONS (*attacks Kevin*): And *now*, your teeth are sunk in Jakey – with two mistakes to your credit! (161)

Byrne, in his condemnation of these “mistakes,” foreshadows Jakey’s inevitable fate – he will be killed, another innocent bystander in this bloody war.^{xx} Kevin suggests that if Jakey produces the guns, he will be fine, but as Kevin stated earlier, he has no control over what is decided by HQ. If it sees Jakey as a weakness, it will eliminate him.

In the midst of their still extant plan for a prison escape, the religious tension that is a near constant part of the fabric of Irish society thrusts forward. Aidan memorializes Conor as a fallen hero in a rousing political speech in which he speaks of Conor’s sacrifice and that the struggle for true freedom does not come from the speaking of politicians but from the actions of ordinary men in prison (162). The speech is ironic, because while he distances himself from “politicians,” he speaks and acts as one himself. This tone suggests as much a political stump speech as it does a general rallying his troops to combat. His emphasis on Irish history and patriotism, which he implies comes from the inmates, not the authorities, is clearly enunciated:

AIDAN : You will remember Thomas Ashe’s words: “Let me carry
Thy Cross for Ireland, Lord.”^{xxi} Once again, an Irishman has taken up that
precious burden. Go ndeanaidh Dia trocaire ar a anam.^{xxii} (162)

This seemingly-inspiring speech rouses the men to action but not in the way Aidan planned. Unlike the famous Crispian, Band of Brothers speech in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, in which the young king stirs his undermanned troops to fighting spirit against a foe of nearly overwhelming odds, Aidan succeeds in inciting Ructions’ anti-religious fervor. In

a surprise almost throwaway moment, Aidan reveals that he is meeting with the prison chaplain so that a Catholic mass will be observed for Conor Egan (162-163).

In a brief moment, Aidan undercuts his oratorical advantage; he causes Ructions to undercut sarcastically the order for a Catholic funeral observance.

RUCTIONS: (*calls aloud*): For men must work, women weep, soldiers must pray! Are these the orders of the day? (163)

In addition to the religious turmoil, Ructions still has the problem of the identity of the informer. Ironically, the man dismissed as only an ordinary small-time criminal with no political importance has his own suspicions about the identity of the informant. Jakey conducts his own interrogation on this question. After Conor leaves, Act II concludes with Jakey reading a letter that Conor received, and he, the man no one believes has the capacity or intellect to understand anything, realizes, in anger, who the real informer is.

JAKEY: (*Having read*): The flamin' bitch! His own wife! . . . (149)

Jakey, the O'Caseyesque character, the ordinary criminal on the lower rungs of society, now sees that even the leaders of the movement can be blind about the people around them. Byrne undercuts everyone and their misconceptions. No one, except Jakey, who will also be an innocent victim of this violence, sees with clarity or understanding. In this extraordinary focus on Jakey as the sole seer of truth, Byrne reveals the myopic vision of the adversaries in this convoluted political struggle.

Jakey, removed from the center of the political battle as an ordinary man, sees through the obfuscations and realizes the enormity of what has happened. First Jakey listens to Mrs. Egan's wishes for normalcy. It is clear that she wants nothing more than to have her husband with her at home (153). This passage might be read as merely an expression of bourgeois social attitudes, but Byrne presents instead a fundamental human need for love. Mrs. Egan understands the revolutionary world, which her husband inhabits, and the demands that society places on both him and her, but she also has wishes and desires – simply to have their home together. This may be seen as a bourgeois attitude, or it may simply be a need for love and comfort in a time of turmoil and conflict.

Like a detective, Jakey sees that Mrs. Egan's brother-in-law, one Charley Burke, was the one she tipped off, and he was the one who caused the shootings, without Mrs. Egan's knowledge of these fatal consequences.

JAKY (*pursues relentlessly*): . . . Was Pat Geraghty an execution? . . . There's a man walkin' the streets now, with a cheery nod – and a smile for all – and plenty o' money in his pocket – blood money – the price o' two – [naming the informer] Sergeant buckaleero Charley! – yer lovely brother-in-law! (153)

Mrs. Egan's response to Jakey elucidates her ignorance of the political ramifications of these events. She vehemently denies his complicity (154). Mrs. Egan is both naive about Charley Burke's culpability and unable to accept the reality of her actions and their consequent reactions—she wanted only to help her husband, and in doing so, put in place

a murderous set of actions. The guns are not delivered for the attempted breakout, the escape is initially foiled, and Pat Geraghty is executed as a traitor.

The discussion of these deaths reflects neither reality nor accuracy. Often the characters make assumptions based on their socio-cultural/political context about the traitor. The IRA men assume the informer must be an insider, and none of them suspect information could have flowed from a wife trying to help her husband. The deeply patriarchal Irish society of the 1950s saw women as merely an adjunct of men, in no way capable of such actions. The heated discussion between Jakey and Mrs. Egan continues, filled with potentially violent anger and desperation. Mrs. Egan, desperate about the safety of her husband Conor on his hunger strike, implores Jakey to take Conor a letter (155). By making this request, Mrs. Egan places Jakey centrally in the middle of a potentially internecine battle between elements of the IRA and of a larger war between the IRA and the Republic. Jakey is deeply fearful of the possible consequences of accepting the charge to deliver the letter—in terms of the prison and the I.R.A. Jakey, however, is caught in a two-layered trap. As many of the men of his time, reacting to the still Victorian Irish attitude towards women, he expresses sympathy to her; he also reveals his worry about his own safety (155). As an ordinary criminal, Jakey learned long ago that he must look after his self-interest, because the government, the Church, and the IRA all ignore the plight of people like him. Jakey realizes in deep discomfort that he could very easily be the next one killed in a case of mistaken identity and misidentified guilt, the crucial irony that Byrne builds and which will soon resonate at the end of the play. Jakey dies because of the erroneous belief that he is an informer. In this highly-charged emotional and political environment Jakey's caution cannot save him.

Mrs. Egan is equally unable to save her husband. Phelan, a warder, gives Jakey this prediction, which acts as accurate foreshadowing:

JAKEY (*suddenly*): Give us one o' your cigarettes.

PHELAN (*leaves forms to give cigarette, unwillingly*): Ah, very! But her man is not going out of here – until he goes out in a box! (155)

Jakey's determined interrogation of Mrs. Egan would have made an investigator proud, but he exhibits empathy for her rather than the traditional hatred for an informer. Byrne successfully undercuts and undermines social and political expectations about guilt and reprisals. In his empathy towards Mrs. Egan, Jakey reveals the most inherent decency of any of the characters.

No one theoretic approach suffices as a basis for examination in this study; however, several literary theories apply. Not only does *Design For A Headstone* deal with class and social issues, but it also examines women's place in 1950s' Irish society, and as such, if desired, a gendered examination of the text would work well. Byrne, as he demonstrates in *Little City*, in which he argues against the Church's anti-feminist position about abortion, is not anti-feminist; rather, through his construction that the IRA members, themselves belonging to a patriarchal organization in an overtly patriarchal society, treat Mrs. Egan differently than they would a man in the same position, demonstrates the demeaning views towards women held by most of the power structures in Ireland. Hers is not a privileged circumstance, but one that is reduced by lowered expectations towards women. That the actual informer is a woman escapes the men, and

even when they recognize her identity as the true informer, they think that she does what men expect of a woman. After the discovery, Ructions argues for her execution, which makes sense for his character, since he most often challenges the status quo of politics and religion:

RUCTIONS (*angry*): George! – And Geraghty! Yes, by God! she *should* be – she *should* be executed. (177)

Ructions' vengeful cry for retribution against Mrs. Egan for her direct complicity in the destruction of the breakout and of the mistaken killings of the other men is as vicious as it is consistent with a contemporary political view that would, in the context of a revolutionary organization, demand that the sexes be treated equally. Jakey, however, argues against that view with a Victorian/Catholic perspective on women that had not lost its hold on the mindset of most Irish—he argues for clemency for Mrs. Egan:

JAKEY : All that poor woman done was try to save what she lost – her man.
(177)

While Jakey dies at the play's end, nothing is ordered for Mrs. Egan, and we can assume that she lives. She is spared because in the mindset of a deeply male-dominated society, it was inconceivable that a woman be held responsible for her political actions and executed as a traitor.^{xxiii}

The second element of the triad in my study is that of imprisonment: I will examine the physical, the metaphoric, and the philosophic elements of confinement in

Design For A Headstone. The first and most important element of imprisonment is that of setting—the play takes place wholly within the confines of a jail like Mountjoy Prison. Within that structure, the audience sees a limited space in which the actors can function. The setting, in realistic and naturalistic fashion, reflects through verisimilitude the claustrophobic nature of a prison and its effect on inmates. The entire play takes place in the prison with no break. It is unremitting in its application of the power of the set. It forces the audience, for the space of the two hours or so of the performance, to realize the limited space that the actors, that the characters, have to function in. The characters, the inmates, have to find ways to survive within the confines of the small cells they share and the small community spaces. Not only do the walls of the set contribute to enforce the closed in feeling, but the guards add a level of reinforcement to the claustrophobic atmosphere. Physical space is confined, and the inmates are constantly monitored. Their physical actions and behaviors are not their own—they exist in a dictated and controlled world—only in their minds can they find a modicum of freedom.

We can assume from the setting description that the prison is filled because we see several prisoners “*in the triple cell; that is, two cells made into one by the removal of dividing wall*” (100). Such a rearrangement of cell space would likely be done to allow the inclusion of more inmates into the same space. While the play would be presented in a standard playing space at the Abbey Theatre, the audience would still see and experience the closed in limitations inherent in a prison: lack of personal space and lack of privacy. They would also see men who do their best to maintain some semblance of individuality in a place designed to repress and crush such feelings.

In his exhortation of his men, in his attempt to speak as a political and military leader who must inspire his troops, Aidan invokes a figure of grandeur from their near recent and glorious revolutionary past, Michael Collins (120). Aidan's tone and manner of speech are indicative of the paramilitary reality of the prisoners—these are no mere thugs or thieves—they are men dedicated to the goals of the IRA listening to a military briefing.

AIDAN: In the last thirty years lives have been given on this issue—
political treatment for political prisoners. Those lives were not given in
vain: political treatment was won. (120)

This point is crucial—Aidan's statement foregrounds the political status previously gained by struggle, now in danger of being revoked. In this way, the Republic seeks to put the issue of Republican struggle in the north into the past, to become a nation at peace and with hopes to enter a more contemporary status. For many in the country, however, this time is not a liminal moment for movement away from the struggle but rather a time of continuing, if muted, revolutionary activity.

Aidan continues his exhortation to his troops and reminds them of the very long Irish memory and their potential shame if they fail:

AIDAN: “. . . win we must, or know to our everlasting shame that ours was the generation that suffered the loss of a principle that was purchased as a great price and assured to us in blood” (120).

Aidan, of course, refers to the generation who fought with England in the failed Easter Uprising and in the War for Independence. Aidan frames their struggle in historic language in order to keep the larger national Irish struggle in the forefront of the IRA men's minds.

Demonstrating another example of the imprisonment of the past that inhibits some of the inmates from looking forward, Jakey speaks of the great days of the revolution. In this way, Byrne not only illustrates Jakey's O'Caseyesque character, but he also interrogates the IRA and its tactics. Byrne does not support the IRA unquestioningly; he presents their struggle, but then he undercuts its purity through Jakey, the O'Caseyesque chorus figure—the man who represents ordinary proletarian Irish, with no particular current political goals. Jakey comments on the differences between the Republican movement during the War for Independence and now:

JAKY (*sits on table to eat*): Time was when the I.R.A. was good gas. No better! Fightin' for freedom, on the run, flyin' columns, and all to that. (130)

The flying columns of which he speaks are the fighting groups organized by Michael Collins, to hit targets and then to get away quickly, and to move rapidly throughout the island. Jakey using the term “gas” suggests that he completely enjoyed the action, that the excitement of those times amplified life for him.

JAKY: [speaking with Geraghty] . . . When you and I were seventeen. But that

was a revolution. Ye had the Countess, and Maud Gonne – and Dev sittin’ up in the oul’ Ford, and she goin’ goodo round the town, the same as it might be a motorcar. But sure, that was a hundred years ago! *Things is very different now.* [my emphasis] People is too hard put to live: hard set to get the bit to put in their mouth at all, with everything two prices; they haven’t the time to be fightin’ for freedom, careering about the place, romancin’ about a republic. I’m tellin’ yez now, yez missed the bus. Them days is gone. (130)

Jakey is not simply lamenting about a lost golden age—he is making a serious point about the difficult economic times that most Irish face simply to make a living.

Additionally, the fight for freedom and the concurrent Civil War happened nearly three decades prior. The bold leaders and the romance of the cause have long since perished for the ordinary Irish, to be replaced by an attempt to eke out a living, no matter how hard that might be. This economic certainty puts the IRA at a definite remove from the majority of the Irish population, and it distances the activity of the revolutionary 1910s and 1920s to a removed mythic past. Those days were truly vanished.

In addition to the actual prison setting, a metaphorical larger incarceration is suggested by the Republic’s embracing of its postconquest circumstances, indeed, being imprisoned by them. The Republic’s postconquest mimicking of the justice system of its former colonizer and conqueror, Great Britain, is expressed clearly in the attempts of some of the inmates, members of the Irish Republican Army, to achieve status as political prisoners while serving time as apparent ordinary criminals in a prison in the Republic. They search for political self-identification in an attempt at political empowerment—an

argument to the world that they were once political figures who believed their cause to be just; hence, Byrne, in his play, predates, examines, and debates the struggles that many prisoners in Northern Ireland make in the 1970s-1990s. In his theatrical examination, Byrne does not make excuses for miscarriages of justice nor for the brutal elements of the IRA's attempts to gain political status as prisoners in the context of their larger attempt to unite the island as one country in the 1950s^{xxiv}. *Design For A Headstone* is complex with a frenzied mixture of tone and theme. Welch explains that the play is a multi-layered, deeply interesting and a crucially important Irish play of the 20th Century (151).

A post-conquest conflict exists at the very opening of the play, when one of the prisoners, Michael, conducts a lesson on Irish Gaelic, though the Irish native language has now been supplanted by English. The audience's acceptance of the 1950s stagnant political situation is jolted; the play interrogates the audience and foregrounds the importance of the rapidly fading original Irish Celtic culture. Ructions establishes quickly that he does not think highly of the modern Irishman. He not too subtly suggests that the contemporary Irish have lost the spirit for battle, that the courage that led to the Easter Uprising and the War For Independence have faded into complacency. He first attacks the lack of spirit and then addresses the class distinctions that are held over as part of the British influence on Irish society when he discusses the playing of either chess or draughts [checkers] in prison. Ructions wishes that more Irish were revolutionaries than chess players, insinuating that the mere playing of a game was wasteful given the political circumstances of the time (103). Ructions implies that the lack of warriors in 1950s Ireland connects to the placid political torpor of Irish society. Ructions knows that

Aidan will be unable to resist this challenge – Aidan falls for Ructions’ verbal chess gambit and replies:

AIDEN: (*rises to bait*): What do you mean?

RUCTIONS: There are only two boards in this place, and either will do to play draughts. One is reserved for the six who play chess – the gentlemen – and one is shared by a hundred men, the proletariat, who plays draughts. (103)

Ructions asserts that the inmates are imprisoned not only in the actual jail but also in their mimicking of the post-conquest values that Ireland adopted from Great Britain. Even in prison, the gentlemanly is valued higher than the proletarian.

As in his other plays, Byrne interrogates Irish societal paradigms including prejudice. Byrne questions Ireland’s problems, including those that were typically unspoken, such as bigotry.^{xxv} One of the inmates, Bayer, is a Jewish man, who speaks very little English and becomes a target for the all-too-common discrimination:

PHELAN (*to Geraghty*): The poor old fellow got nothing to eat.

Geraghty with a gesture, leaves responsibility to Jakey.

JAKY: The customer is always right; but what’s that danglin’ there in his left hand?

PHELAN: He can’t eat it: he’s a Jew.

JAKY: A Jewman, whah! (*Mock welcome.*) The hard man! How are ye doin’?

(*To others.*) Sure, I know him well. (*Banters Jew.*) Didn’t I often lend you money?

Jakey, in other circumstances, is seen as the common-man voice of reason. In this aspect of life, in relationship to the killings, Jakey demonstrates the societal problem of bigotry. Bayer, with his extremely limited grasp of English, does not comprehend the anti-Semitism that Jakey aims at him. The bigotries of the outer society continue within the inner hierarchy of the inmates. Phelan explains that Bayer is in prison because he was charged with a currency criminal charge. Jakey, in his response, affirms his bigotry towards Jews, as well as implicating the Church in being financially corrupt (131). In suggesting noncomprehension of Bayer's dietary needs, Jakey is being deceitful. He understands the situation, but he refuses to recognize Bayer's cultural necessities; in this way, Jakey gains power. A nearly powerless figure in society—a convicted criminal of no real note—but in prison, through the expression of his bigotry, he raises his status over the unfortunate Bayer.

Interestingly, for Geraghty, class rather than religion plays the major consideration in his view of Bayer. Bayer is a member of a higher group—the educated—and the guard dislikes that Bayer is compelled to perform hard physical labor. For Geraghty, class is one of the main demarcations of importance in society.

GERAGHTY: It's a common disgrace to have an educated man like that
out in the woodyard choppin' blocks. (134)

In an accurate reflection of bourgeois society, Geraghty believes that the proper work for an educated man is to use his mind and not be forced to commingle physically with the

common men. In the outside world, Geraghty would see himself as positioned below Bayer, regardless of religion; ironically, even though Geraghty is not a formally educated man, by his employment as a warden he rises above Bayer in the prison.

Following the discourse on class, Byrne turns to Irish anti-feminism. Conor, knowing that he will conduct the hunger strike, decides to write to his wife. Ructions and Jakey speak with Conor; in this scene, Byrne interrogates the male/female divide in Ireland that was even more virulent than Irish anti-Semitism in a passage that exemplifies the 1950s patriarchal Irish attitude towards women:

JAKY: I've a terrible dread of doin't anythin' final. I'd trust no woman – except me mother. (*To Conor, for confirmation.*) Isn't that right, general? Queer cattle, they are – say one thing, and mean another. (136)

In addition to representing the common bigotry towards the Jewish, Jakey also shows the all-too-familiar Irish male distrust of women. His anti-feminist attitude, with the exception of his mother, speaks to the then working class Irish madonna/whore view of women. In Jakey's view of society, women are either sainted mothers never to be spoken badly of or worthless whores to be condemned.

CONOR (*with significance*): I trust my wife completely: when she says a thing, she means it. (136)

Conor does not hold the anti-female attitude that was prevalent, but Byrne imbues the passage with irony and foreshadowing as we will discover that it is, indeed, Mrs. Egan who is the informer. Her actions are not motivated by politics; she makes a misguided attempt to save her husband. Byrne adds a third level to his examination of the prejudices that imprison the Irish in the 1950s: that of the ubiquitous Protestant/Catholic divide.

Jakey pushes the conversation one level further into religious prejudice:

JAKY (by way of excuse): Ay, well, my woman's a Protestant. How can I marry her – and she holdin' with divorce, and all? Strikin' at the very roots of family life! (136)

Conor disagrees with Jakey. The reality is that Jakey, a career criminal, not much of a father, threatens the foundations of family life more by refusing to marry the mother of his children than if he had shattered the Irish political oppositional binary by marriage with a Protestant woman.^{xxvi}

The third leg of the triad of the extended metaphor of this study is that of execution; typically ordered killings would seem likely to function in a post-conquest context, in which the formerly dominant power's legal structure still affects legal and court proceedings. While that will be seen to be accurate in *The Quare Fellow*, this approach does not succeed wholly in *Design For A Headstone*. It is important to note that the post-conquest paradigm has a similar, but not complete, application for this play; Byrne's Ibsen-like realism and his inherent concern for the overall effect of these killing

on people speaks to his humanism, which must be taken into account in a judgment and analysis of the play.

In *Design For A Headstone*, the executions that occur are both suicide and homicide. Conor commits suicide, taking his own life in the act of the hunger strike, that political tool based on the earlier Celtic troscad; here the point of the killing is aimed like a metaphoric arrow at the heart of the Republic, seen here as a post-conquest reproduction of sorts of Britain. The actual death seems to have little effect on the government. The prisoners continue to conduct hunger strikes, while the Republic continues to deny their claim for political status. The IRA orders the killing of innocent men, acts that are deemed to be mistakes, but they are undeniably homicides—more murder than political action.

The IRA orders the killing of several men, whom they mistakenly identify as informers. This implicit critique of the actions of the IRA caused Republican displeasure with the play, but Byrne is unflinching in his portrayal of these wrongs. When Jakey mercilessly questions Mrs. Egan, the actual informant, it becomes clear that others have died in error. Jakey demonstrates astute perception about Mrs. Egan and her involvement in the deaths of George and Geraghty, going so far as to ask her if Geraghty was executed (153). Of course, the answer is that the deaths of both men were executions, ordered for what was believed to be their crime of informing to the government about the guns for the attempted breakout. Byrne's refusal to apologize for their mistake, to cast it in a romantic light, or to explain their deaths as the unforeseen fortunes of war creates a paradigm shift in Irish drama—the executions are not by the government, with the IRA seen as victims, but by the IRA, and mistaken at that, with the revolutionaries seen in the

wrong. Certainly Byrne was brave in demonstrating this critique, one that would be seen far more favorably in the post-Troubles 21st century Ireland, than in the pre-Troubles nearly static country, whose ubiquitous underlying tensions with the North and with Britain were present but not forgotten.

An example of Byrne's treatment of these executions is seen in the dialogue soon following the mysterious George's death. The men discover that George, one of their men on the outside, has been killed, supposedly as Jakey says as "...an informer". (143) The audience understands that the killing is an IRA execution, but as we later find out, a mistake—George was innocent, as Ructions maintains. While violence is endemic in this world of revolution, the fact of a man unjustly accused and executed undercuts the justness of the cause. Due process does not exist in this realm. If accused of being an informer or traitor, then conviction and execution soon follow. Jakey first believes that George was guilty, but Conor also maintains George's innocence, a speech imbued by Byrne with anticipatory dramatic irony. The audience has had the suspicion of Conor's wife briefly planted in their minds—a seed that blossoms into bitter vegetation at the end of the play.

CONOR: No, no, no, no! I couldn't – I couldn't believe it of George. – I'd sooner believe it of my wife! George never! (144)

The IRA prisoners' suspicions alight on Warder Geraghty, who was supposed to deliver guns for the prison break but who fails. The prisoners assume that his failure to deliver the promised weapons shows that he must be some part of a trap. They assert that

Geraghty knows that the mysterious George was murdered. They believe the killer was Jakey; by implication, Geraghty may have been complicit in its commission. When confronted by Conor, Geraghty, incapacitated by fear, capable only of stammering, unconvincing answers, is unable to offer a strong defense (145). For the IRA Geraghty, a terrified and weak man, and his silence about Jakey and the lack of guns, are the apparent evidence they need to convict him. Aware of his impending peril, Geraghty pleads for mercy, an entreaty that will not bring clemency, only merciless disregard from the very men who tried to use him to gain weapons. Without purpose, seen as a weakness, and knowing too much, Geraghty's execution is inevitable. Another innocent will die in the political struggle. After he exits, Ructions and Conor confer and realize that Geraghty will be no help in the attempted prison break, which constitutes a major failure after accepting I.R.A. money and making promises that will not be forgiven.

RUCTIONS (*insistent*): I know he had them – then lost his nerve, when he heard the news about George.

CONOR (*quietly*): He had no guns: he'll bring no guns: there'll be no escape. (147)

“No escape” carries two meanings: the primary significance is the lack of a prison break by the inmates, or if still attempted without proper support and material, it will be one more doomed Irish revolutionary gesture. The secondary implication is the inevitability of the ordered execution of Geraghty. As a now interrogated traitor, Geraghty is

imprisoned by the imminence of his coming IRA sanction—execution. No one escapes accusation or complication of the consequences of this failure.

In Act III, scene 2, Aidan reports that Connor has died, but he lessens the news by claiming that political victory has been won through this sacrifice – a claim that is, at best, optimistic, and at the worst, delusional. While an act of choice, as explained earlier, Connor’s death is intended to be a weapon in a political, revolutionary struggle—hence it can also be seen as an indirect execution, which in this case, benefited the state because of Connor’s failure. Aidan, needing to claim victory from tragedy, even though he has no empirical evidence to support his curious optimism about the man’s death, insists that Connor was victorious. He neglects to see that Ructions’ return might simply be a bureaucratic action, with no political meaning, or that it might mean the Governor simply refuses to deal with the IRA and their demands. His insistence on declaring victory without any empirical evidence suggests either a man caught in emotional delusion or one who is Machiavellian in his manipulation of the facts.

That victory was not won becomes clear with Ructions’ return. Only obfuscation and uncertainty prevail. Political spin becomes a kind of Kafkaesque nightmare.

AIDAN (*to Ructions*): You know about Connor? (*Ructions nods.*) Of course, it’s terrible – but wonderful that he won.

RUCTIONS: Did he? The Governor didn’t say that to me.

AIDAN: Nothing about political treatment?

RUCTIONS: Nothing! My sentence is suspended. I asked him for how long. He couldn’t even tell me that. Just – suspended. So, for all I know I go back

again tomorrow. (159)

This legalistic imposition of lack of clarity and obfuscation not only create a moral transgression against the death of Conor and his goals, but it also is reminiscent of the kind of Kafkaesque insanity faced by Joseph K. in *The Trial*. How do these revolutionaries carry on a fight when they do not know the status of the battle: Have they won? Have they been defeated? Or are they merely stuck in a murky quagmire of perfidy and doubt?

This conflict between Ructions and Maguire pervades the ending of the play with a bitter sense of disillusionment. As Ructions insists that Aidan attempt the escape and that Ructions remain to continue Conor's fight, Aidan cannot comprehend emotionally Conor's failure. Aidan remains stuck in his view that Conor could not have broken the fast, that the Priest could not have broken Conor's resolve. Under the pressure of these daunting emotions, he seems to wilt, causing Ructions to insist that Aidan leave with the escape and Ructions stay behind to carry on the hunger strike (171). Ructions recognizes the inherent political nature of the religious argument that Maguire used to compel Conor into breaking his fast, but Aidan cannot interrogate his own religious configurations. He cannot accept that the Priest would be complicit in breaking the strike, thus abrogating any connection to the revolutionaries. Aidan feels intellectually and emotionally incarcerated by his religious views, even though they conflict with his revolutionary ideals. He cannot break free of the psychic prison of this paradigm.

Aidan's inclusion of a Catholic memorial for the fallen Conor minimizes the effect of his speech by casting light on a crucial inconsistency – the Church opposed

Conor's battle, yet he is to be given a funeral ritual by that same Church. Ructions is incensed at what he perceives to be hypocrisy.

RUCTIONS (*shouts*): Do we ask the Church that struck him down to raise that hand again, in benediction – and crown the murder with a blessing? (163)

While Ructions' dialectic immediately and accurately challenges the contradictory religious notion of blessing the man who, according to the Church's teachings, is condemned by actions of a mortal sin, his logic inflames some of his fellow IRA men, appalled by Ructions' anti-church stance. Many of the IRA may oppose the government of the Republic but still consider themselves to be good Catholics, even though it is the theocratic nature of that government that virtually forces it to oppose their actions. But Ructions is hardly finished. As the Gaelic class is cancelled for the day, Ructions assumes the central role of the teacher, foregrounding his social status as leader and focusing the prison audience's and the theatrical audience's attention to his lesson.

RUCTIONS: . . . (*At blackboard, chalk in hand.*) Abairt a' lae! A phrase a day!
A phrase for a year and a day! A phrase from Voltaire. "When the last king is strangled with the gut of the last priest" – then let my epitaph be written! (*There is an attempt by one or two of the crowd to attack Ructions: the attackers are restrained by the others, Ructions, now in sheer fury, draws a crude headstone about Micheál's words on the blackboard. As he draws.*) Design for a headstone!
Here lies the bodies of Conor Egan, of Christ, and of Turlough Fitzpatrick. Three

fabulous heroes – distant myths – breakers of the seal of the tomb – who were buried secretly in ritual. (163)

Ruictions' sense of theatricality along with his clear disdain for the Church rings in this dramatic declaration, which is soon followed by irony:

RUCTIONS: I told you I'm carrying on the fight . . . I'm staying to do a hunger strike. (164)

Given Ruictions' previous opposition to Conor's hunger strike, to his apparent passive approach to political action, Ruictions' choice seems, at least immediately and superficially, completely inconsistent. This choice, to engage in his own hunger strike and to continue the fight which Conor began, is not in actuality a paradigm shift, but it is, as Ruictions will clarify, a continuation of his opposition to the Church, in a way that he sees as brutally direct.

The others have left, and Aidan addresses this issue:

AIDAN: [To Ruictions] The self-consuming monster, symbolizing the hunger striker! Why do you want to stay, now? (164)

Byrne's inclusion of the comma between stay and now is important – it indicates a subtle pause between the words and places emphasis on “now.” With Ruictions being previously

so set against the hunger strike, and given Aidan's understanding of Ructions' political views, Aidan suspects something has happened to change Ructions' approach to resistance. The discussion continues, and Ructions voices his suspicion that Conor ate before he died, that in doing so, he broke the hunger strike (164). Conor did take some food before he died, even though his body was so depleted that this did nothing to prevent his death. That he took food indicates to Ructions that Conor failed in his mission; such failure is inexcusable, because the action, for Ructions, needed to be carried to its conclusion – either to death or the government's capitulation, but not to abandonment of the cause.

For Ructions and the explanation of why he now chooses to continue the hunger strike in Conor's place, the biggest issue is the reason that Conor took food—religious pressure from the priest about the threat to his soul (164). Ructions understands that the secular wing of the government was not able to force Conor to cease his hunger strike, his troscad, but the Church, a de facto branch of the government of the Republic, brings religious weight onto the dying man's fears. Specifically, they threaten Conor with eternal damnation, that his soul, without the benefit of absolution through the giving of Last Rites, would suffer forever in hellfire. For Catholic believers like Conor and Aidan, such a threat is far more powerful than that of any secular imprisonment or torture – it is religious sanction. Ructions finds this sacred threat to be anathema, one that must be fought on the same battlefield on which Conor was vanquished.

Aidan turns away, an agonized admission of the possibility.

RUCTIONS (*after pause, squaring up to meet trouble*): That's why I want to

stay. (164-165)

Ruictions, ever the secular sword cutting through Catholic assumptions, asserts his disdain for the Church and against that which he perceives it represents. Ruictions intends to fight his battle on two levels: the sacred and the profane – as much against the Church and its claims to be divine arbitrators of the fate of souls as against the Republic’s branding of the IRA prisoners as mere criminals. The anger just beneath the surface between Ruictions and Father Maguire soon erupts into a volcano of conflict between the secular and the sacred as the play builds to its conclusion. In one of the most important sections of dialogue, Ruictions confronts Maguire to try to find out if the priest gave absolution to Conor. The tone of the dialogue is one of deep distrust and violent anger. In 1950s Ireland Ruictions’ verbal attacks on a priest must have been perceived as hugely disrespectful by most—in this powerful section, Byrne creates a dialectic examination of the Marxist materialist position against the Catholic Church.

RUCTIONS: Well? Did you? Answer me! Did you give him absolution?

Maguire maintains a resolute silence. (167)

As an Irishman raised in the Catholic Republic, Ruictions knows intellectually that Father Maguire cannot give him an answer, but Ruictions’ indignation fuels his emotional battle for an answer, one that he cannot receive directly. In essence, by insisting on an answer, Ruictions sets up his own rhetorical defeat.

Understanding that he has achieved victory, Father Maguire recasts the argument solely into theological terms, attempting to deny any validity to Ructions' secular materialist and political stance. He claims that the victory means only that Conor's soul is now safe, that nothing else matters, which in this political context seems disingenuous. For Maguire, the only stated consideration must be religious, which just happens to fall in line with that of the official governmental stance—no coincidence, since Ireland was functioning as a Catholic theocracy.

Ructions rejects this sacred ideation; instead, he attempts to make the matter one not only of secular political conflict but also of personal vengeance. In a shocking moment, he directly threatens the priest.

RUCTIONS (*approaches angrily*): Victory! My God, I could kill you for that word. Victory! I could! And I will! I will d'you hear? (*Cold, low-voiced determination.*) I'll wait for you. (167)

Ructions' direct threat against a priest must have made much of Byrne's contemporary audience at the very least uncomfortable and for some completely offended. At that time in Ireland, such an action was almost unthinkable, if not unspeakable. An overt accusation and stated physical threat was no less than a complete social paradigm shift about the position of the Church in Ireland.

After Conor's failure, Aidan considered being the one to continue the hunger strike. Ructions, the pragmatist, understands that Aidan, a deeply committed Catholic, would also be likely to fail for the same reasons as Conor. Ructions forces Aidan to recognize the political and religious implications of the Father's actions towards Conor,

that he ensured that Conor's hunger strike would fail (171). Ructions compels Aiden to see what the priest has done to Conor and what he will do if Aiden attempts to continue the hunger strike. Ructions knows that Father Maguire will continue to fight for the government's stance by emphasizing the religious threat to Aiden's soul. Only someone who functions completely in the materialist, secular world – Ructions – would be capable of resisting this sacred attack on the troscad.

Aidan, still nominally in charge of the IRA men, has not yet come to terms with his inability to lead the hunger strike, that he, too, would inevitably fail for the same reasons as did Conor. He however opposes Father Maguire, in itself, a beginning, a potential shifting of Aidan's political-religious Catholic-revolutionary paradigm, but it is still only a potential, at least in Aidan's case. Ructions made the intellectual and philosophical shift prior to the play. Aidan successfully establishes his questioning of the Priest's view of the hunger strike, which allows him to consider moving forward with it, ultimately deciding either he or Ructions will continue (172). This step is crucial for the individual battle representing the revolutionary struggle against both the government and the Church.

Soon after, Aidan crystallizes his position and establishes that he will oppose the Church, but he will do so as a good Catholic. He perceives the hypocrisy inherent in Maguire's position and the corruption it leads to in its intertwining with the official government of the Republic. After referring to Ructions' mind as a "rubbish heap," (173), Maguire demonstrates his disdain for anything that seems to come from the minds of the non-educated, the non-elite, and from the "snippets from the popular press" (173). In establishing his view of Ructions' class, Maguire makes it clear to Aidan that the priest

can never represent the IRA, because the established Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland is interested in maintaining the status quo and its part of the established power structure.

Maguire tries to mollify Aidan through a theocratic exchange, but he only succeeds in further igniting his anger. Aidan's perspective becomes clear when he realizes that the Church has intentionally misled many of their flock, men and women like Ructions, deemed by the priests to be unworthy or not intelligent enough to know the more sophisticated points of doctrine.

MAGUIRE (*philosophic perspective, not unsympathetic*): What *more* should it mean? (*Challenge.*) What *is* this summon bonum which is not the attainment of God?

AIDAN (*studied taunt*): Sounding brass and tinkling cymbal! (*Tirade, after pause.*) If [Ructions] McGowan's mind is a rubbish heap, it is you who neglected to teach him – neglected to build on the vacant lot. You who starved him spiritually. The food on which he might have thriven was deemed too strong for his consumption. Truth, you held, was a dangerous thing: it might lead to excess: and since excess was sin, truth must be doled in short measure! (173)

By denying teaching Ructions in any serious fashion, only feeding snippets and platitudes to a fertile, angry, intelligent, and resourceful mind, Father Maguire was certain to drive him away from the Church. The view that the mass of people need not be told any level of truth or given any consequential form of instruction led Ructions deeply away from the

Church rather than keeping him a mindless drone in the fold. Instead, he moved into the materialist, Marxist world of one wing of the IRA.

Father Maguire realizes that, in Aidan, he is speaking with someone who has more than mere acquaintance with complex theological thought, a man who once considered becoming a priest and rejected it. In making this rejection of a calling, Aidan maintains his serious attitude towards the Church even as he becomes oppositional. He never becomes a lapsed Catholic, but a Catholic with deeply divided views towards the Church.

MAGUIRE: You yourself once thought of priesthood?

AIDAN: (*sore spot*): What if I did?

MAGUIRE: And now? Anti-cleric?

AIDAN (*with bite*): Every serious Catholic is! Must be! (173)^{xxvii}

This ambivalent attitude imbues the play with religious conflict that couples with its political ambiguity.

Aidan successfully foregrounds his new and powerful attitude towards the Church, and Ructions makes the decision to be the one to stay and continue the hunger strike. The others will attempt their ill-fated prison break. After Kevin reports on the state of their preparation for their escape plot, Ructions confirms that he will carry on the hunger strike.

RUCTIONS: Aidan goes. I stay.

Kevin looks to Aidan for decision: Aidan is silent. (174)

In Aidan's silence is the non-spoken acquiescence to Ructions' decision. Ructions will lead the one-man struggle through his complete rejection of religion and the Church. While he still prefers active resistance, he has come to embrace the continuation of Conor's fight. He refuses to acknowledge that the Church's victory over Conor is a victory over his Marxist/materialist views of the world.

Design For A Headstone, while dealing with highly controversial issues in the Republic and incorporating a mass of killing in the conclusion, is not sensationalistic in its portrayal of the characters' deaths. Rather, harkening back to the idea of a Greek Chorus in classical tragedy, the deaths are reported, and suggested, but never directly witnessed. This placing of the circumstances and details of the killings in the collective imagination of the live audience amplifies their power rather than diminishing it; neither the audience's complacency about the nearly dead revolution, nor their complicity in bearing witness to official and unofficial killings done in their names, are lessened by not showing them. "The play therefore ends with a collective disaster which is bound to arouse the audience's compassion" (Kosok 79). While the audience might have simply been shocked if they had seen the killings onstage, by not seeing them, their empathy is engaged.

First comes Jakey's death. The IRA decides – incorrectly – that Jakey is the informer. They decide that the time for Jakey's sanction has come.

Dunne covers Jakey with gun. O'Sullivan and Corrigan start to drag Jakey from

cell. (180)

The audience does not see Jakey's death, but from Aidan's brief dialogue with Dunne, it knows that Jakey will be shot soon—he suggests that they allow Jakey to have a few moments to pray before his execution (180). Soon after, the sound of a gunshot is heard offstage. It is clear. The everyman has been executed—another mistaken sanction of a man not an informer by the IRA.

At the very end of the play, sound again signals disaster—this time the failure of the jailbreak and the impending deaths of the men who attempted it.

Sound of a triangle on circle, being beaten incessantly, in alarm, the jail resounding to the din. The curtain comes down very slowly. (181)

Additionally, by the unseen nature of the deaths, the audience's national memory of the hidden trials and executions of the leaders of the failed Easter Uprising of 1916 is recalled. This action taken by the British authorities served to galvanize a largely uncommitted population about the idea of independence from Great Britain to that of a nearly complete support for the failed revolutionaries and for the coming revolution and fight for freedom from Great Britain. Given that the memory of those times would undoubtedly be invoked, it is important to reiterate that Byrne is not simply creating a jingoistic piece; rather, the play interrogates both the Republic of Ireland's maintenance of a post-colonial/post-conquest British legal ethos coupled with a theocratic Catholic influence and that of revolutionary Republicanism.

Design For A Headstone has the tone at its ending of emptiness, of a colossal mistake and squandering of life and spirit. In examining the play's ending, Hogan explains: "The ending also shows how a jailbreak is foiled, how the I.R.A. in its reprisals kills the wrong men, and how many of its own valuable men are killed. . . The final feeling is that a dilemma is unresolved – and that there has been a vast human waste"(75).

While addressing the play and the historical circumstances of Ireland in the 1950s, Hogan's words could speak prophetically for the then unforeseen folly of the Irish Troubles, a civil war that would kill thousands and wound tens of thousands more without solving the issue of the Northern counties.

Byrne's play simultaneously creates empathy for the plight of the people involved, for innocent victims, for a nation stuck in a quagmire of non-progress, and for a political movement that had lost its impetus and support, while also criticizing all these groups. All are victims and victimizers; all are innocent and guilty; all receive Byrne's striking pen of critique.

Design For A Headstone, then, is a play that is now recovered from obscurity, that was long buried in the anonymity of forgotten works, once important but then driven to the lost piles of manuscripts and was mainly ignored both by the world of theatre and the world of the academy. It can now, however, be seen as an important Irish play, one that examines the political context of Ireland in the 1950s and one that illuminates the tripartite metaphor of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction in Irish theatre as an expression of the stagnant, contained world of political revolutionaries in that decade. *Design For A Headstone* captures a particular moment in this political and cultural milieu

and magnifies and clarifies it and its literary and theatrical importance. *Design For A Headstone* represents a liminal moment in Irish theatre, connecting the earlier naturalism with the emerging theatre of the absurd. Byrne's play transcends this important function as transformational play in Irish drama to that of a recovered and important in its own place as a representative piece of important Irish theater of the 1950s.

Chapter 2

The Quare Fellow: Alienation, Absurdity, Heteroglossia, Imprisonment, the Carnavalesque, and Execution

Brendan Behan's masterwork *The Quare Fellow* is a central piece for examination of the prison play in Ireland in the 1950s. Behan is one of Ireland's most famous and well-critiqued playwrights. In this play, Behan moves away from the representational form employed by Seamus Byrne in *Design For A Headstone*. In this powerful anti-capital punishment play, Behan employs a wide variety of techniques ranging from theatre of the absurd, social/political/religious satire, heteroglossia, and the carnivalesque.^{xxviii}

Like Seamus Byrne, Brendan Behan's life had a clear influence on his dramatic writings. Raised in a Republican family, in prison for several years for IRA activities, Behan used his time there to hone his skills as a playwright and to focus his dramatic attention on the complex thematic and moral quandaries involved in Ireland's struggle with England.

Behan's plays are connected intimately with both the Irish political situation and prisons. He served time in the Borstal Institution and Mountjoy prison. Rae Jeffs, in her biography of Behan, speaks to this biographical and literary connection—that he has included the totality of himself in his writings, and that his writings are “. . . quite clearly autobiographical” (14-15). From his early childhood through adulthood, he was steeped in the Irish-English struggle. “He was born into a family of Republican idealists who had little other than a fierce patriotism to combat the tyranny of British rule in Ireland and, steeped as he was in Irish history, it was inevitable that Brendan should put on the cloak

of their political beliefs with the uncompromising intolerance of youth” (Jeffs 18-19). This familial inculcation, coupled with Behan’s fierce adolescent attitude, soon led him into trouble, “and...at the age of sixteen, and not twenty-four hours after he had landed, Brendan was arrested in Liverpool for being in possession of explosives and sent first to Walton prison and later to a Borstal institution” (Jeffs 19). His rigid adolescent beliefs that left little room for anything other than extreme right and wrong slowly changed as he realized that both sides could be ethically and morally wrong. As he grew, his attitudes also changed and formed deeply complex patterns. In Borstal Prison, Behan learned to see variations in truth, to examine issues from numerous perspectives, and to question everything. He was no longer able to give himself completely, unthinkingly and without reservation, to the Republican cause (Jeffs 20). Along with Behan’s realization of the enormous complexity of the Irish-British issue, he also had difficulties in his personal life, while maturing as a playwright of depth and power.

Behan’s experience with the IRA and his time in prison are well documented. Richard Rankin Russell, in “Brendan Behan’s Lament for Gaelic Ireland: *The Quare Fellow*,” examines Behan’s use of Gaelic in his writings and the connection of his time in prison to native Irish language. Behan emerged from Borstal prison with solid working-class sympathies as well as a complete antipathy to the death penalty (75). His interest in language enriched his political sympathies, which are clearly reflected in his plays.

Mountjoy Prison, in which Behan later served time, has special significance to Republicans. Michael O’Sullivan, in *Brendan Behan*, explains the political significance of this particular jail to the Republican movement “Mountjoy Jail is one of the holy places of Republican martyrdom. Generations of the participants in the struggle for Irish

freedom were incarcerated there” (86). Mountjoy Prison, then, is central both to Behan’s personal development and to his plays. Earlier Mountjoy prison had served as a focal point of the national anger against Great Britain, but now in the post-independence era, the Republican focus found itself aimed at the Republic. This shift represents merely a change in the subject of Irish revolutionary efforts, not a change of direction. In its post-colonial experience, the Republic of Ireland marginalized the IRA and attempted to minimize their importance to the country. “IRA prisoners occupied an ambivalent position [in Mountjoy Prison]. It was only just over 20 years since the organisation had played a vital role in securing Irish independence. Now, the government found itself in the uncomfortable position of treating men who formerly would have been hailed as national heroes as enemies of the State” (O’Sullivan 88). Behan found himself thrust into this national confusion and fed on it artistically in his plays. Christopher Murray, in his excellent *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up To Nation*, speaks to the impact of Behan’s early life on his drama and details in depth the nature of the specifics of these events and their impact on his plays.^{xxix} Behan was able to use his life experiences as a basis upon which to launch a successful, if ultimately limited, dramatic career, focusing on scathing and simultaneously humorous critique and satire of both the Republic and of the Republican movement.

While clearly influenced by his Republican background, he is not shackled by it. Behan criticizes both the revolutionary culture and the established society of Ireland. This willingness to serve as a gadfly, unbound by strict allegiance to any political position in his writing, gives Behan an enormous range of artistic expression. His writings were not always accepted easily into the standard canon of contemporary Irish

drama, especially given his working class background. O’Sullivan says: “They [Irish dramatic critics] asked one another what the slum boy with the assertive personality and talent for notoriety had done to achieve such status in the theatre – which in Dublin was a sacred forum” (182). O’Sullivan asserts that it requires great honesty from an Irish critic to understand that Behan moves away completely from standard Republican thinking in *The Quare Fellow* (182). Despite an adolescence formed by Republican ideology and an early adulthood in the movement, as a playwright, Behan challenges thinking across the political-religious-class Irish spectrum. In his multi-targeted satiric approach, Behan occupies a liminal moment in Ireland’s political/cultural development, even though, at that point, Ireland was ensconced in a post-colonially induced fatigue and stasis. In his writings, Behan employs techniques that would emerge later more fully in the world theater as theater of the absurd. While dealing with ancient, but still contemporary, political and social issues, Behan prefigures a new way for the theater. Using these new approaches, Behan, a man who clearly identified with the Republican movement for much of his life, allowed little or nothing, not even the political views he had himself espoused, to escape his sharp critique.

Declan Kiberd, in his seminal text on Irish Literature, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, speaks to the effect of prison on Behan’s writings, especially as it concerns political/philosophic perspectives: “The effect of prison on most of the republicans . . . was to redouble their political fervour: the effect on Behan, however, was to leave him with an abiding distrust of all commitments. His plays are O’Caseyesque in their sharp critique of idealism, so sharp that they come perilously

close to downright nihilism”(513). In fact, Behan’s plays belong more with Camus’ absurdity than with Nietzsche’s nihilism. I address this absurdity in more detail later.

Behan wrote primarily in the 1950s, when little theatrical experimentation occurred, and most of the people of the Republic were simply trying to survive in a bleak economy. Most of the plays, as with Seamus Byrne’s *Design For A Headstone*, tended to be in a naturalistic form. Most of the playwrights avoided anything remotely suggesting the avant-garde. Brendan Behan makes a clear exception to this pattern. Murray explains that even if the playwrights of the time did criticize the de Valera pastoral ideal of Ireland,^{xxx} they tended to do so in a familiar realistic form. “The major exception is Brendan Behan, a true original, whose work is on another level” (138). In his essential work, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin explains the essence of this theatrical movement: “. . . the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (6). In *The Quare Fellow* Behan begins moving into his form of absurdity but not the kind found in Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* or *The Bald Soprano*, in which the action onstage becomes almost plotless, focusing on visual symbolism. Instead, Behan incorporates absurd elements into his play. Behan explores Camus’ idea, in “The Myth of Sisyphus,” of the absurdity of life, that actions seem to serve no real purpose: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless”(18). In *The Quare Fellow*, the absurdity arises from a distortion of these roots by the government and Church.

Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, while similar in plot and theme to Seamus Byrne's *Design For A Headstone*, makes a distinctive break from the earlier prison play in terms of structure and influence. Byrne focuses on laying out a multi-layered critique of Irish society, and in *The Quare Fellow* Behan makes similar kinds of societal examinations and attacks. While both plays criticize the Republic's justice system, a subtle but clear difference in their critiques emerges. In *The Quare Fellow*, Behan criticizes the act of capital punishment directly and the politics of the situation indirectly; he looks at the implied post-imperialist/post-conquest condition that still influenced the Republic's judicial system and the Republic's society as well. While similar in subject matter to *Design For A Headstone*, *The Quare Fellow* differs substantially from the play that influenced it. Given the size of Ireland and the playwrights' common prison and political experience, such a connection is likely. "It seems their paths did not cross. It is unlikely, however, that Behan did not know of Byrne's play, given its subject. . . in any case it [*Design For a Headstone*] has to be regarded as a significant intellectual source [for *The Quare Fellow*]"(Murray 152). The connection between the two plays, especially considering the thematic similarities, and given the often closed nature of the world of Irish theatre in the 1950s is apparent.

Design For A Headstone's naturalism contrasts with *The Quare Fellow*'s more experimental form that mixes influences from the music hall with absurdist theatre. Behan incorporates existentialist absurdity, comedy, song, Kafkaesque visions of bureaucratic insanity, Brechtian epic theatre, Rabelaisian carnivalesque, and hints of classical theatre. This eclectic mix refuses to be pinned down into one form.

Like Byrne, Behan uses his plays to express his indignation at the injustices he perceives in Ireland. Unlike Byrne, Behan is often seen as one of the emerging group of playwrights in both Britain and Ireland— identified as the angry young men—who unabashedly attack the problems of the government and society in which they live. Irving Wardle, in “The Quare Fellow” makes this connection: “. . . perhaps Behan’s obsessive use of Irish Socialist-Republican themes after his own withdrawal from the movement was merely an index of his own contradictory blend of reverence and contempt for the past – a type of negative patriotism comparable to John Osborne’s” (35). While Wardle’s quick review of Behan’s work is ultimately negative and mistaken about the playwright’s wasted potential, he rightly connects Behan to this movement. Ulick O’Connor, in *Brendan Behan*, discusses the importance of the working class milieu of *The Quare Fellow* and its place in the oeuvre of the angry young men: “John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* was the opening salvo for the new playwrights. This play, with its lower middle-class anti-hero, had taken London by storm just two months before *The Quare Fellow* was presented at Stratford” (177). This class connection—of the displacement of the working class in Ireland—is crucial to understanding this play, another element of the heteroglossic reading. The characters in Behan’s plays, like Osborne’s, are primarily working-class, all too often ignored by the theater patrons in middle and upper class Dublin. This class focus is central to understanding the play and Behan’s perspective. His radicalism emerges as much from a life formed in the proletariat as from intellectual Marxist and revolutionary theory^{xxx1}. Any new society that does not recognize the need for class awareness in its structuring is simply a replication

of the preceding dominant culture. Behan is not satisfied with a simple subaltern recreation of British society and government.

In his critique of Irish society, Behan employs audience interrogation as a central feature of *The Quare Fellow*. The structure of the play is impressive—Behan uses a seemingly straightforward plot with very little classic complication to develop his multi-layered meaning. By having the Quare Fellow never appear onstage, Behan imbues the play with classical tragic overtones, in which the most vicious action occurs offstage along with an amplification of audience reaction to the bureaucratically ordered killing. In examining his reaction to a new production, Colbert Kearney, in “The Afterlife of *The Quare Fellow*,” argues that the play’s structure is correct and that “the concealment of the victim—invisible and anonymous—both replicates society’s tendency to keep executions as secret as possible and also facilitates a fuller identification with the condemned man, there being no actor’s body between the audience and him” (490). Because the audience must create the image of the Quare Fellow and his ultimate execution in their minds, the horror of the moment gains power. Behan, like the classical playwrights before him—both Greek and Elizabethan—creates a partnership with the audience, albeit, not one of mutual comfort. In our imaginations, we, the audience, form a difficult, but nevertheless, symbiotic creative endeavor—the shared witnessing of the death of the Quare Fellow. In that observing, we must see the impact and the horror of legalized capital punishment. By placing the creation of the image of the execution within the mind of each audience member, Behan not only directly connects the audience with the action but also demands that they recognize the actuality of the death penalty and its consequences. In this play, forced to engage certainty, the audience cannot escape culpability.

This enforced participation in the sanction of the condemned man both interrogates the role of the audience and engages us in the action of the killing. As the audience in *The Quare Fellow* witnesses the preparations for the execution, performed by the inmates and the workers at the prison, they are put into the uncomfortable position of the witnesses at an official execution. The audience becomes observers, inactive voyeurs, of the official actions. By their public vision, they sanction the ultimate act of official governmentally ordered justice. The audience witnesses not only an ultimate sanction that is completely foreign to most of our common experience but also is forced to observe and empathize with criminals, a part of society which most people prefer to ignore. In this way, the audience's ethics and emotions about the circumstances in prison and prisoners are interrogated—they are forced to confront their own societal demons. Kearney explains that in *The Quare Fellow* we, the society, control those whom we would punish through the institution of prison, even though “. . . most playgoers have never been inside a prison, and the evidence suggests that most of us have no desire to examine what goes on in our name” (492). Undoubtedly, it is easier for members of society to go about their daily lives if they do not have to witness the actions that take place in their names, but Behan removes this level of comfort. The audience is never allowed to sink into relaxed removal from the action.

In his careful blurring of the traditional conventions of the proscenium arch which separates the audience and the performers into safely confined distinct realities—that of performers of action and that of witnesses of action, but at a remove—Behan draws us into the play, mimicking both medieval mystery plays which were witnessed by an audience who might speak directly to an actor and Brechtian epic theatre in which

direction is given to the audience, thereby manipulating their actions as well as that of the performers. Unlike Brechtian epic theatre, Behan wishes to engage the emotions of the audience and not strictly to perform dialectic discussion or instruction. “*The Quare Fellow* works not simply by a mimetic principle of exposition, but also by connecting the audience cathartically to the guilt of the warders, and thereby implicating the ethical and political values of the audience and wider society in the practice of capital punishment” (Brannigan *Brendan Behan* 83). Behan understands that he achieves a greater impact on the audience if he is able to connect his audience directly—emotionally—to the actions onstage, not simply with intellectual and distanced comprehension.

In the opening stage direction immediately after the curtain rises, Behan openly addresses the audience: “*On the wall and facing the audience is printed in large block shaded Victorian lettering the word ‘SILENCE’*”(1). The direction of the sign is essential, because its intention is not to compel the prisoners to be silent but to involve the audience and impart a similar sense of restriction on their actions as the prisoners themselves might feel. The audience’s emotions as well as intellect are immediately engaged but not in a strictly naturalistic fashion; they are not merely witnessing stage events but subtly are drawn into the world of the play. The barrier between actor and audience, between imagination and reality, is interrogated and broken. “It doesn’t take long before the audience/society comes under pressure” (Kearney193). They do not merely empathize with distanced viewings of injustice but are drawn emotionally and dialectically into the experience of the wrongs.

Kearney, in *The Writings of Brendan Behan*, addresses the issue of Behan's audience interrogation. He discusses the play-within-a-play structure that Behan employs in his implication of the theatre audience in the play's proceedings:

The Quare Fellow is a play within a play . . . There are two audiences: those in the theatre watch those on stage who witness the externals of the closet-drama. Those on the stage react in various ways to the ritual in which they play or are forced to play some part. Some of them, prisoners mostly, seem to be callously unconcerned with the fate of the unknown victim; others, most of the people who are part of the system, accept the procedure as sanctioned by religion, morality and social necessity. The theatre-audience cannot resist judging the behaviour of those on stage and invariably they laugh at the black humour of the prisoners and dissociate themselves from the strict principles of the prison regime. At some point during or after the play the theatre-audience must realise that they have been tricked into a position which is critical of the very institution which they support outside the theatre. (71-72)

This near-Brechtian technique demands that the audience confront its own attitude towards the prison system and criminals in general and of capital punishment specifically. Behan prioritizes this dialectically based self-examination as a primary focus in his play. Not only are the prisoners interrogated, imprisoned and sanctioned by the prison and societal authorities, but also the audience is interrogated by Behan initially, then by themselves and compelled into an inescapable examination and critical

judgment of their political positions about prisoners and capital punishment. This dialectical self-examination has the potential to extend into other areas of the audience's pre-conceived ideas. If the audience were compelled to conduct a self-questioning, then what other questions might be raised about themselves and the society in which they live? Would the audience be forced to examine the judicial system of its government? Would the spectators be impelled to move past the state of mere voyeurism to active engagement in the policies of their country? Would the observers potentially gain political agency? Behan's dialectic raises but ultimately does not answer these questions. Rather, he employs a near Socratic technique which makes the audience and the readers self-interrogate their assumptions and circumstances as he questions the characters in the play.

By incorporating a self-conscious deconstruction of the dividing line between actor and audience, Behan compels the viewers to become, at least passively, participants in the activity. The audience, like unknowing participants in a psychology experiment, has their expectations changed; their desire to witness and be entertained is drastically altered into incorporation into the dramatic event itself. "Those who attend a performance of *The Quare Fellow* are not allowed to settle for the escapist comfort of the 'official' account; instead they are forced to deal with the 'unofficial' account proffered by the prisoners"(Kearney 492). It is important to note that most of the audience at the theatre in Dublin in the 1950s would likely have been middle to upper class Irish, those most likely to identify with the society that kept prisoners in jail and not with the prisoners themselves (Kearney 493). This unsuspecting audience is caught in the moment by the opening of the play and intertwined psychologically and intellectually

with the dramatic action. Roche also sees that Behan uses this kind of audience inclusion: “They cannot remain at a remove or at a safe, empathetic distance from what they witness on stage. Instead, the audience is drawn to share the conditions and the fate of the characters. In the small Pike Theatre, for instance, a great measure of *The Quare Fellow*’s success resulted from the shared claustrophobia and the proximity of the audience to the prisoners” (12). This reduction of a physical comfort zone then adds a level of class interrogation. The middle class audience sits much closer to the action onstage than they are typically accustomed to, and with narrowing of removal between actor and audience, they are also put into close proximity with precisely the kind of proletariat character, inmates, whom they would be most likely to avoid if seen for real outside of a prison. While uncomfortable for a middle-class audience, a proletarian audience would have felt at ease, because this proximity to the audience is similar to the placement of the audience to the performers in the music halls—the pantos (short for pantomimes), whose song-and-dance routines influenced both *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*.

Behan goes further than might be realized on a first reading of the text: he successfully blurs the division between actor and audience with the song that begins the play. The voice comes from an unseen actor, but it intrudes on the audience, creating a seam in the expectations of the audience—they hear but do not perceive the reality of the performer. Kearney notes an interesting performance choice that is often made which further heightens the dissolution of the actor-audience divide—the use of the recording of Behan singing the song: “Between the lowering of the theater lights and the raising of the curtain, a subterranean voice is heard singing . . . There is always a tendency to use the

most celebrated recording of the song, Behan's; even though the culture of realism would not encourage this blurring of author and character, somehow the inimitable voice—irrepressible, irresponsible, irresistible—is felt to add something to whatever is happening in the theater” (492-493). While the Irish theater of the 1950s had not yet accepted the movement away from naturalism, Behan, in this play and in *The Hostage*, uses techniques that foreshadow the theatre of the absurd movement that would in the not-too-distant-future invade the world theater.

The general critical consensus is that *The Quare Fellow* is successful in its inclusion, implication, and interrogation of the audience. “After *The Quare Fellow* it is impossible to see judicial hanging as an element in an argument on crime and punishment: Behan has infixed in our minds the physicality of the action and the actuality of the hours before it” (Kearney *The Writings* 69) The performative nature of this play in inclusion of the audience is discomfiting; dramatic action is not simply witnessed through the never broken fourth wall. The audience's preconceptions and beliefs about capital punishment, rather, are engaged and challenged from the opening of the play. It becomes impossible for the audience members to remain situated aloof from the discussion. Behan has drawn them, if unwillingly, into the social/political discussion.

An important consideration of *The Quare Fellow* is its post-colonial nature. In *The Quare Fellow*, two elements of the tripartite metaphor of my study are explicit—imprisonment and sanction—the characters are either convicts in the prison or warders in charge of them. The Quare Fellow himself is a condemned man waiting for his imminent execution. These elements of the extended metaphor are clearly established. The third element—interrogation—exists in an implicit fashion. We can assume that all of the

prisoners were questioned in the past before their trials, so that element is not important, but the interrogation that does exist is subtle and subversive. Rather than appearing in the text as action against characters, this interrogation forms the essence of theatre in its performative quality—Behan interrogates the audience itself. In a nearly duplicate circumstance to that of official witnesses viewing a state sanctioned execution, the audience, by witnessing that which is deeply disturbing, the preparations for a man's hanging, is given a spectacle and forced to confront the reality of state ordered killing and to examine their own views on capital punishment. Warder Regan expresses the wish for public spectacle: "I think the whole show should be put on in Croke Park; after all, it's at the public expense and they let it go on" (76). The Warder's choice of words is important. He speaks of the event as a "show," which connotes an entertainment, something which harkens back to the Renaissance when executions were often held as public events in a city's liberties area. Here the audience is the public at a show. The irony is clear. The responsibility is also given to the public as audience. Without the permission of the public, who elects their government figures, capital punishment would not exist. The irony extends further. Warder Regan might be the character through whom Behan's voice is heard; if so, then his desire for a public spectacle is not to entertain the citizenry but to shock them out of moral complacency, to force them to confront the consequences of their lack of action. If the people of the Republic of Ireland are confronted with the horrifying reality of capital punishment, then—he might reason—they might be moved to take action against this public convention. If no action is motivated by the spectacle, then the public execution would revert to mere diversion and entertainment of the masses.

Presumably the new country wanted to separate itself from the ways of its former colonizer, but in this particular point, the Republic seems to be an extension of Britain, not a different entity. In a discussion of a colony's struggle to attain autonomy, Vic Merriman, in "Decolonisation Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash" explains:

Whenever colonialism has been and is resisted, anti-colonial activists see themselves as working towards decolonisation. The Teleology implicit in their analysis might be represented as follows

colonisation-anticolonialism-decolonisation

Experience teaches that their struggles tend to result in the replacement of one elite by another, as the departing colonisers give way to a nascent bourgeois class. This outcome thwarts the achievement of a decolonised social order, and typically results in disillusion, voluntary exile or even incarceration for some of the most radical persons and groups in the new social order. (305)

Clearly, the Republic of Ireland in the 1950s is in such a condition; the very revolutionaries responsible for the overthrow of the yoke of British control are now criminalized, in De Valera's attempt to impose his personal view of a pastoral Irish world, one doomed to failure because of the British social structure still in place. As the colonizers did before them, the new Irish bourgeois state embraces its colonial basis and, in actions predicated on British policies, attempts to eliminate the IRA. Additionally, the

Irish government embraces the British colonial criminal and revolutionary control technique of execution.

The executions that accompanied 800 years of British domination of Ireland did not end with Ireland gaining autonomy; the name of the state that ordered those killings is what altered. Dunlavin says, “But sure, thanks to God, the Free State didn’t change anything more than the badge on the warders’ caps” (21). Ireland may have become first a Free State and then a Republic, but this seeming emancipation did not remove the layers of colonial and conquest lessons England imposed on the former colony. In this way, the subaltern state of Ireland embraces the hegemonic system of its former colonizer and forces the IRA into a subaltern status within the Republic of Ireland to the Republic of Ireland. This reconfiguring of the power structure that repeats the judicial systems from the former power in the new country is the damning irony that Behan foregrounds in his play. Ireland has been another oppressor, only this time of its own people.

A further specific example of this post-colonial phenomenon in Ireland is its continuation of the well-entrenched British class system. The inmates of the prisons of Ireland were, with few exceptions, working-class, if not poor, and the theatre-goers were primarily middle to upper class. This class dichotomy is inescapable in *The Quare Fellow*. The majority of the characters are from the proletariat, and the justice system, as seen in the play, produces in the audience “. . . a sense of revulsion at the hypocrisy of a social system that pretended capital punishment was not a barbaric practice. (Kearney 496) The Irish social system, with its blithe acceptance of legalized execution, which Behan satirizes, is based on their former conquerors.^{xxxii}

Anthony Roche, in *Contemporary Irish Drama*, speaks to the colonial nature of hanging as the form of penal execution and its pre-freedom connection. He explains that the hangings after the 1798 Rebellion were intended to be public so that the Irish audience would understand the penalty for rebellion. The problem with such a wide-ranging lesson is that almost the entire Irish population consists of potential rebels. (25) England used the executions as a means of public suppression of resistance, with this clear lesson extended to the Irish: rebel against British authority, and you will suffer a public and painful execution. The failure of this particular lesson is historically clear—the Irish continued to rebel against their conquerors until finally achieving independence in the early 1920s. The end result of the lesson learned was not acquiescence but revolution.

Ironically, the Irish Free State and, later, The Republic, much to their disgrace politically and ethically, continued the practice of execution by hanging. It is no mere incidental point that the nationality of Behan's hangman in *The Quare Fellow* is English. "The continuation of the practice of hanging as a colonial legacy is stressed by the dramatic point that the hangman, the necessary instrument of the practice, is an Englishman" (Roche 25). While the legal authority governing the execution was Ireland in its post-conquest incarnation, the actual hand conducting the killing was British. Their influence remains in a not very subtle symbol. Behan, does not claim, however, that the fault lies in the British, but that their establishment of the system is clear. The Irish government, supported by its people, nevertheless, is Behan's target. In *The Quare Fellow* the Irish people do not escape culpability; in fact, they are the ones ultimately responsible for the execution of the Quare Fellow.

The 1950s in the Republic of Ireland was one of torpor, indeed, non-liminality in political movement. After the enormous upheaval of the revolutionary period of the early part of the 20th Century, encompassing the Irish Renaissance in theatre, the Easter Uprising of 1916, the War for Independence, and the Civil War, followed a collapse of revolutionary energy. Ireland, rather than throwing off the internal colonial yoke as well as the external domination of Britain, seemed to move into a period of quietude, but one of acceptance of post-colonial conditions rather than an establishment of a new national identity. The consequences of having been a conquered people for almost 800 years did not vanish. Simply because a former colony has become independent does not mean that the influence of the colonizer has vanished. Russell examines this connection between former conqueror and the formerly controlled: “While on one level *The Quare Fellow* (1956) is a ribald polemic against capital punishment, on a more subversive level, it is also an insider’s expose of the collision between residual British Imperialism and the vanishing world of Gaelic Ireland in an urban Dublin jail^{xxxiii}” (1).

The lingering effects of the post-colonial reality in Ireland informed Behan’s writings. Behan observed that the so-called new country, the Republic, resembled Great Britain more than anything inherently Irish in nature. It was like an orphaned step-child trying to gain the approval of a distant parent upon which it models its behavior. In *The Quare Fellow* this behavior is the penal system. Kiberd explains “This is Behan’s none-too-covert critique not just of the British penal system, which so offended Wilde and Synge, but, even more scathingly, of the so-called Irish Free State which blithely persisted with the British model” (515). The irony of a nation fighting for

independence from a conqueror and then basing much of its government and judiciary on that conqueror is obvious, and for Behan, it is an irresistible satiric target.

Like Kiberd, Stephen Watt also examines Behan from the post-colonial theoretic perspective. In “Love and Death: A Reconsideration of Behan and Genet” he uses Anthony Roche’s exploration of *The Quare Fellow* and *Waiting for Godot*, in which he posits “the lack of a “leading man” in both plays reveals the “anti-hierarchical nature of a post-colonial drama”^{xxxiv} . . . the “official” hanging in *The Quare Fellow* represents the “persistence of colonial acts of legislation,” while the “unofficial” effect on Behan’s prisoners includes “the incorporation within the individualized colonised subject’s psyche of that legacy of hanging as a mode of escape from an intolerable situation”^{xxxv} (132) While it is undeniable that Ireland had gained titular independence, excepting, of course, the counties in the North, the makeup of the Republic continued to reflect the aftermath of Britain’s centuries of domination—by incorporating the British system of justice as their own, with this special change—the governmental influence of the Church, in essence, forming the Republic into a Catholic theocracy.

It is logical, given Behan’s experiences, that the settings for Behan plays are prisons in the Republic. In *The Quare Fellow*, while an almost silent whisper of the political situation of the IRA softly reverberates in the far background of the play, the setting is firmly that of a prison for criminals, not political activists. This does not mean, however, that political considerations vanish from the play. They exist in the dominant feature of capital punishment. The very nature of the so-called normality of the execution emphasizes Britain’s post-colonial influence from which the Republic of Ireland is unable to escape. Brannigan speaks to Behan’s view of the Republic’s prisons

as extension of British rule in his “ ‘On England’s doorstep’: colonialism, nationalism, and carceral liminality in Brendan Behan’s *Borstal Boy*”: “For Behan, the prison frequently seems to be the site of fraught colonial struggle, . . . and policed by colonial warriors in flight from the impending demise of the empire. Carceral space is thus for Behan the extended instrument of colonial rule, its regimes and strategies calculated to undermine and censure his sense of national identity” (209). While Brannigan examines Behan’s views of prison as colonial power extension in *Borstal Boy*, Brannigan’s argument is still valid in examining *The Quare Fellow* and, later, *The Hostage*.

Specifically in his book *Brendan Behan: Cultural Nationalism and the Revisionist Writer*, Brannigan examines *The Quare Fellow* and its post-colonial implications and points out the dreary, almost defeated tone of the Republic in its retention of colonial ways: “The anxiety of the post-independence state was that after the revolution, there appeared to be no substance to the dream, that Ireland was condemned to nostalgic reveries of former glories, and incapable of effecting progress beyond post-colonial [post-conquest] atrophy” (91). *The Quare Fellow* indicates the lack of political and social progress away from the time of being conquered, controlled, and limited in action by England. Rather than being a period of social liminality, the 1950s were the opposite—a time of stasis and nonliminality—a period of inertia and compliance, an era of rigidity and conformity.

Russell examines the issues of the post-independence nature of Ireland and its implications for the vanishing culture of native Gaelic Ireland. A land, once complete with its own religion (pre-Christian Celtic) and its own language, finds virtually all major characteristics of that earlier society either gone or dying. Ireland has become trapped in

a subaltern state: “Criticism of Brendan Behan’s masterpiece *The Quare Fellow* has generally viewed it as an anti-capital punishment drama and often tended to neglect its critique of lingering imperial remnants in postindependence Ireland^{xxxvi}”(73).

Unfortunately, Russell’s assessment of the often myopically focused criticism is accurate, but he asserts that “*The Quare Fellow* (1956) is a ribald polemic against capital punishment, on a more subversive level, it is also an insider’s exposé of the collision between residual British imperialism and the vanishing world of Gaelic Ireland in an urban Dublin jail”(73). Behan mixes Gaelic with various levels of English in *The Quare Fellow* with extraordinary dramatic effect.

Behan’s plays, *The Hostage* and *The Quare Fellow*, provide excellent opportunities for examining the various aspects of this study: the importance of the set as prison, both actual and covert, interrogation by both the government and the IRA, and the act of ultimate sanction in the death of the Quare Fellow and of the British soldier. Additionally, Behan establishes a tone that reflects his complex and pessimistic world view and gives birth to other later existentialist and absurdist theater.

Behan’s long time in the IRA and in prison, both in Britain and in the Republic of Ireland, armed him with the intellectual ammunition to create explosive writing; his complex personal life fueled his intricate artistic creations. Understanding these multifaceted plays requires an encompassing approach such as heteroglossia, a critical tool that illuminates Behan’s style in *The Quare Fellow*. Mikhail Bahktin’s concept of heteroglossia is a useful approach to understanding the complexities that abound in this play. Bahktin argues that, in examining a novel, the critic must investigate the language on several levels. In this case, the critic who glosses this play must look into multiple

meanings and techniques, the social critique of Shaw and Ibsen, an indictment of the Republic's political system, a critique of the existence of capital punishment and of the Irish class system, classical form through the off-stage execution of the prisoner, absurdity, bureaucracy, a post-colonial critique of then contemporary Irish government and society, the carnivalesque, passive audience participation, interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction. In *The Quare Fellow*, a Bakhtinian heteroglossia uncovers various forms of language in the text: working-class language of most of the inmates, the upper-class, or at least middle class speech of the bureaucrats and ruling class, and the use of Gaelic. These combine to give a compelling examination at the textures of language and their applications within the confines and context of the prison. The convergence of the multiplicity of seemingly disparate voices creates a kind of chaotic symphony that reveals turmoil in the prison system in general and specifically the Republic's use of capital punishment.

The first voice is that of a prisoner, but because it is in song, this voice is an intertwining of both the working-class inmates' and Behan's satiric voice. Behan's voice, that of the playwright, controls, intrudes on, and guides the action. Given that a recording of Behan singing the opening song is used often in production, and that the tone of the satire is clearly Behan's, his voice is established in the play. As will be more common in novels and plays in the 1980s and forward, Behan's voice intrudes either directly or indirectly and controls the play's progress.

The voice of the inmates is that of the working-class, the proletariat of Ireland, which seems to have missed not only the industrial age but also the strong union movement in Europe and America. Here the working-class often does not have

employment and is working-class more in hope than in reality; here the working-class is a societal group without control—marginalized politically even though they are a majority of the population of the Republic. Behan symbolizes that reduction of power in the setting of the prison. Here the prisoners are not only deprived of the freedom to coexist in the outer society of the Republic but also the opportunity to survive and thrive. Like peasants in the feudal system that had been imposed on them in the previous eight centuries, the free working-class of the Republic cannot hope for true advancement in a listless economy. For many in the 1950s Irish proletariat, they are members of the working class only in theory, because they do not have employment; as long term unemployed, they actually inhabit the lowest rung of poverty, not truly the proletariat.

A look at an early dialogue illustrates the class of most of the inmates. Two prisoners, designated only as Prisoner A and Prisoner B, discuss the possibility of an official reprieve being granted to another prisoner. What is significant is not the mundane nature of what they discuss but their language. The audience sees them as they prepare to begin their day's work:

PRISONERS A and B come out of their cells, collect buckets and brushes, and and start the morning's chores. A. is a man of 40, he has done two "laggings," a sentence of five years or more, and some preventive detention. B. is a gentle-looking man and easy-going.

PRISONER A. Nice day for the races.

PRISONER B. Don't think I can make it today. Too much to do in the office.

Did you hear about the commotion last night round in D. Wing? A reprieve

must have come through.

PRISONER A. Aye, but there's two for a haircut and a shave, I wonder which one's been chucked? (2)

This is not a country club prison for the arrested elite of society. While they mimic the conversation that they expect such upper-class men to have during the course of their business days in their discussion of offices and races, it is apparent that they have not experienced that world. Rather than having these men report an accurate representation of an upper-class environment, Behan creates a caricature of that world, what might have been a typical view from the perspective of the proletariat. These unnamed men represent the underclass, the hopeless, the captured, and the controlled. Behan shines an unflinching spotlight on this theatre of the oppressed and the disenfranchised.

The voice of the controllers, the warders and the Governor of the prison, speak for the Irish Republic. A distinction exists even in the administrators of the prison. Most of the warders sound a great deal like the inmates—for them, this is a job. They have ironically become true members of the proletariat through their employment, even as they administer the suppression of their fellow working-class men. By virtue of having employment in 1950s Ireland, they move up a step in the class system from impoverished to proletarian. While it might seem like they were always working-class, it is crucial to remember, that for many of the poor in 1950s Ireland, having employment seemed like a dream. If work was found, then that person moved up the class ladder from that of poverty to working-class. In a discussion with another warder, Regan's working-class language illustrates his background.

WARDER REGAN. Mr. Crimmin. The Chief, a decent man, he's after giving us his kind permission to go into hospital and have a sit down and a smoke for ourselves when these fellows have the work started. He knew we'd goin anyway, so he saw the chance of bing floochalach^{xxxvii}, at no expense to the management. Here [*Takes out a packet of cigarettes, and takes some from it.*], here's a few fags for the lads. (53)

Regan knows that this gift will help the men and their work of digging a grave and building a gallows, but he also knows the limitations of the offering and its implications.

CRIMMON. I'll give them some of mine too.

WARDER REGAN. Don't do anything of the sort. One each is enough, you can slip them a couple when they're going to be locked up, if you like, but if these fellows had two fags each, they'd not work at all but spend the time out here blowing smoke rings in the evening air like lords. I'll slip in now, you come in after me. Tell them not to have them in their mouths if the Chief or the Governor comes out. (53)

Regan, one of the prisoners' class, only on the other side of the prison bars, gives them a small reward, but he is explicit in the need to keep the knowledge of this gift from the true authorities of the prison. Regan plays an intricate role—similar to that of a double agent. In his official capacity as a warden, he controls the inmates, and in his actuality as a working-class man, he tries to give them support and guidance. He administers

discipline and dispenses mercy. The second capacity puts him potentially at risk with the prison officials. In order to keep his employment, Regan is forced to hide his generosity and his inherent working-class identification from his employers. Almost as if he were an actor in a play-within-a-play, Regan wears the mask of officialdom around his employers, pretending to be other than what he is.

In another exchange, Regan demonstrates his working-class status as he discusses prisons with the carceral Priest – Holy Healey:

HEALEY. Society cannot exist without prisons, Regan. My job is to bring what help and comfort I can to these unfortunates. (32-33)

In these two sentences, Healey establishes that he is a member of the educated upper caste—a Catholic priest—and that he supports the theocratic-governmental-incarceration system of the Republic. Healey considers himself above the inmates and is there only to offer holy guidance to the men beneath him. He continues:

HEALEY . . . Really, a man with your outlook [Regan], I cannot see why you stay in the service.

WARDER REGAN. It's a soft job, sir, between hangings. (33)

This paid work is the crucial point for Regan—without the hangings, he has what he considers to be easy and secure employment, a near luxury for the working-class. More importantly, moreover, is the fact that he *has* employment, in a position likely to last,

working for the government. There would be no expected drop-off in the prison population in Ireland. Regan should not have to be concerned with landing on the dole.

Only the true head of the prison, the Governor, and the Catholic Priest, Holy Healey, both representatives of the elite, speak the language of the ruling class—educated English. In scene I of Act III, The Governor and the Chief are speaking about attitudes of the warders about the upcoming execution, especially seeing humor in it and the Governor's distaste for such views:

CHIEF. . . . and I think I ought to tell you that I heard the principal warder make a joke about the execution.

GOVERNOR. Good God, this sort of thing is getting out of hand. I was at my School Union this evening. I had to leave in sheer embarrassment; supposedly witty remarks made to me at my own table. My eldest son was furious with me for going at all. He was at a table with a crowd from the University. They were even worse. One young pup went so far as to ask him if he thought I would oblige with a rendering of "The night before Larry was stretched". I shall certainly tell the Principal that there's at least one place in this city where an execution is taken very seriously indeed. Good night to you. (74-75)

The Governor maintains a supercilious attitude as well as grammatically correct Queen's English. It is not difficult to see the Victorian attitude holdover in his manner and speech. His assumption of the right to authority because of his class resonates through

the use of the language. His is the voice of the upper-class, one not liked, if obeyed, by the proletariat. That working-class disdain of the language they are compelled to obey is clarified and amplified through Behan's satire.

Another voice in this heteroglossia is that of Irish Gaelic. Behan shows some of the prisoners speaking in Ireland's native language. It is an interesting bit of dialogue that illustrates an unusual bit of class disparity in the prison population as well as establishing that Gaelic is the native and authentic Irish language that has now been marginalized into a native language spoken only by a few on the western part of the island. It is taught to others in school, resembling Latin in that it is important to the culture but essentially as a dying language. Those who learn to speak Gaelic are trying to reclaim an authentic aspect of their culture, long since pushed aside by the dominant conqueror England.

Their discussion is instructive, both of class distinctions and the marginalization of Gaelic. The prisoners discuss Warden Regan's attitudes towards capital punishment, and Prisoner D speaks as a member of the educated elite, one who has completely incorporated the legal and social ethos of the conquering society. He sees capital punishment as a necessary way to protect the rights and property of the ruling class. He might be a prisoner, but he still perceives his proper status as one of the ruling class.

PRISONER C. Oh, Mr. Regan doesn't believe in capital punishment.

PRISONER D. My God, the man's an atheist! He should be dismissed from the public service. I shall take it up with the Minister when I get out of here. I went to school with his cousin.

PRISONER A. Who the hell does he think he is, a bloody high court judge?

PRISONER D. Chaos!

PRISONER B. He's in for embezzlement, there were two suicides and a bye-election over him. (56)

The other inmates may not like Prisoner D., but he is certain of his position both inside and outside of the jail. For this man, his sentence seems more of an inconvenience than a real punishment. He believes that his social position will be intact upon release. Whether or not he is correct in his assumption is not the issue, but this self-foregrounding of social importance drives his self-worth as well as that of the other prisoners' view of him.

PRISONER C. [*to others*]. A college educated man in here, funny, isn't it?

PRISONER D. I shall certainly bring all my influence to bear to settle this Regan fellow.

PRISONER C. You must be a very important man. (57)

This line has at least two main readings: a) – of straight forward recognition of the inmate's superior external social status, and b) – of satiric irony, suggesting that whatever he was on the outside is completely unimportant on the inside of the prison. Carceral status is often not dependant on a person's social status in the external world.

After this snippet of dialogue, the prisoners speak a few lines of Gaelic.

PRISONER C. Go bfoiridh. dia rainn^{xxxviii}.

PRISONER D. Irish speaking?

PRISONER C. Yes, sir.

PRISONER D. Then it might interest you to know that I took my gold medal in Irish.

PRISONER C. Does that mean he speaks Irish?

PRISONER D. Of course.

PRISONER C. Oh sir. Ta Caoliumn go leor agamsa. O'n gobliabh an amach^{xxxix}, sir.

PRISONER B. That's fixed you.

PRISONER D. Quite. tuighin thu^{xl}. (57)

Behan is not simply demonstrating his knowledge of Gaelic, and through this example, establishing his deep Irish roots as artist and revolutionary, but also he effectively disconnects the audience, most of whom would not speak Gaelic, from the prison conversation. The Irish words are as distant from the experience of the middle and upper-class theatre audience as are the experiences of the majority of the working-class inmates. Behan does not provide a translation for the Gaelic, so he intends to confuse the audience about their meanings and, in effect, marginalize the audience in a similar way that the English speaking population marginalizes the rapidly diminishing Irish speakers. In effect, through the use of a distanced language, Behan successfully ostracizes the Republic's majority population—striking back against the domination of the post-conquest society.

Behan's use of Gaelic also becomes a weapon, a technique employed by the prisoners to gain what would seemingly be impossible in a completely controlled and constantly observed environment—a brief moment of privacy. Roche explores this point: “If private communication between the prisoners shuts out the authorities, Gaelic goes even further by breaking down the absolute separation between warder and prisoner and the system of order maintained by such segregations” (31). In this case, Roche elucidates first the power of any private communication between the prisoners, and then he moves to the implications of the use of Gaelic, both actions undercutting the state's power, which is determined by strict adherence to assigned roles and place. Roche examines the exchange in Act II in which Crimmin, a warder and prisoner C, through their use of Gaelic, subvert completely the marginalization of the native language and its speakers and undermine the ultimate authority of the carceral system to regulate the totality of the inmates' lives. What is crucial to understand is that the dialogue is an actual exchange of information between two people who communicate in intimate terms, on a first-name basis. The exchange differs dramatically from what would be expected between a warder and inmate, including strict formality and a sequence of commands and responses. (Roche 31)

When Prisoner C is addressed by Crimmin, his ‘Seadh’ is questioning and wondering, an invitation to discourse which the use of the first name further encourages:

CRIMMIN: [*calls Prisoner C*] hey!

PRISONER C. [*comes to him.*] Seadh a Thomáis?

CRIMMIN. [*gives him cigarettes and matches*]. Seo, cúpla toitín.

Táim fein is an screw eile ag dul isteach chuig an oispeadeal,
nóimeat. Roinn amach na toitíní siúd, is glacfaidh sibh gal.

Má thagann an Governor nó'n Chief nó an Principal, ná bíobdh
in bhur moill agaibh iad. A' tuigeann tú?

PRISONER C. Tuigim, a Thomáis, go raibh maith agat.

CRIMMIN: [*officially*]. Right, now get back to your work.

PRISONER C. Yes, sir.^{xli} (53-54)

Gaelic here provides the prisoner and this warder with a medium for a more private and authentic exchange than the English language and voice, with its imperialist and authoritarian overtones. (31)

Behan's use of the Irish language then is complex and multi-layered in itself. It separates the mainly English-speaking audience from the non-translated dialogue, it demonstrates the marginalization of the native speakers from the majority of 1950s Irish society, and it gives a highly effective tool to those who do speak Gaelic to gain privacy and a modicum of control over their immediate environment, no matter how restrictive their situation. While such a brief exertion of agency might seem to be trivial in the larger carceral setting, it is, indeed, a subversive and important revolutionary action in its own right. This claiming of personal space and voice undercuts the attempt by the prison to maintain absolute regulation over the prisoners' lives and actions. In this tiny bit of assertion against authority, the prisoners gain a piece of liberty, a slice of agency, and a hope for self-definition in a rigidly dehumanizing setting.

Another distinctive aspect of the multitude of voices in *The Quare Fellow* is Behan's incorporation of oral tradition in his characters' speech. In a nation in which oral story-telling has been an ancient practice, Behan uses aspects of that tradition in his play. The importance lies in the existence, but not apparent, eloquence of Behan's language. It does not soar with artificial theatrical hyperbole; rather, it convinces with the appropriateness—even while manipulated into near poetry—of the working class Irish.

As an example of Behan's oral tradition, in which he directly imparts his dialogue convincingly with the speech of the proletariat, while using that speech to undercut the religious hypocrisy of the Catholic Church's support for a government that enforced capital punishment, consider Dunlavin's exchange with Neighbor in Act I. As the inmates wait for the appearance of the sarcastically named priest, they discuss the likelihood that the same representative of the Church is probably drunk:

DUNLAVIN. No sign of Holy Healey yet.

NEIGHBOR: You're wasting your time chasing after old Healey. He told me here one day, and I was trying to get myself an old overcoat out of him, that he was here only as a headman of the Department of Justice, and he couldn't do business of any sort or size whatever, good, bad or indifferent. It's my opinion that old Healey does be half-jarred a deal of the time anyway. (25)

The Neighbor's implication is both telling in its accusation and accurate in its working-class formation. Neighbor does not simply say that Healey is probably partially

intoxicated most of the time but expresses that exact point as “half-jarred,” the working-class term for a pint of beer.

Dunlavin extends the indictment of the religious figure further:

DUNLAVIN. The likes of Healey would take a sup all right, but being a high-up civil servant, he wouldn't drink under his own name. You'd see the likes of Healey nourishing themselves with balls of malt, at eleven in the morning, in little back snugs round Merrion Row. The barman would lose his job if he so much as breathed their name. (25)

Dunlavin understands that a man in the position of power like Healey must not be overt in his daily drinking, but if he does it in out of the way places, his peccadillos will be ignored, if not actively covered-up. Hypocrisy becomes the tool of the power elite; what the proletariat does in the open, the ruling-class must do in private or under anonymity, at least during working hours. In order to maintain a façade of decency and upper-class decorum, Healey, like his compatriots, must conduct all vices behind closed doors. The appearance of upper and middle-class decency and control is essential to the myth of its power. If its hypocrisies and sins were to be apparent to all, then a great part of its authority to rule over the lower classes would be weakened. The apparent differences between their actions and those of the lower classes would vanish, and they would be perceived to be mere puppets of the larger post-colonial state.

If a member of the lower-class is present with an upper-class person, he/she exists only to serve but not to notice any activities. Much like in upper-class England, speech

was not controlled or hidden around the servants because it was expected that those in service would never truly listen to the speech of the upper-class, nor would they be assumed to have the capability to understand its meaning. It is as if Victorian England were alive and well in Dublin, in which the Church functioned as a part of the state. The bartenders know their jobs could be threatened if they even acknowledged the reality of their powerful customers' names.

DUNLAVIN. . . . [continuing the previous speech] It'd be "Mr. H. wants a drop of water but not too much." "Yes, Mr. O." "No, sir, Mr. Mac wasn't in this morning." "Yes, Mr. D. Fine morning; it will be a lovely day if it doesn't snow." Educated drinking, you know. Even a bit of chat about God at an odd time, so as you'd think God was in another department, but not long off the Bog, and they was doing Him a good turn to be talking well about Him. (25)

The obsequious toadying demanded of the bartenders, as if they were merely servants employed in an old British manor is both appalling and accurate. Not only does Behan imbue this passage with ugly undertones from the past, but he also shows us the distaste of those who served the upper class.

The final voice to consider in the heteroglossia of *The Quare Fellow* is that of the playwright—Brendan Behan. Behan is not overt in his insertion of authorial voice, but its effect is present nonetheless. This is not unlike the authorial intrusion that would grow in the latter part of the twentieth century but is still a salient feature of the play. As mentioned earlier, some companies use Behan's recording of the song to set the tone. His is the controlling speech—the one that implicates all in his sweeping critique of

capital punishment and the torpor in Irish society and government that allowed such a punishment. Whenever we see satire, comedy, the music hall, or carnivalesque in the play, these are expressions of Behan's voice, the guiding principle behind the action and the critique. As was shown earlier, that Behan inserts himself into the play's action through the opening song, I argue that it is Behan's voice, that of the playwright that supersedes the characters when satire, the song of the panto, or the expression of Bahktinian carnivalesque appear. In those moments, Behan is directly present. In this way, *The Quare Fellow* forms a bridge between the naturalism of *Design For A Headstone* and the overt immersion into new theatrical forms in *The Hostage*. Behan, in *The Quare Fellow*, prefigures post-modern authorial intrusion while not yet emerging into theater of the absurd.

In addition to heteroglossia, the form of *The Quare Fellow* is important to examine. Critics, however, do not always recognize the complex structure of Behan's plays. *The Quare Fellow* is often seen only as representing an attack on capital punishment in Ireland. If this play were perceived today as simply a biographically-driven representation of sociological problems, it would be interesting as an historical account but would suffer as drama. Capital punishment no longer exists in Ireland, and the political situation of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland would be vastly different and more complex than it was in the 1950s. Additionally, if viewed from a purely realistic basis, the two plays—*The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*—could be judged to be failures because of their loose plots and nearly farcical elements. Ted E. Boyle, in *Brendan Behan*, explains that *The Quare Fellow* has been attacked because it has a loose, seemingly disconnected structure. (67) "Theatrical purists abhor the fact that the plot

does not lend itself easily to traditional analysis. Essentially, the plot possesses no "complication," in the structural sense of the thickening of the plot, the buildup to the climax. And, if the structure or conflict of the play is the point at which the crucial question or conflict of the play must be resolved, *The Quare Fellow* has no climax (67). This play may, indeed, lack a coherent naturalistic structure, but this absence of a formal organization does not reduce its artistry and power and its movement into the kind of theatre that was soon to burst onto the world stage—theatre of the absurd. A formalist reading of the play misses its more important and overriding quality of absurdity, carnivalesque, and the power of the metaphor of prison for the Irish situation.

This lack of formal realistic structure imbues the play with strength. Behan rejects the standard paradigm of opening with detailed exposition typical of realistic plays, followed by a rising action of complications, in which thematic ideas and character conflicts develop to their logical highpoint—the climax—and are then wrapped up in a neatly written resolution. He chooses another form for *The Quare Fellow*. In this new structure, he creates the tone and actuality of a death watch. Like a family waiting for a terminally ill member to die, the audience, as well as the inmates, prepare for and await the moment of the execution of the Quare Fellow. There is no suspense—this is not a melodrama in which the characters and the audience wait and hope for a last minute reprieve from the Governor/authority to stay the execution. At no point is the audience pulled emotionally into the story of the condemned man; Behan does not use the play to create empathy for the Quare Fellow. Behan establishes that the condemned man is guilty of a terrible crime, but that simple foundation of fact does not mitigate the point of absurdity and ethical error of the coming execution. Behan's point is not the guilt of the

condemned man that informs the situation—it is the implication of the state and the population in another homicide, albeit a legally sanctioned death. All are condemned, all are implicit, and all are guilty in the convoluted justice of the Republic.

In this structure of waiting, Behan employs a trope similar to that of his countryman Beckett in *Waiting For Godot*. The action of waiting for an event is an externalization of the implacable quality of the event itself. It is coming, but it is unstoppable and tragic. As Brannigan explains, “No heroes are to emerge, no one is saved, nothing will interrupt the tragic fate of the condemned man” (“Form and Ethics” 250). All that we, the audience, can do is to observe the actions of the men who prepare for and await the execution. Anthony Roche, in *Contemporary Irish Drama*, examines the similarities between Behan and Beckett to argue that the absence of the Quare Fellow is crucial for understanding the effect of the imminent execution on the inmates, that the play becomes murkier, and it is obvious that neither will the condemned man ever appear on stage, nor will he be saved from his execution (24). Behan’s structure emphasizes the absence of the title character, thus amplifying his existence and soon-to-be-death in the minds of the inmates and the audience. It is akin to why a book, in which the reader’s imagination is engaged, is almost always more powerful than a movie adaptation of a book in which the director’s viewpoint is the only one present. Behan instills the play with a demand on the audience’s intelligence and imagination. The structure of the play, therefore, is framed between two songs and establishes that the audience will observe and participate in that death watch, even as Behan implicates all in his satire.

In *The Quare Fellow*, Behan uses the idea of capital punishment and the inherent absurdity of a man knowing his legally fated time of death as a way to examine his larger

view of the absurdity of life. Included in this absurd view of life is also an image of Kafkaesque horror—that of dealing with an unseen, omnipowerful, and ultimately inhumane bureaucracy. The overriding force is that of the government, one that clearly favors the powerful and the connected. The inmates of the play come from the lower class, the proletariat in the Republic, which never seemed to gain collective bargaining power as did other proletariats in other parts of the industrial world. In the Republic, they are seen and used much as they were as subjects of the British Empire; now their rulers are unseen bureaucrats, the wielders of authority in the Irish government.

Boyle asserts Behan's role as a forerunner of absurdity in theatre. In this respect, Behan is very much aware of the societal and theatrical developments of his time. Martin Esslin, in his excellent *The Theatre of the Absurd*, says that absurdist drama "castigates, satirically, the absurdity of lives lived unaware and unconscious of ultimate reality,"^{xlii} lives which exclude humanity as they allow themselves to become prisoners of "inauthentic, petty society." This is exactly the type of satire Behan writes. Both Behan and playwrights better known as practitioners of the "theatre of the absurd" go beyond criticism of the hollowness of the society which man has created. With Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Jean-Paul Sartre, Behan realizes that man is thrown into a world which he can neither control nor understand; and Behan's answer, like that of his contemporaries, is laughter. (60-61)

Much as Samuel Beckett does in *Waiting For Godot*, Behan presents a world in which the defined action of waiting is a dominant motif. In their presence in a circumstance of nonmovement, these prisoners represent a Camusesque Sisyphean absurdity. While not the totality of the importance of the play, this existential absurdity drives the inherent personal meaninglessness that the prisoners experience in the boredom and stasis of their incarcerated lives.

Another important element in *The Quare Fellow* is the inclusion, although in a suggestive manner, which Behan will develop more fully in *The Hostage* of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Behan included Irish comedic tradition, including that of the proletariat music-hall with satire, to create a carnivalesque which bites deeply even as it inverts and subverts the world it examines. Brannigan speaks to this issue concerning both plays: “In *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage* . . . he [Behan] experimented with the dramatic possibilities of tragicomedy, and specifically of political and ethical atrocities within predominantly comedic frames. In both plays, the ethical issues at stake could hardly have been more timely or more significant to the author and intended audiences” (“Form and Ethics” 255). Brannigan frames the form of these plays in terms of tragicomedy, but I assert that they are more clearly delineated as Behan incorporating Bakhtian carnivalesque as an aspect in his plays. In fact, Brannigan further explores and incorporates this point: “Behan chose to represent these ethical questions about violence, law, justice and political identity not through the naturalist or melodramatic forms familiar from his youth, but through the effective use of carnivalesque comedy in his plays” (255). Behan understood that a standard representation in the Shavian or Ibsenesque naturalism would not serve his purpose or his message. He needed to use the

forms he knew would be able to illustrate the injustice he saw in a way that would also use almost Roman Juvenalian style satire to deeply underscore his political and ethical indictments.

In this satire, Behan mixes a fiery brew of elements, including that very particular Irish concern with death, and infuses it with humor, with a combination of compassion for the inmates and the Quare Fellow and ridicule for the society that allows capital punishment. “The compassion is mediated through the character of Warder Regan, who seems to be Behan’s spokesman in the play. It is Regan who cries out against the brutality of capital punishment. And it is Regan who keeps vigil as at a wake on the night before the execution, when a prisoner sings a love song in Irish” (155). In an element that deeply suggests the carnivalesque, at the time immediately preceding his execution, a time which should be somber, there is a ridiculous argument over the Quare Fellow’s letters. “This mixture of death and comedy is very Irish and links Behan closely to what Vivian Mercer (1962) calls the Irish comic tradition” (155). Throughout both *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*, this infusion, correlation, and connection of laughter and death are apparent.

Behan uses music hall song and dance to introduce the play and to serve as a Greek chorus to comment throughout. This music clearly demonstrates the carnivalesque characteristic of the inverted and distorted world view. A crucial element of the carnivalesque is a reversed, often widely disorienting world view, in which the ruled and rulers might reverse their situation or in which the very ridiculousness of the situation described heightens rather than diminishes the societal critique. Part of what Behan includes is the use of spectacle of public execution. Furthermore, the complex nature of

Behan's plays shadows the comedic aspects of these texts. Behan incorporates several theatrical traditions in *The Quare Fellow*. In speaking to this point Murray says, "In a rave review of *The Hostage* in the *Observer* Kenneth Tynan suggested that the style of production was *commedia dell' arte*. More to the point, it was Brechtian and epic, alienating and fragmented in the modernist mode" (158-159). Murray is certainly correct in pointing out these characteristics of *The Hostage*; inherent in this play and *The Quare Fellow* is also the influence of Rabalais. By using such an unusual form for his play—mixing comedy, the absurd, and the serious—Behan disarms his audience and then interrogates them about their immediate culpability in the events. Brannigan begins a discussion of a similar point by referring to Susan Sontag's examination of the relationship between images of suffering and ethics. "At stake in this relationship between ethics and form is the question of how the atrocity can be made meaningful, memorable, or imaginable, and to what ends, for the remote spectator" (Brannigan 247). In the case of drama and specifically Behan's plays, we need to see the relationship a step closer than Sontag suggests—to that of the immediate, not distant, spectator. "The same question [as explored by Sontag] animates the two plays *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*, Brendan Behan's most successful contributions to modern theatre" (Brannigan 247). Indeed, the audience is confronted by both a state sanctioned execution in *The Quare Fellow* and an IRA ordered killing in *The Hostage*.

In Behan's plays, the political ideologies of either the state or fugitive nationalism put into lethal practice exclusionary conceptions of what constitutes a narratable or grievable subject, with tragic consequences. But

the form of Behan's plays is not tragedy: The subtitle of *The Quare Fellow* is 'A Comedy of Drama', and *The Hostage* is essentially a farce, heavily indebted to the influences of cabaret and music-hall. Behan's medium for the representation of atrocity was comedy . . .(Brannigan 248)

By choosing comedy as his means for portraying horror, Behan does not lessen his message. As Brannigan suggests, this seeming contradiction amplifies the message, creating a *momento mori* that penetrates to the heart of the Republic's and the IRA's seeming indifference to the moral and human consequences of their actions.^{xliii}

For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque represents the ability of ordinary people, often those on the lower rung of society, to exert power, through the disordering and reordering of society. It was in his seminal work, *Rabelais and His World*, that Bakhtin developed his concept of the carnivalesque. Kearney succinctly explains the concept and why it is popular today, especially among people in highly controlled societies. Its strength comes not from any official recognition but from a primal drive established long before government and legal systems. That force is expressed in satire and the desire to reform the world in often outlandish ways, even if only for very brief moments. (491) "This is what is so attractive about the theory for people living in increasingly regulated societies: the possible existence of a fundamental human energy that will never be fully suppressed by governments no matter how hard they try to relegate it to the level of the folk, the coarse, the vulgar, the obscene" (491). It is the elemental force that drives the satire through both *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*.

Behan's use of comedy initially relaxes their emotional barriers and then strikes to the core of their morality and ethos. The audience confronts the consequences of the actions of their society:

The comedic forms of Behan's drama, in other words, are essentially ethical in purpose, and work to construct an alternative sense of moral values to the necrophiliac tendencies of the political ideologies satirized in the plays. If both plays take as their centre the spectacle of human suffering, this is inseparable from the alternative spectacles of carnivalesque celebration which are performed throughout, and which indeed form the conclusion to both plays.

The hanged man and the butchered hostage become *momento mori*, not through the achievement of ethical and political gravity, but through the counter-discourses of comedy and music. (Brannigan 249)

Behan creates a dialogic interrogation of the audience that is both compelling in its immediacy but oddly devoid of emotional sympathy—in that distanced emotionality, *The Quare Fellow* is more connected to Brechtian epic theatre than to the easy emotion of the music hall. In the music-hall, laughter and music allows the audience to escape temporarily from the difficulties of everyday life; in the epic theater, the realities of political and ethical existence are confronted intellectually and the audience is encouraged to perform its own dialogue with those issues. “Behan's play [*The Quare Fellow*] shows no interest in enlisting the sympathy of the audience for the condemned man as tragic hero, or even as individual. Instead, it mirrors the degree to which, in the public discourse surrounding capital punishment, the life of the condemned man is

rendered less than human, his death unremarkable, and his burial, and the play shows at the end, an expedient form of disappearance” (Brannigan 249). The crucial point is that Behan illustrates not only the implication of the audience with the execution but also that the very nature of the seeming ordinariness of the actions in Irish society itself dehumanizes both the capital prisoner and the rest of Ireland. No one is able to be extricated from either responsibility or from dehumanization by these actions.

The very action of the offstage execution dehumanizes the prisoner, making him seem more a commodity, a mere thing to be disposed of, than a human being. This is, of course, an absurd idea, but a necessary one for a country that maintains the governmental tendencies of the preceding government. Certainly Behan might have decided to make the hangman Irish, but the naming of the executioner as English underscores that the Republic of Ireland is still deeply connected to its former colonizer and as Roche points out, the potential Irish applicants for the task in the play are not acceptable. Behan denigrates the Irish hangmen as drunkards. Roche correctly points out that “In 1954, the same year as the Pike premiere of *The Quare Fellow*, the British hangman Albert Pierrepoint executed the last man to be hanged in Ireland on 20 April at Mountjoy Prison. Capital punishment was not removed from the books until 1990. It had remained on, like so much pre-independence legislation, rarely if ever acted upon, but continuing to cast a shadow over people’s minds” (26). Capital punishment, remaining in the legal system, as it had been under British control, even though almost never used, nevertheless maintained a part of the pre-independence British control, even in a post-colonial world.

Albert Camus, a leading existentialist and a major intellect on the concept of the absurd, posits that the world is ultimately unknowable, and in the separation between the

desire for knowledge and order and the impossibility of reaching that goal lays the absurd. Camus says "This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity"(6). The human being, according to Camus, constantly strives to impose order on the chaos of the universe, an impossible and ludicrous feat. "I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world" (Camus 21). According to Camus, knowledge and moral order are human-created and imposed, rather than formed by a God for human learning and obedience; therefore, for Camus, life, not death, is the ultimate aim. Suicide, some existentialists would argue, is the natural consequence of the inability to ground life on external, preexisting values. Some existentialists would argue that if there is no meaning, then nothing matters, including human life. Camus disagrees. Suicide, he asserts, is itself an imposition of an illusory human order on death. "Suicide. . . is acceptance [of a given, human-imposed belief system] at its extreme"(Camus 54). Yet, even though suicide may promise potential control over irrational life, if the reality of the experience of death cannot be known, then the human emphasis must be on life. Camus states his position clearly: ". . . even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate"(Camus v). Camus emphasizes that ". . . the point is to live"(Camus 65)^{xliv}. If "the point is to live," then murder, as well as suicide, is not justifiable. Execution is state-sanctioned extension of murder. Whether ordered by a recognized government or a microcosmic version of such a state in the form of a political terrorist organization, absurdity, according to Camus, remains inherent in an execution. A condition of the

human experience is not to know the time of one's death, but those who are condemned are blindingly cognizant of their fatal appointment. Thus, the condemned person's life takes on an amplified duality: to experience the remaining lifespan as fully as possible and to realize the horror of preordained death. If true knowledge, in a Camusian worldview, is ultimately impossible, then this knowledge of appointed death is itself a mockery, and the situation of the inmates on death row or the political prisoner awaiting execution is one of amplified absurdity—not only do they experience the normal absurdity of the ordinary human condition, but they also experience the absurdity of knowing the unknowable.

If written in a naturalistic fashion, the Quare Fellow's execution might be expected to be presented with a somber tone, but Behan introduces a rowdy feeling and tone as he begins with:

A hungry feeling came o'er me stealing
And the mice were squealing in my prison cell,
And that old triangle
Went jingle jangle
Along the banks of the Royal Canal. (66)

Rather than showing prisoners in the drudgery of their typical days, the tone is heightened and altered by the music-hall song, even in the midst of an extraordinary event—the planned killing of a human being. For Behan, the inclusion of the music hall into his form is completely natural: “. . . [He] never tired of reminding his public that his

theatrical education had been in the melodramas staged by his uncle in the Queen's Theatre rather than in 'proper' theatres or university lectures" (490). In beginning and ending *The Quare Fellow* with music-hall songs, Behan establishes a structural frame for his play and foregrounds the importance of the music-hall and its lively nature.

The imminent execution fuels the inmates' gossip of the day and establishes the social order within the prison that mirrors the external societal order. Dunlavin, an old man who has spent much of his life in prison, speaks to the interactions within the prison and to the situation surrounding the coming death. When discussing the new prisoners, Dunlavin establishes that a sexual offender is the lowest class in the inmates' hierarchy:

DUNLAVIN: You wouldn't mind old Silver-top. Killing your wife is a natural class of a thing could happen to the best of us. But this dirty animal on me left. . .

PRISONER B: Ah well, now he's here he'll just have to do his birdlime like anyone else.

DUNLAVIN: That doesn't say that he should do it in the next flowery dell to me. Robbers, thieves and murderers I can abide, but when it comes to that class of carry-on—Good night, Joe Doyle. (5)

Dunlavin clearly has no problems in sharing prison space with a murderer—that is a normal crime—but he does not want to associate or be near a sexual offender, "that class of carry-on." Whether inside or outside the prison, the inmates conform to the imposed

view of criminals and class strata. Mirroring the class system of the outside world, the inmates establish a social strata based on their own moral laws by whose existence they maintain a false sense of structure—the human desire to impose order on chaos. In this imposition, they reflect the already established views shared by the larger world; thus, they are imprisoned in a construct from which they not only cannot escape but into which they gladly put themselves. Behan establishes the hierarchy of the prisoners' society as a context by which to illustrate the existential meaninglessness of that world:

DUNLAVIN: (*calling in to the OTHER FELLOW*). Hey, come out and get gelded. . .[to the NEIGHBOR] Don't have any chat at all with that fellow.

D'you see what he's in for? . . .

NEIGHBOR: What the hell does that mean?

DUNLAVIN: A bloody sex mechanic. (23-24)

With this demonstration of the prisoners' social strata, the action in *The Quare Fellow* centers around the preparation and performance of the execution. For all involved competent work on the issue is necessary and expected. In performing this work as if it were completely mundane, the prisoners accept an inherently unacceptable idea: they are helping to kill one of their own. They must act as if this absurd activity were normal. One prisoner explains some of the preparations:

YOUNG PRISONER 1. But I tell you what you will see from our wing this morning. It's the carpenter bringing up the coffin for the quare fellow

and leaving it over in the mortuary to have it handy for the morning" (10).

The inmates and warders also act as performers in a theatrical piece, a play-within-the-play; thus, Behan creates a meta-theatrical context. Not only is *The Quare Fellow* observed by the audience in the theater, but also the execution becomes a play in which the inmates act and react. As thoroughly as actors performing roles in a production for paying customers, the inmates take on parts in this performance, one in which they are both participants and audience, both observers and observed. Sometimes they joke, sometimes they break into song, and sometimes they prepare the stage. By instilling these actions with a tone of comedy, Behan suggests that the apparent normalcy of the situation is a disguise for the acutely abnormal circumstances.

The setting itself expands and amplifies the meta-theatricality of *The Quare Fellow*. There are three elements present: the audience outside, inside the prison, and the event itself. In a similar manner to Athol Fugard's *The Island*,^{xiv} Behan extends the audience of the spectacle of the coming execution to include the actual audience, which is itself watching the men prepare the set for the execution. This audience inclusion is both the macrocosmic metaphor of Ireland, and perhaps the world (what would Hamlet say?) as a prison and a microcosmic specific example of the carnivalesque theatrical representation of a performed execution. Behan, even as he makes his audience uncomfortable in a claustrophobic setting, never loses control of humor. Behan uses the question (or cliché) of the condemned man waiting for a final reprieve as a joke, even though Dunlavin is serious in his recounting of the incident:

DUNLAVIN: . . .Although I remember once in a case like now when there were two fellows to be topped over two different jobs, didn't the bloody fellow from the Prison Board, as it was then, in Max Greeb's time, didn't he tell the wrong man he was reprieved? Your man was delighted for a few hours and then they had to go back and tell him "Sorry, my mistake, but you're to be topped^{xlvi} after all"? (6-7)

So a man, who already has to face the horror of his coming death, is briefly reprieved, only to be informed that the stay of execution was a mistake. His brief enjoyment of life is ultimately more painful and ludicrous than his steady progression to death. Behan clearly illustrates and heightens the distance of which Camus speaks between desire and knowledge by the doubled absurdity of the condemned-reprieved-condemned man's fate. Behan further amplifies the absurdity by using a stock device of the last-minute reprieve, but he mocks this cliché by making a joke of the mistaken identity of the condemned man. Hence, Behan creates a situation of morbid humor.

In order for the execution to proceed properly and for the show to go on, there must be a star. It would be a usurpation of authority if the condemned man killed himself; in fact, it would be a dereliction of duty for the star of the show not to take the stage at the appointed time. Much like a stage manager keeps a theatrical production running smoothly and the actors ready, so Warder Regan, keeping Behan's play-within-a-play progressing, continues the preparations for the execution moving and the star participant alive:

HEALEY: Ah yes, you're helping the Canon at the execution tomorrow morning, I understand.

WARDER REGAN: Well, I shall be with the condemned man sir, seeing that he doesn't do away with himself during the night and that he goes down the hole with his neck properly broken in the morning, without making too much fuss about it. (29)

In order for the execution to be carried out "properly," the state must maintain the rigid time and place of the victim's death. For the state, the death itself is not as important as the control of its occurrence. But the victim must also play his role well for this performance to be a success. When the state denies the condemned man the opportunity to commit suicide, it defines itself as the ultimate power and arbiter of mortality.

Healey superficially expresses great compassion and wisdom, but the hypocrisy of his commentary is crystallized. Healey realizes that there are religious implications to executions, especially within the context of Catholic Ireland:

HEALEY: Well, we have one consolation, Regan, the condemned man gets the priest and the sacraments, more than his victim got maybe. I venture to say that some of them die holier deaths than if they had finished their natural span.

WARDER REGAN: We can't advertise "Commit a murder and die a happy death," sir. We'd have them all at it. They take religion very seriously in this country. (29)

The tone of this dialogue indicates that Warder Regan, understanding some of the incongruity of this situation, has a sense of irony about it, while Healey, the greater fool, is serious about his pronouncements. In his severity, Healey illustrates the hypocrisy of the church in lending its "sacraments" and support to such a rigid and brutal ritual. The church becomes not a savior of souls but an instrument of state sanction.

This level of religious hypocrisy is not lost on the inmates. Warder Regan, who is arguably the most decent man of the jailors, tries to convince another prisoner of the importance of religion. Regan is disgusted by Holy Healey's duplicity, but he maintains the importance of religious observance and involvement. Regan is able to separate the corrupt religious leader from the religion; for Regan, he sees value in the teachings of the Church even if many of its representatives are hypocritical:

WARDER REGAN. . . . You haven't forgotten what it's like to come from a decent home, have you, with the family rosary said every night? (61)

Regan seems almost desperate in his attempt to claim a semblance of normalcy and decency to the hoped-for bourgeois home life, including Catholic observance.

The prisoner with whom he is speaking is not convinced:

PRISONER A. I haven't any time for that kind of gab. I was in Walton last Christmas Eve, when the clergyman came to visit a young lad that had been given eighteen strokes of the cat that morning. When the kid stopped moaning long enough to hear what he had to say, he was told to think on the Lord's sufferings, then the cell door closed with a bang, leaving a smell of booze that would have tripped you up. (61)

To the most ordinary of inmates, indeed one whom Behan did not even designate with a name, the lesson is clear about whose side the Church is on and the level of decay and corruption that is possible, especially among the priests who visit the prisons. Behan, through this unnamed Prisoner A, focuses with diamond clarity his disdain for organized religion and its connection to the state in Ireland:

PRISONER A: *I never saw religion do anything but back up the screws.*

(Emphasis is mine.) (61)

Catholicism supports the guards who, in turn, do the bidding of the government. In a clarified moment of post-colonial repetition, the Republic of Ireland, recently having gained its freedom from Great Britain, acts as if it were still the 8 century conqueror running their island. The Irish government seems almost indistinguishable in its actions from that of Great Britain.

Indeed, the duplicity that Behan shows in *The Quare Fellow* extends beyond that of the church to include the entire government and society it represents. Anthony Roche explains that one of Behan's purposes was "to expose the hypocrisy by which the

physical act of hanging is neutralized by a brief newspaper announcement. The colonial legacy is obscured by the blank facade of bureaucracy. . . . In Behan's later treatment, the dramatic approach is more deliberately Brechtian: to acknowledge the spectacle as a theatrical event and penetrate through it to the motives which put it on, the social practices which authorise its continuance" (52). That Roche mentions "the spectacle as a theatrical event" suggests Foucault's idea of the public execution as spectacle. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, spends a considerable amount of time discussing the issue of the execution as public spectacle and its purpose. Foucault claims that public execution is a political ritual and that it

. . . has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular. The public execution, however hasty and everyday, belongs to a whole series of great rituals in which power is eclipsed and restored . . . Its aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength. (48-49)

In this respect, it is clear that Foucault's claim about the demonstration of the power of the state over the individual is accurate. Without such strength, this ultimate sanction would be impossible. While a fascinating idea, Foucault's public execution is not completely accurate in representing this theatrical spectacle.^{xlvii} The theater, often the

place of social and political dissent, is not the arm of official sanction. Brecht's and Artaud's view of spectacle, in which the state's power and justifications for its abuse are interrogated, are more useful here. Behan's theater and its portrayal of legalized execution is not Foucault's—Behan interrogates, satirizes, and skewers the state that performs such acts.

The show must go on, or the public will not have its spectacle. The next detail of preparation is to dig the grave. In Act II, the grave is the central point of the setting. Behan shows prisoners working at digging the grave that will be occupied the next morning. Behan heightens the horror with the physical presence of the "final resting place." Two young convicts decide that they need a close look at the grave for a joke.

SHAYBO: Eh, Schol, let's have a pike at the grave before the screw comes out.

SCHOLARA: Ah, yes, we must have a look at the grave.

They dive into the grave, the old men shout at them, but WARDER DONNELLY comes to the door of the hospital.

WARDER DONNELLY: Get up to hell out of that and back to your own wing, youse two. (*Shouts to the warders in the prison wing.*) Two of you there, pass them fellows into the Juveniles. Get to hell out of that! (Behan 41)

The warder's response to the two young convicts is similar to an old man's angry yelling at a couple of boys who have hit a ball into his yard and have trampled some of his garden. Donnelly is indignant that they do not seem to understand the implications of both their actions and the impending execution. Further, the Warder is appalled that the

young convicts have entered a taboo area, a place open to only the old and cynical, not the inexperienced and naive.

The warders show an odd concern for the welfare of the condemned man. When they bring the Quare Fellow into the yard for exercise, the Chief is horrified when he realizes that the condemned man would see his freshly dug grave.

CHIEF: (*exasperated*). Do you want him to see his grave, bloody well half dug? Run in quick and tell those bloody idiots to take him out the side door, and exercise him over the far side of the stokehold, and tell them to keep him well into the wall where he'll be out of sight of the cell windows. (50)

Several implications arise: first, there is an extremely odd concern, which the warders insist on a level of normality in a situation that is anything but ordinary. They are very desirous that the Quare Fellow have his exercise, as if physical fitness the night before his execution somehow matters to his well-being. The state maintains the fiction of health so that the condemned man is seen as “whole” when executed. This has post-colonial echoes of the execution of Connolly by the British after the Easter Uprising, when Connolly, already mortally wounded, had to be strapped to a chair so he could face a firing squad. It is not sufficient for the state to kill a prisoner, but that prisoner must seem to be whole and healthy in order for the sanction to carry full weight. Second, not only might the condemned man have seen his own grave, but also the other prisoners might have seen the condemned man viewing his own grave! It might be difficult for the warders to maintain control over the imprisoned men if the immediate consequences of

the inmates' participation in the execution is witnessed and understood. The inmates' cognizance of the condemned man's fate might be amplified beyond a mere recognition and acceptance as an example of normal activity in the prison. The inmates might no longer accept these activities as typical and refuse to cooperate with the warders. If the inmates refused to participate in the preparations for the execution, the act itself might not occur. If the warders were still able to perform the execution without the inmates' assistance, the power of the ritual would be lessened. The men would still fear execution, but they would no longer be a part of its performance.

Inherent in the chief's worry is the assumption that, somehow, the Quare Fellow will behave normally if he does not see his grave, and that it would be unwise to bring the other prisoners' attention to the fact of the coming execution. This assumption is, of course, ludicrous. How can a condemned man ignore his fate, and how can the prisoners not be aware of this event? Clearly they are:

PRISONER C: Ah, God help him! Sure, you'd pity him all the same. It must be awful to die at the end of a swinging rope and a black hood over his poor face. . . Maybe he did those things, but God help him this minute and he knowing this night his last on earth. Waiting over there he is, to be shaken out of his sleep and rushed to the rope. (58)

Prisoner C speaks another of Behan's ironies—that the condemned man, who will soon have an eternity to sleep must soon be awakened from his last living repose to be sent quickly to the act which will cause permanent slumber.

When the Hangman arrives the stage company is complete. The star and the supporting actor are now in residence. The Hangman shows himself to be serious about his craft but not without an appreciation of the joys of traveling, for taking the theatrical show on the road:

HANGMAN: Not bad. It's nice to get over to old Ireland you know,
a nice bit of steak and a couple of pints as soon as you get off the boat. (64)

For the Hangman, the work in Ireland is like a vacation, a holiday. The British Hangman crosses the Irish Sea to perform his work. While the government performing the execution is Irish, Behan implies that the Irish state's control over the inmates is analogous to Britain's former control over Ireland. It is as if Behan were shining a brilliant stage spotlight on the post-conquest status of the Republic and its actions.

In Act III the preparation is complete, and the execution, like other well-planned shows, is ready to begin. As the final wait begins, the men who serve to keep the prison running know that they have to suppress their basic humanity in order to keep the show going:

WARDER 1: We're in it for the three P's, boy, pay, promotion and pension, that's all that should bother civil servants like us.

WARDER 2: You're quite right. (68)

The moral implication of their work, however, does bother these men. In order to ignore the dilemma of recognizing the ethical problem involved in the performance of their occupations, these warders occupy themselves with trivial tasks like patrolling the grave and worrying about which prisoner is singing, a concentration of activity that is arbitrary, irrational, and absurd. These activities are diversionary and allow the warders to follow orders without acknowledging the moral difficulties of those orders, a situation clearly recognizable as a repeated pattern in the twentieth century. The words of the Nazis from the Nuremberg War trials that “We were only following orders” would resonate with an audience removed from the horrors of World War II by less than a decade. That Ireland was neutral in the war would not remove the vivid awareness that virtually the entire world had of the Holocaust. That genocide, like that of the Great Famine in the mid 1800s, must have spoken directly to the Irish audience. The warders might be civil servants who are only performing their duties, but World War II taught the world that such thinking can never truly excuse obscene horrors such as genocide or capital punishment.

Despite the extraordinarily serious nature of his subject, Behan never allows his tone to be simply morbid in the face of horror. Maintaining the sense of the comic absurd that he has already established, Behan reinjects joviality as the Hangman, in a lyric mood, sings:

HANGMAN [sings].

She was lovely and fair like the rose of the summer,
Though 'twas not her beauty alone that won me,

Oh, no, 'twas the truth in her eyes ever shining,
That made me love Mary the Rose of Tralee. (77)

Behan infuses this passage with a double irony. Unlike some of the warders, the Hangman does not allow his work to interfere with his happiness. As he prepares to execute a man, the Hangman sings a love song celebrating beauty and life. That the British hangman, as he works on the gallows meant for an Irishman, sings an Irish song about love adds to the irony.

Inevitably, the execution occurs. Such a well-planned show will not fail. Behan never permits the audience to forget this is a human being who will be executed shortly. “By the end of the play, our sympathies have been focused on one individual, the Quare Fellow, who has come to symbolize the ultimate injustice of the law toward humanity. . . We know little about him; he is a human being and that is enough” (Hogan 201). This point is of paramount importance—despite the experimentation in its form, the satire inherent in its critique, and the carnivalesque in the delivery of that societal criticism, *The Quare Fellow* ultimately concerns human beings. In its core, it is humanist.

That Behan maintains the Quare Fellow’s offstage presence throughout the play amplifies the humanity. Even at the final moments, the convict facing death is not seen by the audience, but this lack of visible presence does not negate the amplitude of concern for him or for the reality of his humanity. This invisibility to the audience is vital—by not seeing, the horror of the event is amplified in the audience’s imagination. They are forced to confront internally, within their personal being, the image of a man being executed by hanging. If the audience saw the execution onstage, it would, no

doubt, be a horrific event, but it would also run the risk of being melodramatic, an impression Behan carefully avoids. “Behan does not bring him onstage, as a writer of melodrama would, to jerk out the last tear. He is too reticent to make his point by an easy sentimentality. But he does make his point, which is our ever-growing conviction that, no matter what the crime the Quare Fellow committed, the punishment is a greater crime” (Hogan 201). The nonwitnessing of the actual execution compels the act to transcend the horror of a voyeuristic event. The hanging becomes personal as well as public and political.

In not showing the execution, Behan utilizes Mickser's voice to narrate the event almost as if he were the public announcer calling a horse race or a soccer match. This near comic delivery is a juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy—a heightened focus:

MICKSER'S VOICE. . . . (*A clock begins to chime the hour. Each quarter sounds louder.*) His feet to the chalk line. He'll be pinioned, his feet together. The bag will be pulled down over his face. The screws come off the trap and steady him. Himself goes to the lever and . . . *The hour strikes. The WARDERS cross themselves and put on their caps. From the PRISONERS comes a ferocious howling.* (83)

The prisoners' howling serves several purposes: it is the reaction of the audience, which is a necessary component for a theatrical performance, it is the classical Greek chorus-like reaction to the violence and tragedy that occur offstage, and it is the ultimately sane response to the absurd insanity of a state-ordered execution. As the noise of the

prisoners' howling fades, the audience knows that the execution is complete. It is also the inverse continuation of the carnivalesque that had preceded the death. Prior to this point, Behan had imbued the text with humor, dark humor perhaps, but humor nevertheless. It was the unbridled response of controlled inmates to the absurdity of their environment. Through the laughter and the inversions, the intolerable was made tolerable. With the death, however, the carnivalesque ceases, and horror begins. Nothing now can prevent the realization of the execution and the inmates' and the audience's relationship to that death.

In the world of the prison two strikingly different responses to the execution occur: "Removing their caps and crossing themselves, the prison staff identify themselves with the official civic and religious powers that sanction and organize capital punishment" (Kearney 501). In order to maintain their own sanity, they must accept that they are a part of an action they view to be in the best interest of society. They must see themselves as correct. The inmates, however, do not have that comfort. "The prisoners, deprived of their only defense, carnivalesque laughter, are reduced to howling like pack animals that have lost one of their brethren to predators" (501). Their semblance of belonging to a civilized society is destroyed. Their expression is not one of political rebellion, nor is it of a reasoned argument against an injustice; it is a primal reaction of horror, fear, and the recognition of the absurdity of their situation.

There remains, however, the last work to be accomplished—the chiseling of the dead man's number onto his gravestone. Behan adds a last touch of humor to this action as the Chief offers an incentive to the prisoners for hard work:

CHIEF. . . There's the usual two bottles of stout a man,
but only if you work fast. (85)

Behan gives an ironic touch—the dead man's memory does have an intrinsic measurable value to the state: two bottles of stout per man. The prisoners will be given the opportunity to celebrate the execution in proper Irish fashion: a wake, and the audience is given a verifiable but ridiculously small economic value to the condemned man's life. While Behan never shows the wake, the suggestion of a celebration in these circumstances is unnerving and ludicrous. Additionally, it is clear that in the eyes of the state, the Quare Fellow is almost completely devalued.

The performance is over, the Quare Fellow is dead, and Behan ends the play as he began it—with a song. The framework is complete, as the music hall encompasses the horror that the audience and inmates have just witnessed. The play's progression moved from music hall to satire/absurdity/carnavalesque to existential horror and now finally back to the music hall.

VOICE OF PRISONER BELOW [*singing*]

In the female prison

There are seventy women

I wish it was with them that I did dwell,

Then that old triangle

Could jingle jangle

Along the banks of the Royal Canal. (86)

The unseen prisoner sings a panto song, one that Behan might have heard in his childhood^{xlviii}. Brannigan explains the significance of the bawdy words of the song “Here, without spelling out the bawdy implications too far, ‘the old triangle’ becomes a metaphor for the ways in which the prisoners continue to find pleasure despite and because of the disciplinary apparatus of incarceration” (“Form and Ethics” 251). The subject of the lyrics is simple: a lonely man aches for female companionship—the words represent a simple cry of humanity. This desire returns us to the very human face of the text. This sexual desire also connects to the carnivalesque, in that one of the very few elements that the prison cannot remove completely from the prisoners is their sexual drive and desire. It is expressed through a simple song, but it denies the dehumanizing nature of the execution of the Quare Fellow. Despite the preparations for death the inmates were compelled to conduct, and despite the execution of the condemned man, a simple song dislocates the power of the government, lyrics invert the impact of the postconquest society, and the absurd and carnivalesque assert, rather than detract from, the inmates’ humanity.

Chapter Three

Carnavalesque, Heteroglossia, Syncretic Structure, Audience Implication, and Satire within the context of Imprisonment, Interrogation and Sanction in *The Hostage*

Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*^{xlix}, written several years after *The Quare Fellow*, completes his movement away naturalism and realism. For those who are unfamiliar with this play, I include a synopsis in the endnotes. In this play the directions suggested in *The Quare Fellow* become complete and actualized. My examination of *The Hostage* is the culmination of this analysis. In this chapter, I will analyze: *The Hostage*'s connection to *An Giall*; the importance of the play's hybrid structure; Behan's use of audience interrogation; his interrogation of nationalistic assumptions; the meaning of the title; Behan's use of absurdity in his satire/humor; the consequences of execution, especially in the context of the soldier; and the meaning of the play's ending. I will demonstrate that these elements complete a hybrid, multi-layered play that speaks through humanism to the lies and outdated mores of the decayed Republican movement in 1950s Ireland.

Any discussion of *The Hostage* has to deal in some degree with the unusual history of this play. The stage history of *The Hostage* is complex, especially in its relation to Behan's earlier Gaelic play *An Giall*. Ted E. Boyle, in *Brendan Behan*, explains: "Behan's second play *An Giall* was commissioned by the Irish language organization Gael Linn and was produced in Dublin's Damer Hall in June, 1958" (86). Boyle then goes on to speak of *The Hostage* as "*An Giall* in its English form" (86), but that is a somewhat simplistic view. "On October 14, 1958, the first English-language production of *The Hostage* opened in Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop at The Theatre Royal, Stratford, London" (86-87). That *The Hostage* is based on *An Giall*, at

least in part, is certain, but significant differences exist between them, which leads to my assertion that they are different plays, not simply separate versions of the same idea.

Christopher Murray, in *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up To Nation*, explores this significant distinction. Murray, detailing eight specific points, speaks in depth about the differences between the two plays, but a few examples suffice: “*An Giall* is a straightforward naturalistic play, with no music-hall trappings. . . and the tone and mood resemble *The Quare Fellow* [as opposed to *The Hostage*] in that suspense predominates” (157). While there is a clear development from one play to the next, it does not follow that *The Hostage* is simply an English language version of the previous play. *The Hostage* needs to be understood to be a separate but connected play. John Brannigan, in *Brendan Behan*, performs an extensive examination of the connection between *An Giall* and *The Hostage* and argues effectively that they are separate, but intricately connected, pieces. One of the central points he finds in *The Hostage* is comedy and satire, including that which was self-directed: “The parodic and self-reflexive devices assembled and played out in *The Hostage* reveal that modern political discourses borrow extensively from, and are disturbingly analogous to, theatrical spectacle and, caricature” (123-124) Brannigan argues that not only does Behan parody *An Giall* but also, in *The Hostage*, “recovers a fractured and contested notion of Englishness in *The Hostage* through the humor and irreverence of Leslie, just as he figures Irish nationalism as a reactive imitation of colonial discourses of control as correctives to the myopic political vision of both Irish nationalism and English imperialism “ (124). The two plays have different forms, different languages, different

approaches, and different theatrical techniques; hence they are not simply different versions of the same work.

The Hostage had success first with Joan Littlewood's production at her Theatre Workshop in London then at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Critical debate exists over the amount of influence that Littlewood had on the play, some going so far as to claim that she should be given partial writing credit. I suspect that this is a result of literary critics who are not familiar with the theatrical process and a misreading of the progression a play makes as it develops, especially for its first run¹. This collaborative nature of any play is often overlooked by literary critics.^{li}

Additionally, the changes that Behan includes in *The Hostage* from *An Giall* permit the playwright the latitude to explore themes that did not exist in the original. Richard Wall, in "An Giall And *The Hostage* Compared," speaks to these additional advantages that "allow the introduction of a host of topical English [and Irish] issues of the day, such as the Wolfenden Report on homosexual behaviour, immigration, race relations, the power of The Lord Chamberlain's Office, and even Brendan Behan himself" (166). These are all issues that, for the 1950s, are highly unusual in terms of treatment in an Irish play. Because of its initial incarnation as an Irish language play, Behan is able to expand his treatment later in *The Hostage*. "An Giall concentrates exclusively on Irish issues, such as Partition, the I.R.A. and its endless splits, the revival of Irish, romantic attitudes towards Irish history, and De Valera's remoteness from the people. These may be found in *The Hostage*, but they are almost buried under the avalanche of issues added for the amusement of an English audience [by Joan Littlewood]" (166). While Wall is correct that Behan expands the thematic treatments in

The Hostage, he is incorrect in thinking that the previous issues are buried. They are not; rather, they are included in the amalgam of voices, structure, and theme that is *The Hostage*.^{lii} Also, the question remains if the inclusion of IRA and Irish nationalistic criticism exists as a balm to the English audience or because Behan had grown in his view of the world. I argue that seeing these inclusions simply as a way to entertain an English audience is misreading the play. While it is certainly valid to consider the impact of the play on a strictly English audience, I do not accept that the play was changed simply to mollify that particular audience. This claim ignores the extraordinarily potent political satire and social commentary that arises from the various aspects of the play, and it ignores Behan's ability to skewer anyone and any group with his satire. It also ignores Behan's temperament, which was highly unlikely to agree to such terms regarding the sensibilities of any audience.^{liii}

Speaking to the point of the power of theatrical spectacle and the impact of words that are both poetic and idiosyncratic to theater Gordon M. Wickstrom, in "The Heroic Dimension in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*," connects this idea of the spectacle to "the kind of discoveries that Jerzy Grotowski's actors make as action bombards action, actor confronts character and himself to reveal new elements of myth and emotion in dramatic concert" (406). Grotowski's explorations of the primal and mythical nature of drama and performance fit well with the kind of direct confrontation of the audience and the mixed nature of the play's structure with which Behan imbues *The Hostage*. The effect is not purely rational as with Brechtian epic theatre; rather, it engulfs the audience rationally, emotionally, and mythically. "Ludwik Flaszen writing on Grotowski says, 'Theatre starts where the word is not sufficient.'^{liv} Behan's theatre springs from such beginnings, and in

The Hostage the playwright develops an heroic rhythm not very different from the *tragic rhythm* that Francis Fergusson describes in his *The Idea of a Theater* as the essential dramatic action” (406).

Behan develops and evolves his IRA experience in *The Hostage* like a play evolves during the production. As with *The Quare Fellow*, Behan’s experiences, both with the IRA and as an inmate in Mountjoy Prison influenced *The Hostage*. Like his social critique in *The Quare Fellow*, Behan uses his play to attack the difficulties and hypocrisies in the Republican movement. Bert Cardullo, in “*The Hostage* Reconsidered,” asserts that “The play hardly glorifies the IRA . . . *The Hostage* satirizes the IRA’s fanatical nationalism and senseless glorification of the past, while asserting through song, dance, and the love between the Irish maid Teresa and the English soldier Leslie, the worth and community of all human souls” (139). Cardullo is correct in emphasizing the lack of glorification of the IRA, but he is not quite correct about the humanism in the play. While I wish it were there, I think the absurdity of the existential world Behan creates dominates the play. John Brannigan, in “Belated Behan: Brendan Behan And The Cultural Politics of Memory,” examines the implications of the Irish nationalistic memory: “The anamnestic imagination of the 1916 Rising, then, points to the constitutive failure of modern nationalism; in situating nationalist heroism ambivalently and insecurely in the past, Behan implies the instability of the nationalist project” (47). Brannigan, however, does not take his assertion far enough. Behan is not making an implication about the failure of nationalism and the IRA version of Republicanism, but he is condemning it. Brannigan does explain “Through these recurring themes of memory

and anamnesis, Behan articulates dissident and critical perspectives on the forces and ideologies of nationalism in post-independence Ireland” (47).

Cardullo also raises an interesting point about the applicability of the play’s lessons to Ireland and to the world at large: “Given the continued refusal of the IRA to accept a divided Ireland [1985], it should be evident that a production of *The Hostage* is as timely now as it was twenty-five years ago. But this play addresses the subjects of nationalism, colonialism, and terrorism in general as well as the Irish situation. Its lessons are as applicable to the Middle East as they are to Ireland” (140). The political situation has changed dramatically in Ireland since the Easter Agreement, which seems to be holding, but in terms of a wider audience, in a world often dominated by civil war, unrest, colonial and post-colonial struggle, and terrorism, *The Hostage* speaks with a powerful voice on the problems of the glorification of violence as a means to a political end. Just as in Ireland, the only way for a country or land to emerge from the prison of violence is to end it, to declare a cease-fire and to work through the various problems that caused the conflict. Returning to the vengeance by violence paradigm in which Ireland was trapped for much of the 20th century only ensures that the violence will continue. We need only look around the world for many glaring examples^{lv}. For that reason, *The Hostage* has become a more important play than when it was focused only on Ireland. Now it can speak for many trouble spots in the world.

While it can be argued that *The Hostage*, set in the Republican movement in Ireland in the 1950s, is best viewed as an historical artifact, interesting in the context of the cultural, social, and political circumstances of that time and place, such a purely historical understanding limits our vision of the play. In 21st century terms, *The Hostage*

speaks to the imprisonment that occurs anywhere in the world where terrorism and senseless violence dominates, wherever people are trapped in their homes by war, or wherever innocent people face the horror of interrogation, torture, and execution whether by their government or revolutionaries. Regardless of their tormentors, their pain and trauma is still just as real. These people are innocent victims, trapped in their surroundings, just as Leslie is.

In *The Hostage*, just as in *Design For A Headstone* and in *The Quare Fellow*, Behan's focuses on the proletariat. All too often, the working-class and the impoverished are the forgotten or unseen victims of political persecution and violence. Their names are not usually marked in history; too often they are the victims of political oppression. In *The Hostage*, the proletariat, along with other extremely marginalized and ignored members of society who make their homes and living in a Dublin brothel, is the center of the play. For Behan, they are not forgotten; rather, they populate the mythic reality of drama.

Ritual and mythic elements of theater speak to a deeper core in humanity than simply the words on the page. In Behan's play, the proletariat becomes the mythic hero, in place of the classic tragic hero. Jerzy Grotowsky, in his seminal work on the nature of the theater says, "The core of the theatre is an encounter. . . . That is to say an extreme confrontation, sincere, disciplined, precise and total" (56-57). For Grotowsky, theater is a mythic expression by human beings that borders on, or achieves, religious status in its import and impact. Speaking directly to the crucial realization of the primacy of the performance over the script, he says "For me, a creator of theatre, the important thing is not the words but what we do with those words, what gives life to the inanimate words of

the text, what transforms them into the ‘Word’” (58). Richard Schechner, in *Performance Theory*, also establishes the mythic nature of performance in theatre: “Ritualized behavior extends across the entire range of human action, but performance is a particular heated arena of ritual, and theater, script, and drama are heated and compact areas of performance” (95). Schechner and Grotowsky, among others, argue for the impact of live theatre that surpasses the written word that the performance speaks to humanity at the level of its deepest mythology.

This level of theatrical-religious consideration applies directly to *The Hostage* because its performance transcends its text. I am not arguing that we cannot analyze the script’s words for meaning, but without their application in live performance, we are examining only their potential. Again, in some plays, especially those in the classical canon or those which are representational, such literary exegesis and examination is more applicable, because the texts exist in a coherent established way. For plays such as those of theatre of the absurd, experimental, as in the idiosyncratic form of *The Hostage*, we must see past the linear logic of the page in order to understand their meaning and power holistically^{lvi}. The performative nature of all theater, but this play in particular, dictates that readers must not only be literary critics but also directors, actors, and producers. *The Hostage* demands that we use our imagination as well our intellect, and all performance aspects—actors, script, music, costume, and setting—must be imagined.

The immediacy of theater gives the power to the words of its script. No other art form, with the possible exceptions of dance and music, allows for its eternal existence only in the present. As Peter Brook explains in his seminal work on performance, *The Empty Space*, “The theatre . . . always asserts itself in the present. This is what can make

it more real than the normal stream of consciousness. This is also what can make it so disturbing” (99). Behan utilizes successfully in this play this potential for both impact and audience disturbance.

In connection with performance issues, structure and form of *The Hostage* require examination. A discussion of the structure of *The Hostage* is inherently complex, because this play’s structure is far more complicated than many critics claim. A useful starting point is heteroglossia, the Bakhtinian idea of a piece having several voices speaking in it; this is a concept I applied to *The Quare Fellow* in Chapter Two, and which I also use for *The Hostage*. The cacophony of voices in this play, however, is not the only structural mixture that Behan uses. Inherent in this text is a heteroglossic-like mixture of narrative forms, from comic music-hall to representational to absurdist, in a way that does not allow the accurate pigeonholing of the text into one recognizable form; instead, Behan creates a new form that is an amalgam of these various types, one I call syncretic structure.

In this form, Behan strips away dramatic expectations and forges new territory. In a naturalistic play, the audience expects to see a play that follows the classical paradigm of exposition, rising action through multiple conflicts, a climax, and then resolution, all shown with recognizable characters in a clearly delineated representational world. In theatre of the absurd, the audience expects to see plays using symbolic or unfamiliar stage figures, all moving in a nonlinear, nonlogical way. By incorporating elements of both of these types of theater, Behan creates a different and new way, one in which he attempts to create a syncretic dramatic structure. This play is often mistaken for being merely a version of music-hall theatre. Paul M. Levitt, in “Hostages to History:

Title as Dramatic Metaphor in *The Hostage*,” speaks to this misconception: “There is about it an effortless air of madcap fun, which at first reading is rather deceptive. Because of the frolicking atmosphere of jigs and reels, set in the midst of apparently unconnected scenes, the play appears to be a kind of light variety show or vaudeville. However, the riotous nature of the work has obscured its underlying seriousness” (401). While Levitt has correctly identified the serious nature of the themes of *The Hostage*, he is still incorrect in his assertion that the comic nature of the play has somehow masked that message. Rather, the comic tone of the play is only one aspect, one which reinforces rather than restricts its serious messages. In much the same way that the tradition of literature^{lviii} in using humor to amplify satiric messages, Behan heightens rather than decreases his scathing indictment of the political world of 1950s Ireland.

The Hostage is not simply a replication of a Pantomime music hall, nor is it a representational play in the model of Ibsen, nor is it a complete example of theatre of the absurd; rather, Behan creates a hybrid amalgam of forms, blending them into a new, previously untried dramatic mixture, a new recipe for a new kind of theatrical cake. But it is one of great depth, not merely a pleasant desert. D.E.S. Maxwell, in *A Critical History of Modern Irish Drama: 1891-1980*, says “*The Hostage* forsakes *The Quare Fellow*’s (relatively) documentary soberness for a jumble of styles. It is partly the patchwork that gives it verve The danger of the method is its potential for indiscipline” (153). Maxwell mistakes the style of *The Quare Fellow* as well as the point of Behan’s creation of a new form out of the mixing of old forms. The dramatic form of *The Hostage* is liminal, marking a moment in theater moving from representation to theater of the absurd and beyond; it is a new form of dramatic structure that has gone

unnoticed by literary critics who tend to see *The Hostage* only as a mere hodgepodge of thrown together forms. They miss the intricacy and cohesion in the play. Much as Joyce, in *Ulysses*, demonstrates the possibilities of using multiple techniques and narrative styles and forms in the novel, Behan shows this opportunity for the range of styles in drama in *The Hostage*. It is born from the past, predicated on the present (1950s Ireland), and thrust into the future of the world theater. In its eclectic nature^{lviii}, it encompasses fluidity of form, style, message, and satire. Behan's dramatic approach in *The Hostage* is macrocosmic, rather than hyper-focused microcosmic.

Seen as a new form, the play's seeming lack of structure is neither a weakness nor an actuality but a structural tool used by Behan to mystify the audience so that they become prepared for his presentation. Michael Patrick Gillespie, in "Violent Impotence and Impotent Violence: Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*," says: "For some critics, the play's refusal to establish clearly defined structural patterns might stand as an inherent weakness in the work. Such a response, however, presumes the primacy of cause-and-effect logic, and, I believe, needlessly circumscribes one's reading by ignoring the ontological features that characterize *The Hostage*" (92). As Gillespie points out, such ignoring of the existential elements, and I would add the deontological components, of the play leads inevitably to a misunderstanding of its meaning. "Elements within Behan's play repeatedly underscore disorientation as an integral component of its dramatic development and suggest that proper interpretation rests upon one's willingness to cultivate a sense of ambivalence"(93). This ambivalence, especially in the context of structure, is essential to understanding the play. No one clearly established theatrical structure or form completely fits the play. Just as heteroglossia is made from a variety of

voices, in *The Hostage* a multitude of forms creates a structural cacophony of form, and that seeming disjointed and disparate noise unifies the play.

Like the structure of the play, the plot of *The Hostage* is also not highly delineated. Boyle says, in *Brendan Behan*, "The outrageous humor and disconnected music-hall plot of *The Hostage* are most certainly designed to shock people out of their trite, mechanical, and complacent existence"(89). This again, is an extension of concerns established in *The Quare Fellow*. Behan deemphasizes the importance of traditional plot in that play, focusing on the point of waiting. Boyle explains, " *The Hostage* also resembles *The Quare Fellow* in that it is practically plotless" (91). In *The Hostage*, Behan nullifies the importance of plot by creating a play that moves like a music-hall piece rather than a formal play (I will speak at length about the music hall later in the chapter). This form moves it from any semblance of representationalism to theater of the absurd. The lack of traditional plot informs the play with power and message.

The Hostage begins and ends with music: Act I opens with a dance, an Irish jig
Curtain up.

*Whole company dances an Irish Jig after two figures in which two whores
and two queers have danced together; MULLEADY is seen dancing with
MISS GILCHRIST. (91)*

This opening could easily be seen, especially in Ireland of the 1950s, as simply a grotesque version of the music-hall, with characters marginalized from the mainstream of middleclass Irish society, meant to entertain the masses, but that would miss several

points. First, as stated earlier, Behan creates a new format in this play with his inclusion of several theatrical and narrative forms; second, implicit in this short opening dance is a broad suggestion of the questioning of assumptions of sexual roles that pervaded extant Victorian attitudes in 1950s Ireland—members of the Irish population who were typically marginalized, prostitutes and gay, are presented openly and directly to the audience; third, he uses interrogation of the audience. As in *The Quare Fellow*, he continues the tactic of directly and indirectly challenging the comfort and complacency of the Irish audience. They cannot simply sit and watch from a removed and comfortable distance. By using panto (music-hall) techniques, in which the audience is traditionally very close to the performers and expected to interact with them, Behan pulls the audience directly and emotionally into the workings of the play. Additionally, by having the entire company perform the opening dance, and by having the first line of the play address the reality of the theater. Behan employs Brechtian Epic Theatre techniques by challenging the audience directly and forcing them to acknowledge intellectually as well as emotionally their place in Irish society and Irish Theater. Behan employs the 1st Whore to draw the audience into the action by expressly establishing the reality of the performance. Additionally, Behan uses a flamboyant figure to confront a bourgeois Irish audience about the existence of brothels and the existence of homosexuals, both realities the middle-class audience would probably prefer to ignore.

1st WHORE [to queers]. Get off the stage, you dirty low things. (91)

Behan establishes a metatheatricality in the play, resembling Brecht's epic theatre, where the audience is constantly kept aware that this is a performance with a message being delivered.

Robert Hogan, in *After The Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of the Irish Drama since The Plough And The Stars*," speaks to the play's structural question when he explains that critics have missed the point of the play by not realizing its unrealistic incidents are Behan's tools in creating: "reality by heightening it and seeing it through a unique, sometimes bleary, often humorous, and finally sad imagination" (205). Behan's hyper-focus on the overriding reality of the situation through its distortion, both psychologically and in terms of action, is similar to magic realism employed by some authors in novels. Behan shows the underlying reality of the distorted mythology and memory of the Irish nationalist movement by displaying it in heightened carnivalesque forms.

This magic realism disputes the claim that John Brannigan makes, in "Belated Behan: Brendan Behan And The Cultural Politics of Memory," about the basis of the form of *The Hostage*: "*An Giall* and its London translation, *The Hostage*, [this is not an accurate assessment of the separate nature of *The Hostage*] are constructed through the conventions of Irish political melodrama, as well as through an early-Twentieth-century music hall culture common to both" (50). That music-hall traditions and conventions influence this play is clear, but to label it as having arisen from melodrama misreads the play. Certainly there is carnivalesque and absurdity, but this is not a melodrama. Behan does not focus on creating easy sentimentality, nor does he

create cardboard melodramatic figures; instead, he develops mythic/political characters who speak to the deep and bitterly divided Irish culture and nationalism of the 1950s.

This severe divide in Irish culture and nationalism is reflected in the schism in Irish drama. Margaret Llewellyn Jones, in *Contemporary Irish Drama & Cultural Identity*, examines in depth the question of changes in representational theater and its connection to Irish identity. One particular point illustrates this connection to the kind of magic realism in Behan's theater—that he undercuts the basis of realism, both in form and intention, using fluidity of form, time, language, and meaning, “from [the] use of the mythical and magical to disruption of linear time” (Jones 139) all to create a larger political and social truth. Jones suggests that the Foucaultian idea of space relating to otherness works very well with *The Hostage*. Behan establishes not only a different structure to the play itself, but he also, in performance, uses the actors' persons to establish a sense of disconnect from the norm of everyday Irish life, to a world that is distinctly different from expectations, one that is not typically seen in the course of everyday life. This is the heterotopic region of *The Hostage*.

In an interesting discussion of the hermeneutics of *The Hostage*, Micheal Patrick Gillespie, in “Violent Impotence and Impotent Violence: Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*,” he suggests that “Hermeneutic assumptions become particularly appropriate subjects for consideration when one approaches Brendan Behan's play *The Hostage*, for from its opening lines the drama challenges habits of perception”(92). He explains that typically the examination of a piece assumes that the whole achieves its importance from the totality of its individual parts, but that this Aristotelian logic does not necessarily apply to *The Hostage*. Instead “elements within Behan's play repeatedly underscore

disorientation as an integral component of its dramatic development and suggest that proper interpretation rests upon one's willingness to cultivate a sense of this ambivalence" (Gillespie 92-93). Ambivalence about the play arises from Behan's mixing of forms and refusal to adopt a specific iron-clad ideological position. Behan uses many techniques, but none define his play: "In fact, the line between creative ambiguity and entropic anarchy seems very thin in Behan's play"(Gillespie 93). In this mixture of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and the absurd is finally a completion, a whole, a dramatic unity. Out of seeming chaos comes order, but the audience might not be aware of it after an initial viewing or after a first reading of the play. "Because Behan's play refuses to assign primacy to any polemical or rhetorical position, the inevitable irresolution of the topic—political turmoil in Ireland—stands as the drama's concern" (Gillespie 93). Behan makes clear in his play that a definable answer might be outside of the purview of his writing, but that the answer is not as important as the questioning, that awareness of the problem is the beginning of eventually arriving at a solution. In some ways, his approach brings echoes of both Socrates and modern addiction treatment. Socrates focused on the primacy of the question on the path to understanding as paramount in intellectual development, not on a mythical final answer, which would then infer that no more searching needs to be done; in addiction treatment, a basic assumption is that the addict, like Ireland in Behan's play, must first admit that a problem exists before he/she can move forward with recovery.

E.H. Mikhail, in *The Art of Brendan Behan*, argues *The Hostage's* form can be identified as similar to that of Commedia dell'Arte, one that incorporates both comedy and tragedy (124). Mikhail's idea is useful in consideration of the form of *The Hostage*.

Commedia dell' Arte uses improvisation as well as given characters in creating an ongoing discussion of life in Medieval and Renaissance Italy. Its form is fluid, using an audience's understanding of the given situations of their lives and society. In a similar manner, Behan uses this kind of form. Behan's play, while not strictly improvisational, as a set script exists, creates a feeling within that script that the characters are improvising in a world that is completely familiar to most of them. The characters who live in and around the brothel seem to be an Irish version of those from the Commedia dell' Arte— young star-crossed lovers, older people who interfere, and a mixture of whores and societal misfits. Just as the medieval actors often addressed their audiences directly, so too do Behan's characters sometimes directly speak to the audience, pulling them into the action. Additionally, in Commedia dell' Arte, development of character is not important; instead, they characters serve to elaborate on social critiques and satire. While there is some character development in *The Hostage*, it is not as important as the play's critique of the nationalist agenda. The incorporation of these various elements fills the play with its dramatic power, allowing Behan to shock his audience with tragic events while removing resistance to those messages through comedic techniques.

Another form which Behan incorporates into *The Hostage*, one that is often overlooked by many critics, is that of the Irish wake. Walentyna Witoszek, in "The Funeral Comedy of Brendan Behan," says that *The Hostage* is "a record of the Irish wake—a humorous funeral rite standing on the border-line between art and life" (85). This is a fascinating idea, one that speaks to the ancient wake tradition in Irish culture, one that predates Christianity. Vivian Mercer, in *The Irish Comic Tradition*, explains the connection between the Irish wake and carnivalesque humor: "The Irish propensity for

macabre humour may easily be traced to the world-renowned Irish wakes, at which merriment alternates with or triumphs over mourning, in the very presence of the corpse. Convivial drinking and cheerful conversations are the best-known features of modern wakes, but it is generally accepted that dancing, singing, and horse-play formed an essential part of the wakes of earlier times”(49). Alcohol, its consumption, and the consequences of that drinking were also a central feature of Irish funereal tradition. Sean O’Sullivan, in *Irish Wake Amusements*, says: “drunkenness was more common then [the past] than it is now. To make matters worse, most houses were small, and when a wake occurred, were overcrowded and badly ventilated. Thus, the heavy atmosphere combined with the alcohol and, occasionally, the smoke to cause drunkenness at wakes. Unruly behaviour and the playing of games on such occasions often reached unseemly proportions” (17). The descriptions that O’Sullivan offers in his book suggest an extreme carnivalesque feel to some of the actual Irish wakes, including inversions of order and place in society. Extremes of behavior become the standard at such events—these are the same kinds of behavior we see in *The Hostage*. “The only difference between the action of Behan’s funeral drama and that of the wake is that in Behan’s comedy the wake feast takes place not after, but before, the hero’s death” (85). This connection of humor to death is to be expected, especially when considered in connection to Bakhtin and the carnivalesque. In the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky speaks to this connection: “Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world” (9). This cycle of death and rebirth, central to Irish history, Irish mythology, and pre-Christian Irish religion, permeates both the carnivalesque and the structure of *The Hostage*.

But the ending does not, according to Witoszek, signify any representation of rebirth, quite the opposite. “The corpses are the resurrected heroes who mock at the idea of resurrection. They rise from the dead to sneer and jeer at all the participants in the never ending national wake, the death dreamers and the lovers of ruins” (90). The republican movement’s romantic and outdated attachment to the past resulting in killing and mayhem is the target of Behan’s satire. The “death dreamers” living in a world gone by, not facing the future are, according to Witoszek, are the ones who will cause Ireland to have a national wake. While I do not completely agree with Witoszek that this is the entirety of Behan’s point in *The Hostage*, it is certainly part of the message, a prescient warning, which becomes clearly expressed in the carnage of The Troubles. In this way, Behan uses this wake/carnavalesque image to interrogate the audience and Irish society about holding on to outdated republican ideas and using violence as an effective and moral political tool.

This connection of the Irish wake to Irish drama and the carnivalesque is consistent with Peter Brooks’ commentary in which he explains the rough theatre: “Of course, it is most of all dirt [what I am terming the carnivalesque] that gives the roughness its edge; filth and vulgarity are natural, obscenity is joyous; with these the spectacle takes on its socially liberating role, for by nature the popular theatre is anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional, anti-pomp, anti-pretense” (68). Much of what Brooks says describes the chaotic nature of *The Hostage*—it is anti-authority, anti-smugness, but in an odd way, it is also proud of tradition in theater, but the theater of the working-class, not the upper or middle classes. Still Behan’s play is not simply like Brooks’ idea of rough theatre. It would also fall more deeply into his definition of the holy theatre: “I am

calling it the Holy Theatre for short, but it could be called The Theatre of the Invisible—Made—Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts” (42). In *The Hostage*, despite its confrontational manner, its mixture of forms, its use of working-class music hall, a great invisible force is at work which drives the destructive nature of the Irish split and deeply imbedded hatred for the English from its near Freudian depths to the surface, lancing like a huge infected boil the not-so-hidden depths of despair and turmoil in Ireland.

In his discussion of a dialectical approach to *The Hostage*, Gillespie examines the disjunctive nature of the play’s structure and its effect on the audience: “The play’s context—the absence of self-reflexivity and the lack of resolution in the antinomies that characters express—emphasizes for the audience its centrality in fabricating an interpretation” (94). That interpretation is, often, ambiguous because of an intentional absence of traditional story-telling linear paradigm, which would establish a direct casual story based on the classical paradigm of story-telling, with rising action leading to climax and resolution. Instead, Behan creates uncertainty through fluidity and vision: “Its spectacular moments disrupt the audience’s linear, cause-and-effect habits of perception, urging a view founded upon the necessity, even the desirability, of ambiguity” (Gillespie 95). By breaking down linear time and the standard logic of cause-and-effect, Behan moves the audience into a theatrical world focused on spectacle and emotional and psychological effect. As an example, rather than constructing a representational moment in which the threat to Leslie is clearly identified and illustrated onstage, Behan gives us what feels like comedy even though the reality of the threat exists under the surface:

SOLDIER: Here, mum, listen—

PAT [To Leslie]. Now, you stay where you are. I'm going to fix you. Here, hold this. [*Gives him a bottle.*] Now, I'm going to draw a circle round you, see, like that. Now you move outside that and you're a dead man. Have you got that? (166)

In a traditional play, the audience would expect serious consequences to the soldier disobeying his restrictions. In this situation, the orders seem more like they are part of a children's game, even though they are ultimately deadly.

MISS GILCHRIST [*sings*].

Just say there is no other,
To take the place of mother,
And kiss her dear sweet lips for me—

SOLDIER [*moving out of circle.*] Hey.

PAT. Yes! Now I told you.

SOLDIER. I bet that fellow in Belfast wouldn't want me to be plugged. (166)

No immediate consequences result; instead, we see a song and dance. It is not a rational anti-polemical and anti-violence argument that Behan constructs formed on rhetoric and argument; rather, it is an imposition of ideas, feelings, and images, created from the mixture of voices, structure, and theme that works to interrogate the audience and compel

them to deal with the inner and outer zeitgeist of the Ireland and the republican movement.

The end result of Behan's eclectic approach still stands as a new kind of drama, a syncretic and eclectic blend of narrative and dramatic forms, one that emerges in a distinctive medley that allows Behan to extend his critique of capital punishment that he begins in *The Quare Fellow* to include a sweeping indictment of the IRA, being trapped in outdated revolutionary thoughts, nationalism, and unreasoning hatred based on ancient grudges. Such a broad range of indictment requires either a realistic representational model or a new form, which is the route Behan takes in *The Hostage*.

In the play, Behan demonstrates that Ireland is trapped, incarcerated in assumptions, which he first interrogates. Then he shows the ultimate sanctions that come from such outdated paradigms. Similarly, though the prison is not an official construct in *The Hostage*, we, the audience, still are presented with the same heightened presence of confinement and helplessness. Typically in the 1950s, a brothel would have likely been seen as a place of sin and/or indulgence, but here it is a place of confinement and execution. The near Victorian attitude that pervaded much of mid-century Irish middle class thinking probably would have professed shock at the mere existence of brothels, complete with numerous variations of sexuality carefully shut aside by the bourgeoisie; this mindset would likely never have seen them as places where still simmering political revolutionaries might carry out jailings and killings.

Having established that Behan uses a new form/structure in *The Hostage*, we then can examine the impact this new form creates on the live audience. Because of the unusual style of *The Hostage*, some critics mistake the impact of the various components

of the play and see it as weak or confusing. Desmond Maxwell, in “Brendan Behan’s Theatre,” says “The play’s jumble of styles, however, confuses their presentation. Comedy and pathos never reach into each other” (94). While Maxwell is correct in Behan’s inclusion of both comedy and pathos in *The Hostage*, he is mistaken in its dramatic effect. Behan utilizes these forms to illustrate the hypocrisies that he sees in the Irish situation. No one clear form would have been adequate to demonstrate the byzantine social and political circumstances of Ireland.

I will explore next Behan’s interrogation of the audience, the IRA, Irish assumptions about the British, and the efficacy of revolutionary action as it was in the 1950s. I will also examine Behan’s demonstration of imprisonment of the audience in its witnessing of events, of the IRA in its moribund views and actions, and ultimately of Ireland in the post-colonial/post-conquest existence. Finally, I will investigate the use of sanction: the executions of Leslie and the boy in Borstal and their relationship to revolutionary action.

Behan includes interrogation of numerous targets as a central aspect of *The Hostage*, including the IRA and their use of execution of innocents. Many critics frequently view *The Hostage* solely as a satire on the Irish political situation of the 1950s. In this play, unlike in *The Quare Fellow*, in which he critiques the Republic and the Church’s connection, Behan focuses his satiric and critical attention on the political turmoil surrounding the IRA—criticizing the revolutionary group for its willingness to kill innocent victims. This inversion of the focus of his attack is extremely important because it comes from a former member. The impact, therefore, is more powerful than if it came from someone completely external to the organization. Did Behan put his very

life in danger with such a critique? While certainly not an informer, was it possible that he could have been viewed as a turncoat, someone no longer to be trusted? Certainly he had gained a level of fame as a playwright, which might have served as a shield against retribution by the IRA. It is undeniable, however, that in *The Hostage*, Behan completes his evolution from being an active member of the IRA to being critical of the government and capital punishment in *The Quare Fellow* to critiquing the IRA and the Republican movement in *The Hostage*.

Behan quickly establishes that the maintaining of a romantic view towards the Irish revolutionaries is not only dated but useless. Early in Act I

PAT. Don't have me use a coarse expression, you silly old bitch. This is nineteen-fifty-eight, and *the days of the heroes is over* this thirty-five years past. (emphasis is mine.) Long over, finished and done with. The I.R.A. and the War of Independence are as dead—as dead as the Charleston. (92)

Pat, who is often, but not always, the voice of logic and reason, is determined to remind the other denizens of the brothel that most of them neither participated in the revolution, nor do they understand it and its implications.

Behan uses interrogation even in the construction of his characters. Rarely are they what might be expected; instead, he invents, upends, and explicitly subverts audience expectations. The world of the brothel is one of illegal and illicit sex and of donned masks and assumed identities. Transvestites, homosexuals, "social workers," johns, hookers, and old Irish "patriots and soldiers" weave intricate illusions about

themselves. Men dress as women, boasters pretend to be people of courage, and even those on the farthest fringe of 1950s Dublin society--homosexuals and transvestites--are not merely sexually ambiguous, but are also political spies and police plants. Identities, like the world, are unverifiable and unfathomable.

A prime example of a character whose name both directs subversive satire and distorts post-colonial sexual attitudes is Monsewer. Monsewer is the owner of the house and a man who sees himself as extremely important; however, Behan clearly undercuts such self-aggrandizement through the farcical and satirical name that suggests he is a man of the sewer. Monsewer, whose name itself is a comic scatological version of a polite French address, is a man who pretends to have achieved greatness serving the cause of Ireland. He tells everyone who will listen about his self-professed courage, honor, and patriotism:

I would give all that I have in the wide
world to stand in the place of that young
man in Belfast Jail tomorrow morning. For
Ireland's sake I would hang crucified in the
town square. (125)

Monsewer's boasting is characteristic of the self-serving man who will always promote his own cause so long as he never has to prove his claims. He is the boasting, but cowardly, man who tries to impress his audience with false courage while sitting safely away from any real peril. He is the person who supports a revolution without directly

participating or witnessing its consequences of blood spilled and lives lost^{lix}. Behan satirizes easy, uncommitted political zeal.

Just as the characters are multi-leveled in their appearance and reality, so too is the setting fluid in its function. Wickstrom explains that the setting is a reification of the inversion of Irish values and attitudes: “a whorehouse that is also a haven for the fugitive, down-and-out IRA underground. The inhabitants of this house compose a microcosm of a world in upheaval and dislocation” (408). Nothing is as expected. A brothel is not merely a place of sexual trade but now a carceral space. As such, “It is a symbol of Ireland—an unreality where politics, nationalism, religion, the military, the family, and love are grown sick. Love becomes prostitution; the military is madness; nationalism is crime. Religion becomes perversion, politics cowardice and nihilism” (408). This whorehouse is reified as a symbol of Ireland and its internal societal/political illness and corruption.

Additionally, the setting of the whore-house as prison has resonance with *Hamlet*. In *The Hostage*, while speaking to the officious IRA officer, Pat says

PAT. How did you hear of our little convent? (119)

This sarcastic reference to a brothel as nunnery directly connects to the nunnery scene in *Hamlet* Act III, ii. in which Hamlet berates Ophelia as she is forced by her father to return love gifts to Hamlet. During this scene, Hamlet tells her “To get thee to a nunnery” (III.ii. 137), and his words mean either that she is too pure for the world and should be in a convent or that she is a whore and should be in a brothel. Secondly, this

brothel becomes a prison, just as Hamlet says he sees Denmark as a jail, place can become a prison regardless of its originally intended use.

As he does in *The Quare Fellow*, Behan, in *The Hostage*, interrogates the relationship of the audience to the theatrical performance. Through this questioning, Behan not only forces the audience to become more than viewers of the event, but he also traps the middle-class audience in their cultural and class expectations. In his discussion of the play's title Kiberd says: "The title *The Hostage* seems to refer to the captured Leslie, but may really indicate the older Irish onstage, all of whom seem to be hostages to a calcified past" (524). Kiberd sees Behan's satire as cutting through "the aristocratic pretensions of the nationalists" (425), a concept which supports the post-colonial paradigm under which the Republic was functioning. Rather than being truly revolutionary in the creation of a new state, the Republic was a subaltern imitation of the conqueror. Kiberd speaks to Pat's satiric "when told that the Taoiseach can speak seven languages, . . . it's a pity that English and Irish are not among them" (524). Pat speaks for the Republicans who are deeply disenchanted with de Valera's government, one that seems to be more concerned with self-promotion than building the Irish nation. "In castigating de Valera for his aloof image, Pat is speaking for all those disappointed radicals of the republican movement, who were told that 'Labour must wait', that the social question was secondary to the national question. For Behan, this was the moment when 'liberation' was missed (524). It was not enough for the republicans simply to have a nation that was identified as Irish in name. They had fought for and expected a change in the social structure of Ireland, one that would not reflect the same kind of government

that had dominated them previously. They had expected socialist changes but experienced more bourgeois reality.

For Behan, the proletariats are the most important in his drama. They feature centrally throughout his writings. It is the class of Behan's childhood and the one with which he most closely identified. And connections are never far away in his plays. In *The Hostage* almost all of the characters are proletarian, and we see clear expression of their attitudes towards class in Act Two in the lines from the following song.

MULLEADY AND MISS GILCHRIST [*singing*].

I really think us lower middle-classes

Get thrown around just like snuff at a wake,

Employers take us for a set of asses,

The rough they sneer at all attempts we make,

To have nice manners and to speak correctly,

And in the end we're flung upon the shelf,

We have no unions, cost of living bonus,

It's plain to see that no one loves you like yourself. (137)

They understand that they are among the others in society, the forgotten and the ignored, without political or economic power. Behan forces the audience, presumably comfortable middle-class to upper-class, to confront and acknowledge the reality of the people these characters represent.

Behan also demonstrates that, regardless of who is in charge, that the treatment of those under them, whether soldier, criminal, or worker, remains the same—exploitation and misuse. The soldier maintains that the fate the young man awaits in the government prison would also be meted out on an Englishman.

SOLDIER. Look, if he was an Englishman he'd be hanged just the same. (139)

Leslie does not see the young Irishman's imprisonment as a political act but as a judicial sanction against crime.

SOLDIER. Well, you know, you can't let blokes go around shooting at coppers.

I don't fancy coppers much myself, but you've got to have law and order. (138)

The soldier presents a reasonable argument, that society has the right to enforce laws against criminals, especially violent criminals, unless, of course, such action is seen from a revolutionary political perspective. That does not mean, however, that Leslie's view is neither accurate nor reasonable. Behan is clearly arguing for Leslie's point.

Behan, as he did in *The Quare Fellow*, argues that those in charge in 1950s Ireland use those below them just as the British used the Irish when the British controlled the Republic. In Act III, Meg is speaking with Pat about the effects of his time in prison.

MEG. Ah, Mountjoy and the Curragh Camp were universities for the like of you.

but I'll tell you one thing and that's not two, the day you gave up work to run this

house for Monsewer, and entertain the likes of her, you became a butler—a Republican butler, a half-red footman—a Sinn Fein skivvy-- (161)

The political implications of this speech are enormous. Pat, according to Meg, had received his proper instruction for life in prisons. He would have learned the skills needed to build a career as a criminal, which would be better than being a servant. Meg implies that there is more honesty in being criminally dishonest than in servitude, especially when it resembles and is taken from the British system of Lord and servant. Pat, however, did take the position of running the house for Monsewer and by doing so, placed himself into the ironic position of become essentially a manservant for Monsewer, the supposed Republican hero. The scatologically named Monsewer now is not only a comic play on the French term of address but also of the image of the revolutionary hero. He functions as a noble, one who maintains ownership of a property and hires others to do his bidding, much like the titled nobility of Great Britain who owned property but left the managing and care of it to others who were deemed beneath them by birth. Monsewer's and Pat's situation, in terms of the brothel, is a comic subaltern representation of Ireland's continuing post-colonial reality. Pat is, in essence, a Butler, serving a Master, the same way as if he were wearing the proper clothing of a servant in a great house in Great Britain.

Behan uses a similar inversion technique that he did with characters also on the audience, by violating the so-called fourth wall and having some of his characters directly address the audience. This is reminiscent of both music-hall technique and Brechtian epic theatre. The use of direct address both confronts the audience and moves it out of a

comfort zone and also compels it to examine its dearly held nationalistic and bourgeois attitudes. Kiberd asserts that Pat is the main character whose voice resembles most closely that of Behan's (525). "His shabby boarding-house-turned-brothel is a fitting metaphor for the decayed ideals of a free Ireland. He is the first character onstage to speak directly to the audience, *as if he were mediating between Behan, the actors and onlookers* [emphasis mine]" (525). Such mediation is, exactly, what he is doing. Pat acts as if he were a referee of sorts, keeping Behan's questioning of the audience moving and functional. He becomes the voice through which Behan addresses the audience and mocks the dead nationalistic ideologies that still permeate a movement and country that have not changed with the times and the current political realities. Instead of recognizing this death, the IRA will form this brothel into a prison and an execution chamber. "While the other characters in the house seem minor pawns in a power-game between England and Ireland—Leslie is to die if the boy in Belfast jail is executed—Pat sees the truth: that such a backyard squabble means little" (525). Both the IRA and the bourgeois audience are trapped in their post-colonial political assumptions, which Behan compels them to see; through Pat as his tool of audience interrogation, Behan forces the audience to confront their views which allow them to participate in the post-colonial holdover of capital punishment.

That the audience is implicated in these near meaningless skirmishes, as they are in *The Quare Fellow*, is a Behan theme that continues throughout his work. Culbertson directly points out that implication: "He [Behan] has also suggested that great conflicts with 'foreign' powers are substitute wars that inhibit local slaughters. The final song announces, however, in an ironic inversion of the Pauline proclamation, that death brings

no victory, and the bells of hell continue to ring, not for actors, but for audience” (187-188). Throughout the play, from the beginning to the end, Behan consistently not only interrogates but also implicates the audience for its participation in the killings that continue in the name of revolution, even though no active revolution is occurring, only a weak, almost parodic, version of the Irish revolution of the first several decades of the 20th century. Gillespie claims “*The Hostage* wishes the audience to recognize the function of violence in Irish lives, but it has neither the desire to justify it or the capacity to suppress it” (104). That this violence, which Behan brings to dramatic life, is too powerful for the playwright to control is an important point. No one person could control the internal and external expressions of violence in Ireland’s history and political circumstances, but Behan is able to force the Irish audience out of their moribund complacency and to confront them with the reality of this violence.

About the power of Behan’s direct implication of the audience, Hogan says “He has worked his trick again and worked it more startlingly than in *The Quare Fellow*, for he hurls accusation of inhumanity pointblank at his audience. That moment at the end of *The Hostage* is one of Behan’s triumphs and a great moment of the modern theatre” (205). Interestingly, by claiming that Behan is attacking the inhumanity of the Irish situation, including the audience, an inference can be raised that Behan is speaking from a position of humanism. While this assertion might seem odd, for Behan is using a new and experimental form, it is actually consistent. Behan, both in his personal political views and in his dramatic writing, has evolved past angry accusation towards England from an Irish political revolutionary perspective to one of larger implication of the entirety of guilt encompassing Irish, England, and the IRA. In his broad sweeping

condemnation of this killing, he expresses a unity of suffering among humanity.

Regardless of who is executed—an IRA rebel or a British soldier—the suffering is the same because they are both human beings.

Even in Behan's choice of language, English and Gaelic, and both colloquial, working-class forms, is there an audience interrogation and post-colonial implication. Kiberd explains: "The dialect in which Behan's characters speak was neither standard Irish nor standard English, and whenever he worked in English, Behan left a number of Gaelic phrases untranslated, as if to remind audiences of all that must be lost in such a carry-over. This was in no way to suggest the feasibility of a return to some pre-colonial identity, merely to resist his own too-facile absorption into the canon of English literature" (529). Through the use of untranslated Gaelic, which Behan could be reasonably sure was completely foreign to most of his Irish audience, he is able to put the audience off guard and unsure of the totality of the meaning of the words. These words still have effect on the audience, but not a linear, logical influence. They are left inconclusive about what they have experienced and felt. "Simply put, as *the Hostage* unfolds, the audience comes to see the tension generated by ambivalence leading to stasis: the greater the commitment that one makes to the use of force, the less effectual that individual [and the cause to which he/she committed] becomes" (Gillespie 102). Behan seems to be saying that we, the audience, are also held hostage by our expectations of what a play should be.

An examination of the title of the play shows layered meanings. On the surface, it refers to Leslie, the British soldier who is being held prisoner in a brothel as a bargaining chip in an attempt by the IRA to force the British to release an Irish youth from Borstal

prison^{lx}. If seen this way, the title is a simple and direct representation and creates a tragic figure, one that might be seen in a naturalistic play. In Behan, expectations and reality are rarely connected neatly; rather, disorientation is his aim.

Just as Behan creates disorientation through language, so does he imbue ambiguity into the play through the multiple levels of meaning in the title. Paul M. Levitt, in “Hostages to History: Title as Dramatic Metaphor in ‘The Hostage,’” explores this multifaceted meaning: “The title of the play has several meanings and provides a key to understanding Behan’s attitude toward tradition and, in particular, the relation of past to present” (401). This connection is very Irish and inescapable—even in the most modern of times, ancient hatreds and traditions inform literature and life. The two most powerful political parties in the Republic of Ireland are Finn Gael and Fianna Fáil, both of which trace their roots to the opposing sides in the Irish Civil War, and the enmity of those opponents often still informs the policies of the parties more than a traditional conservative and liberal split does^{lxi}. As such, the political landscape of 1950s Ireland is also held hostage by its reluctance to move forward into a democracy defined by parties aligned along conservative and liberal perspectives. Instead, they still are defined by the positions taken by their parents and grandparents during the Irish Civil War. No significant ideological beliefs seemed to define and determine the parties, only history, both a post-colonial holdover coupled with the Irish tendency to mix history with mythology. The title of the play carries various meanings: hostage implies someone or something being held captive, or imprisoned – Leslie, the British soldier, the unseen IRA man held by the government, and Ireland itself—from the micro to the macrocosmic view of hostages.

Like the title and its ambiguity of meaning, the setting is also ruled by multiplicity of purpose. In *The Hostage* Behan uses both an immediate and a metaphoric setting. The primary setting is in a brothel in Dublin, one of the very busy business establishments hidden from the view of the genteel population, although frequently patronized by them. This is a level of hypocrisy that typified both middle-class life in general and the political situation in particular. The bourgeoisie turned an apparent blind eye to the places of sexual business that they frequented, pretending that such things never crossed their collective minds, and they also pretend not to recognize the existence of the IRA and Ireland's revolutionary past as they go about their daily lives, even though the presence of that revolution is constantly apparent and the IRA have never gone away, even if they seem to have become trivialized. The Irish memory is very long and persistent.

Behan's setting has a second level, a metaphor of Ireland as a prison itself. This is not an explicit but an implicit comparison. The micro-image of the brothel as prison is a point that Behan clearly expresses, but by establishing that these often eccentric characters represent the whole of Ireland, Behan also creates the macro-image of the brothel as representation of Ireland, and thus Ireland, itself, as a prison. Colin MacInnes, in "The Writings of Brendan Behan," says, "We come out of jail in *The Hostage*—but only just so, since the central character, the young English soldier held in a Dublin house by the I.R.A., is again a prisoner" (53). Kiberd also addresses this point: "In *The Hostage*, a chair and circle of light become both a prison cell and site of sexual assignation between Teresa and the captive soldier, Leslie Williams" (134). The difference in prisons is only of kind—we move out of the government prison in *The Quare Fellow* and into an improvised and hidden, but nevertheless real, jail in a Dublin

brothel, illustrating that humanity is capable of inflicting torment on other humans anywhere, no matter the apparent function of the place where the imprisonment and torment are conducted.

Another important point of consideration in discussing the setting of *The Hostage* is that of absurdity. Patrick A. McCarthy, in "Triviality and Dramatic Achievement In Two Plays By Brendan Behan," says: "The Hostage is a play that abounds in theatricalism: it begins with an Irish jig and ends with a song sung by a character who has just died, and in between there are frequent songs, jokes, and humorous addresses to the audience" (114). The theatricalism of which McCarthy speaks extends past the music-hall influence, and, as he asserts, illustrates the meaning of the brothel and of the deterioration of the power and importance of the IRA in the 1950s: "While keeping us entertained with songs and jokes, Behan is quite careful to make his point that the madness of this play reflects the sickness of an age that clings to outmoded nationalistic ideals even when these ideals threaten all other human values" (McCarthy 114). In essence, the setting, one of absurdity itself, reflects that the entirety of Ireland is imprisoned by its clinging to outdated nationalist ideas and by its post-colonial status, making the nation encompassed by an over-arching umbrella of absurdity.

As he does in *The Quare Fellow*, Behan poses a similar condition of absurdity in *The Hostage*. In discussing Esslin's idea of "The Theatre of the Absurd," Boyle draws the connection between these playwrights and Behan: "Esslin does not mention Behan in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, but what Esslin has to say about such playwrights as Ionesco and Beckett clearly applies equally well to Behan. . . Behan shows--as do Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, and Genet--that man is ridiculous when he allows himself to be

controlled by a system” (89). Esslin does not name Behan as a theatrical absurdist probably because Behan's presentation of the absurd is different from that of Ionesco and Beckett, who use the stage to manifest absurdity directly in the production, while Behan explores the absurd nature of the world through suggestion and situation. Behan's plays, while apparently in the mold of realistic drama, nevertheless, share a philosophic concern about existential nihilism with the playwrights Esslin discusses in his book.

The setting is a brothel in Dublin, a place that signals to the audience a commentary on the coming events. Bert Cardullo in "*The Hostage Reconsidered*," points out "That the IRA's headquarters is a brothel itself comments on their cause" (Cardullo 139). The central action of the play is, like that of *The Quare Fellow*, a loose collection of events rather than a tightly-drawn plot. "*The Hostage* has less a structure than a framework around which action is improvised"(Cardullo 139). The main "improvisations" are: a young English soldier is kidnaped by the IRA, and they plan to kill him in retaliation for the coming execution of an Irish criminal in England. While Behan might seem to be creating a straight-forward and obvious political theme, he is actually adding complexity by setting the action in an odd locale and peopling his play with extraordinary characters, the kind with which the IRA would not normally like to be associated. Additionally, Behan employs a "star-crossed lovers" theme, as the soldier Leslie falls in love with Teresa, a girl from the country, to undercut the power of the IRA and the official world. The soldier, then, is killed accidentally in a crossfire between the police and the IRA. If Behan risks becoming maudlin and melodramatic at this point, still, by keeping his distance through a satiric, absurdist view, he maintains a humorous

tone in his presentation of the people of this world. What could have been melodrama is instead satire and comic denunciation.

Behan is careful to maintain a comic tone throughout the play. The serious and vicious quality of these events is amplified, not undercut, by the humor. In a moment of Brechtian epic theater, Behan causes the audience to laugh at the same time they realize the horror of the soldier's plight. While being guarded by a volunteer of the IRA, both Leslie and the soldier need to urinate. Instead of allowing a simple solution to a basic human need, the self-important, overblown Officer responds as though he were making a decision of great importance:

VOLUNTEER: He wants a--to go round the back, sir.

PAT: Well, he can, can't he, surely?

VOLUNTEER: No, sir. I'm in the same plight myself, and I can't move from this door for another hour yet.

PAT: Why don't you both go?

VOLUNTEER: We'll have to ask the officer.

PAT: Well, I'll call him. Sir! Are you there, sir? *The OFFICER appears. PAT whispers to him.*

To AUDIENCE) A man wants to go round the back and it's a military secret. (131-132)

Behan uses the comic technique of bathroom humor to unite the jailer and the jailed in a common bond of humanity. They are not enemies in this situation; instead, they have a mutual enemy in the arrogant officer who would deny them bodily relief. This comic technique signifies the total control of the jailer through random and bizarre demonstrations of strength. By controlling even the time of a person's urination, the jailer eliminates the prisoner's autonomy. That the situation is comic and that the jailer is a twit does not reduce the impact of the scene; rather, it heightens its irrationality and power.

Behan's use of satire is both explicit and subtle. He attacks the absurdity and insanity of the human race overtly, but then he undercuts the direct attacks by use of song, humor, and absurdist technique. As the play progresses, Behan's critique become more pointed and stronger but always tinged with humor: "Behan's assertion of the absurd things man does to man in the name of causes and faiths makes it more difficult for one to laugh good-naturedly at the foolish but dangerous maniacs which inhabit his brothel. But, whenever Behan momentarily threatens to make a really vitriolic points about man's stupidities, he overwhelms it with the great vitality which his characters evince even in their impossible situation" (99). Behan continues to disrupt the direction of the audience as they react to the events. When seemingly experiencing humor, he brings them to sorrow; when dealing with satire and tragedy, he undercuts the tension with insertion of comedy.

Behan's comic tone is not simply for the sake of humor but for a demonstration of the human capacity to use that humor to endure pain and to survive the vicissitudes of a seemingly uncaring and random universe. Paul G. Buchloh, in "Brendan Behan's *The*

Hostage: Lachende Hinnahme einer bitteren und chaotischen Welt,” says about Behan’s humor and its power: “Die Unsinnigkeit aller vermeintlichen Werte, wird erträglich, wenn es ein Mensch mit dem Wissen um die eigenen Stärken und Schwachen, mit Liebe zu sich selbst und seinem Nächsten, mit Lachen betrachtet, auch wenn letztlich das Lachen mit trauiger Bitterkeit gemischt bleibt” (232). (The absurdity of all the supposed values—truths—is tolerable, if a person pays attention to themselves, has self-knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses, and this knowledge is tempered with laughter, even if that laughter is ultimately mixed with a sad bitterness. Translation is mine.) The laughter serves a purpose, not as a cure for the illness of absurdity but as an anesthetic to help mask its pain.

Within Behan’s comic inclusion, we also see an interesting twist to the purpose of his humor. As in *The Quare Fellow*, Behan imparts a tone of celebration to the prisoner’s death through a drinking song; only in *The Hostage*, it is the dead man himself who sings the piece. This device not only frames the play with a dance and a song, but also, through humor, undercuts the misery with a last reminder of the meaninglessness of the whole event. Behan is concerned with the social issues that face Ireland and humanity, but he does not express that concern through polemics or diatribes. Rather, he uses his understanding of the ludicrous nature of the human race in its glories and foibles, its strengths and weaknesses, its noble achievements and its degrading crimes, to present a world in which tears and laughter are always intermixed. It is a world which is ultimately absurd, but it is also a world in which we, as the human race, must strive to live. Boyle explains, “The two young people are concerned with life and the present. Everyone else in the brothel is concerned with death and the past. In the midst of unimaginable sterility

. . . the young people assert life” (97). The young people seek life affirming love, even as everyone around them is involved either in terror and violence or in degradation of life. Even though they will not achieve success, their attempt at love and normalcy is the only affirmation of Camus’ directive: "The point is to live."

While in *The Quare Fellow* Behan begins to use the techniques of theatre of the absurd, in *The Hostage*, he jumps completely into this new form and exploits its possibilities for satire and audience manipulation. Boyle emphasizes the importance of seeing *The Hostage* as an absurdist play, that this play fits extraordinarily well into the emerging form: “To prove that *The Hostage* is an “absurdist drama” is important in that it serves at least partially to liberate Behan from the charge that *The Hostage* is a failure and that Behan was a man of no talent because his play breaks with nineteenth-century formulas of play construction” (91). This new approach is not a weakness; rather, it is a powerful, experimental artist’s vision of a new way of presenting his plays that it is possible, even in 1950s Ireland, to break with the past. This creation of a new form in theatre mirrors the point that Behan makes about the country and the IRA needing to break with the old thinking about violence and retribution. Boyle continues: ““Absurdist’ dramatists eschew nineteenth-century traditions of plot and character presentation because they wish to show a chaotic world, one without logic or tradition. This is the world Behan wishes to show, and he chooses the techniques of ‘absurdist drama,’ not because of lack of talent, but because of his view of the world” (91). The only point that Boyle misses is that there is one tradition that Behan shows in *The Hostage*, and that is the ancient Irish tribalism of killing and vengeance. In terms of portraying that tradition

onstage, however, Boyle is correct in his assessment of Behan's abandonment of traditions of nineteenth-century theatrical production.

It is interesting that in a review of a performance, one critic acknowledges the new direction which Behan takes in *The Hostage*. Christopher Murray, in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up To Nation*, says "In a rave review of *The Hostage* in the *Observer* Kenneth Tynan suggested that the style of production was *commedia dell' arte*. More to the point, it was Brechtian and epic, alienating and fragmented in the modernist mode" (159). Certainly it is not a large leap to suggest that in addition to Brechtian and modern, it is also absurdist. "Since its premiere in 1958 *The Hostage* has been accepted world-wide as a splendid piece of theatre, entertaining, carnivalesque and irreverent" (159). This play became more than simply an entertainment—it would be a statement of Behan's indictment of the all-inclusive Irish situation. In speaking to the play's lasting importance, Murray explains: "Yet it will always be a play which disturbs Irish people, aware on the one hand of its anarchic energy and on the other of its kinship with the more serious play in Irish.^{lxii} The political issues seriously debated in *An Giall* are mocked in *The Hostage*; in 1958 the IRA were moribund but after 1969 and into the 1990s the IRA were no longer a laughing matter" (159). Murray details that a newer production in 1990-1991 was hugely successful: "it was a new version in English, by Michael Scott and Niall Toibín, using material from *An Giall*, which had Dubliners flocking to a new theatre, the Tivoli. There is a nostalgia for the original which is true to Behan's own desire for lost innocence. He was forever creating and recreating his own mythology" (159). What is clear from this quotation is the lasting power that Behan's play has on the psyche and spirit of Ireland, that regardless of the relative power of the

IRA or of the revolutionary zeal, that the commentary Behan speaks through *The Hostage* continues to resonate in the minds of the Irish.

Previously, I discussed the Irish wake and form, which also connects to the absurd and the carnivalesque: “The wake suspends social, racial and ideological barriers. The rules of war dividing friend from foe are not accurately observed by the wake community. The mutual relationship between the Irish team and their English prisoner in *The Hostage* reveals a carnival brotherhood rather than hostility and cruelty” (Witoszek 88). Witoszek explains: “In Irish culture the death of a political rebel is often celebrated as a grand funeral spectacle whose nature is basically optimistic: its role is to demonstrate national unity and the continuing spirit of patriotism and defiance” (14).^{lxiii} For the funeral of a political rebel, the wailing is not to represent the grief of a group who know an individual, but it should encompass the national sorrow over tragedy, over the continuing Irish attempt and destruction of liberation. “Behan also theatricalizes death, but neither the death of Leslie nor that of Cronin initiate a community rite signaling a moral-spiritual revival of the presented world. There is no resurrection in Behan’s carnival of death, even if the corpses of Leslie and Cronin rise from the dead at the end of both plays [*Richard’s Cork Leg*]” (89). Witoszek argues that the play functions as an overall wake for the Irish, serving to show them that they are not dead, like the corpse being waked but are still alive. The wake also serves as a point of unification in Irish society: “The wake suspends social, racial and ideological barriers. The rules of war dividing friend from foe are not accurately observed by the wake community. The mutual relationship between the Irish team and their English prisoner in *The Hostage* reveals a carnival brotherhood rather than hostility and cruelty” (88).

This lack of hatred between supposed enemies is ironic because they react in the end of the play as enemies in violence and murder. Behan creates a level of irony, because the association of the funeral with disruption of tribal divide is itself disrupted, creating even more divide between class, religion, and nationality. Speaking to this point, Witozsek disagrees with “M. Wickstrom’s interpretation of *The Hostage* as a play whose ‘business it to salvage the exhausted heroism^{lxiv}’” (89). Instead Witozsek argues that the wake, itself a carnivalesque representation, exists to destroy “the myth of heroic sacrifice [and] the myth of progress” (90). This dichotomy of opinion illustrates the wide variety of critical interpretation possible with this fluid and intentionally ambiguous play. I suspect that the truth of the wake-like characteristics of *The Hostage* lies in a combination of these and other meanings. Any one defined meaning limits and simplifies the overtly syncretic structure, voice, and themes of the play. Behan certainly criticizes the republican revolutionary myths of the time, but he does not completely eliminate the possibility of heroism in a humanistic context.

Man might be alive, but he is also a figure, according to Behan, who deserves scorn for his hypocrisies. Richard A. Duprey (even though mired in heavily religious overtones) speaks in “The Bloodshot World Of Brendan Behan,” of Behan’s implications about our collective failures: “The most disturbing thing about the Rabalaisian denunciations of Brendan Behan, as he squints at us through bloodshot eye, is that much of what he says is true. We dwell in a bawdy-house of our own making—a society full of cacophony and disputation—hypocrisy and cant” (39). Behan, who presented himself to the public as an almost living embodiment of a Rabalaisian figure, ran the risk of having his words subsumed by the power of his public image. Colin MacInnes examines the

power and problem of this kind of persona as it creates a public image that often interferes with the critical reception of the work of the author/playwright: “There are artists whose public performance is so flamboyant—Byron, Alfred Jarry or Erik Satie are examples—that their contemporaries, repelled or dazzled by the man, have failed to measure his artistic quality”(45). He asserts that this perception has affected the works of Brenden Behan that the image of the Wildman, the drunken Irishman and Celtic poet has placed his works into the realm of stereotypes and has damaged its artistic reception. “This has been the fate of Brendan Behan. The ex-Borstalian, the rebel in trouble with two governments, the interrupter of his own plays in London and New York, the drinker, the singer, the “broth of a boy” persona, have been a gift to columnists and the shame of those who expect of artists that their loftiest aim be the Order of Merit (or its Irish equivalent if there is one—as I hope there isn’t)” (45). This image, however, of the sexually-free, drunken Irishman, if viewed in the context of a media heightened vision of the playwright might serve to highlight the powerful implications of society in his work, written by a man who saw and experienced much, including the hypocrisy of a terror-driven political movement and the lost ideals of a revolutionary society.

Duprey is clearly distressed by what he calls Behan’s anti-Church views, but he misses the point that the Church is implicated in Behan’s attacks as much as the Republic and the IRA. In a theocratic nation, it is virtually impossible to criticize the government and society without also attacking the ruling religious power. In his obvious difficulties with Behan, he says “It is in this violent naïveté, so characteristic of rebellious children, that Behan’s weakness lies, for with all his latent idealism, one can scarcely canonize petulance, and impatience is not to be confused with the theological virtue of

hope” (41). The problem with this criticism is that Duprey completely misjudges Behan. *Brendan Behan is not a child, nor is he naïve.* [Emphasis is mine] He makes his denunciations of society, religion, and the IRA from a position of experience and observation. In fact, in this particular moment in his essay, it is Duprey who appears to be naïve about the workings of the world. He still manages, however, to make a very strong point about *The Hostage*: “*The Hostage*, the core offering of Behan’s formal blasphemy, is an indictment of law, religion, home, country, human decency, art and even death—things that Behan, like all other men, loves or fears and at least respects” (41).

The hostage himself displaces the assumptions about politics that controlled 1950s revolutionary thinking as John Brannigan, in “Form and Ethics in the Comedies of Brendan Behan” says: “Leslie functions in the play, then, to unsettle the politics of identity underpinning the murderous actions taking place in Belfast and in the brothel in Dublin” (254). The Irish view the situation through the lens of Britain and Ireland, oppressor and oppressed, them and us. “*The Hostage* mobilizes contradiction as the principal instrument for displacing the politics of identity” (254). Characters move from one fixed identity to another and have different abilities at different times. These are not writing inconsistencies, but they demonstrate the inherent inconsistencies of a political situation based on incontrovertible identity politics, that we are right and you are wrong, regardless of circumstances or people.

Central to understanding *The Hostage* is examining the complexity of his satire, seeing that it does not speak to only one issue or one version of Ireland. In this play numerous versions of Ireland compete for the audience’s attention: there is the extant

Republican revolutionary world of the IRA that is intent in the destruction of anything that is British, the lost world of revolutionary glory from the days of the War for Independence, and the stagnant contemporary world of Ireland (Wickstrom 409). Behan carefully juxtaposes these images of Ireland, criticizing all, and making a plea that somehow human beings learn from the past and their mistakes. None escape his pen or the stroke of his satire. “Sex, liquor, fear, and bigotry demolish the integrity of the IRA men. Self-delusion and disappointment bring down Pat and his national dream, and Monsewer is mad. Official Ireland is cursed with the task of mopping up her own dreaming children” (409).

Wickstrom’s point about Ireland and its children is crucial to the horror that Behan portrays. Inherent in this play is the failure of the older generation towards the younger generation. It is two young men, barely out of their adolescences, who are executed, one in Belfast by the government and one in the brothel by the IRA. In both cases, it is old people, or at least middle-aged, lost in their dreams of a glorious past, who destroy these young people’s possibilities for productive futures. Additionally, the young maid, Teresa, who falls in love with the hostage also, by witnessing the horror of an execution, has her psyche scarred and her hope for love ripped away from her. It is certain that Ireland, by being trapped in its post-colonial subaltern position, is unable to establish its own way, its own life, and its own future, thereby condemning many of its young people to death and despair.

Sanction, or execution, constitutes the third leg of the metaphor I examine in *The Hostage*. Into this world come the IRA Officer and his prisoner, Leslie, the young English soldier, who is as removed from the political problems between Ireland and

England as any other young working-class Englishman looking for a job. The soldier does not understand the political implications of the coming execution of the Irishman. He tells Teresa, "Look, if he was an Englishman he'd be hanged just the same"(Behan 139). To Leslie the condemned man in Belfast is simply another criminal, without political importance.

The IRA Officer, however, does have a particular understanding of the political consequences of this event, and he acts on those "understandings." His actions, however, undermine the strength and integrity of his beliefs. The Officer, when he "inspects" the brothel, pretends moral disapproval, but he is unveiled:

PAT: Isn't it good enough for your prisoner?

OFFICER: It's not good enough for the Irish
Republican Army. . . .

PAT: Are you splendid, or just holy? Haven't
I seen you somewhere before? It couldn't be
you that was after coming one Saturday night . . . (116)

Pat, as he often does, reveals the truth behind the curtained world of the brothel and Irish bourgeoisie society. The Officer pretends to be shocked at the environment in which the prisoner is being kept, that it does not reflect the IRA's so-called high moral ground, but Pat knows that he has seen the Officer in the brothel as a customer. The very same man who would condemn the affairs of the prostitutes and their customers is revealed to be a

“john” himself. This is the kind of hypocrisy Behan attacks in this play, from that of the righteousness of the Church to the self-aggrandizement of the IRA.

After the arrangements for housing the prisoner in this "jail" have been made, the inhabitants of the brothel, those who use and make a living there, consider the plight of the young Irishman who has been scheduled to die in the Belfast Jail.

MR. MULLEADY: The poor boy--in his lonely cell
--waiting all night for the screw coming for him
in the morning.

TERESA: It would break your heart to be thinking
about him. (122)

In this dialogue, Behan illustrates the existential horror that the condemned men face in their respective death rows—the young Irishman in Belfast Prison and Leslie in this brothel. They must use their remaining time alive to make sense of their lives and reconcile themselves to their coming deaths. Ironically, the people who show the most empathy for Leslie are people who are themselves marginalized from the mainstream of Irish society. In this brothel, its inhabitants and the IRA replicate the plight of the young man in the Belfast Jail by imprisoning Leslie and holding him for execution. Only Teresa shows herself to be truly separated from this insanity by falling in love with the young soldier.

If Camus is correct in his assertion that a striving for life is a necessary consequence of the absurd world, then Teresa and Leslie are the only people in this play who are positive

figures. They consummate their love and, in the short time they have together, deny the distorted interpretations of the world that the others would impose on them. They are emblematic of life; the others are emblematic of death. This star-crossed lovers theme can speak to life, but it can also speak to absurdity and the existentially comic condition of impossible.

While unsophisticated, Teresa is not naïve, and she understands the world and its dangers more clearly than the other characters. She knows she is safer working as a maid at the brothel in which no one will accost her sexually with all the other options available than she was at the convent in which she had to avoid the advances of ". . . a clerical student in the house"(Behan 124). Her fear of the clerical student is disturbingly prescient about the horrors that are presently being revealed about the Catholic Church and its treatment of children and women in Ireland. Teresa is also cognizant of some of the mistakes and hypocrisies of the political thinking, even if she is unschooled in the details of the current political ideologies. Among such recognitions is her understanding of the horror of execution. Teresa sees the idiocy of Monsewer's inflated honoring of death:

Wasn't that the ridiculous talk that old one
had out of him about the boy being hung? (125)

Teresa also comprehends the injustice that the IRA is committing against Leslie. Unfortunately, despite her realization, she is powerless to alter the course of these events. Like many others before her and many others after her in Ireland, she is condemned to be

one of those who have suffered the loss of a loved one in the Irish "Troubles." After Leslie is killed in the crossfire between the police and the IRA, Pat tries to console Teresa, but Teresa will not accept the superficial explanation:

PAT: Don't cry, Teresa--and don't blame anybody
for it. Nobody meant to kill him. (182)

Pat tries to mollify her by claiming lack of intent changes the reality of the situation, that no one is at fault because no one truly wanted to kill him, at least this way. Of course, his reasoning is another level of absurdity—they did intend to execute Leslie, even if not at that moment. And their actions did kill him; they can neither escape the reality of his death nor of their culpability in that demise. Teresa is succinct in her removing Pat's obfuscation:

TERESA: But he's dead. (182)

Like the Quare Fellow, Leslie is killed. The Quare Fellow is executed by a careful and orderly state, while Leslie is murdered accidentally in the random gunfire of opposing political forces.

The ending of *The Hostage* is complex and needs its own explication and examination. The ending bookends the play with music, only in this case, Behan uses a song from the dead man to send the audience on their way, knowing that like the

characters in the play who are implicated in the death of Leslie through their inaction, they, the audience, are also implicated; through their blatant acceptance of the status-quo, they are also guilty in the deaths of other innocents. The situation in Ireland demands complete responsibility for the actions of all, or the hatred will never go away.^{lxv} The ending of *The Hostage* is read numerous ways critically, each of which has an element of truth to it, but taken together, they again represent the kind of syncretic structure and theme that Behan imbues his play with. Behan does not, however, leave the stage in a state of tragedy. Rather than closing on the grieving Teresa, Behan employs the soldier once more. Now dead, Leslie finishes the play with a song.

The bells of hell

Go ting-a-ling-a-ling

For you but not for me.

Oh death where is thy

Sting-a-ling-a-ling

Or grave thy victory?

If you meet the undertaker

Or the young man from the Pru,

Get a pint with what's left over.

Now I'll say goodbye to you. (Behan 182)

Before considering the critical responses to the ending, it is important to note the Biblical connection which Behan satirizes. Behan references “O, Death, where is thy sting? O

grave, where is thy victory” (“First Corinthians: 15: 55”) in which the message is given that Christ offers saving from death through belief in Him, a view that would be extremely well-known to the Irish 1950s audience. It might, indeed, have been seen as almost blasphemous to mock the Christian message the way he does. Rather than use the message in a respectful and somber and sober manner, Behan offers that the Hostage does experience rebirth but not through Christ but via the hand of the writer. Further, Leslie, in the panto-like song and dance, reminds his audience to have a drink, a message which is very Irish but not somber.

Among the critical readings is that of tragedy. Philip Bordinat, in “Tragedy Through Comedy In Plays By Brendan Behan And Brian Friel,” speaks to the underlying serious, potentially tragic, nature of this play: “The problem addressed here is the manner in which the playwright uses humor to intensify the tragic. The story told certainly has tragic potential” (84). “Behan in *The Hostage* gives us a comedy dealing with the tragic” (87).

Behan directly connects the audience to the tragic victim, through pulling the audience into the action of the spectacle beyond the act of simple theatrical witnessing from a safe distance. Diana Culbertson, in “Sacred Victims: Catharsis in the Modern Theatre,” speaks to tragic catharsis as it is possible in the twentieth century: “At the end of the [twentieth] century, however, with the ever-present possibility of mass, even planetary destruction, with the realization that we cannot keep violence at bay, the audience has changed, and so has the understanding of tragic catharsis” (179). Not only has this tragic understanding changed, but also has the means by which a playwright can deliver this

tragedy, from that of nineteenth-century topoi and production values to that of twentieth-century theater of the absurd.

Culbertson gives a lucid and cogent explanation of the change in tragic experience for the audience:

A dramatic tradition beginning as far back as *Oedipus at Colonus*, and including such dramas as *The Hostage*, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and the recent *The Gospel at Colonus* and *Empress of China*, relocates anagnorisis to the audience, achieving a kind of disclosure appropriately described as *apocalypsis* or unveiling. To achieve this effect, the playwright must lure the audience into the action with the promise of emotional and moral superiority, then gradually include the audience as an essential component of the projected world^{lxvi}. The collapse of distance between audience world and stage world creates a theatrical collective when the audience recognizes itself as antagonist.^{lxvii} Then significance of this recognition can be understood by paralleling recent tragic drama with René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and its consequences: mimetic rivalry; reciprocal violence, and victimage. (180)

It is the metatheatricality of the play's ending that connects it directly to the audience, forcing them to make the connection which Girard posits, that the breaking down of the barriers between performers and audience directly compels the audience to recognize its implicit and explicit complicity in the horror of the situation. The audience's expected moral superiority of which Culbertson speaks (180) is destroyed, and they are without emotional barriers. They must confront Behan's message; there is no emotional or

intellectual escape. And Culbertson argues that Behan's message like the classic theater he references is ultimately one of tragedy.

Not all critics, however, agree that *The Hostage* is tragic. Because of the fluid nature of its form, it is easy to have varying viewpoints. Boyle argues against a purely tragic reading and asserts that the play's tragic tendencies are always balanced by its absurdist directions: "Out of the tragic-comic tension of *The Hostage* the same sort of statement emerges as in *The Quare Fellow*: man is ridiculous; man is alive"(93). In fact, this tragic-absurd combination is what Boyle argues is "typically Behan" (93). Boyle is correct, in that Behan tinges all assertions with counter assertions and allows no pure readings because another critical, thematic, or dramatic point or perspective is always lurking in his plays. We must be open to a larger contextual reading or viewing of his plays, especially *The Hostage*, in order to understand the micro and macrocosmic meanings of the play.

The ending of *The Hostage* has elicited a great deal of critical debate, specifically about Leslie's onstage resurrection after his execution. The ending is such a crucial moment in the play and is one of such uncertainty that it has generated a range of interpretation. In speaking of the effect of Joan Littlewood on the play, Colbert Kearney, in *The Writings Of Brendan Behan*, offers this explanation: "The twin aims of the Theatre Workshop were to divert and instruct [very much in ideological, but not technical, ideals of Brecht and his epic theatre]. *The Hostage* is an epitome: behind the whirl of song and dance and slapstick, national, religious, moral and political prejudices are mocked^{lxviii}" (132-133). Boyle speaks to the ending, "In *The Hostage* the wake is a celebration of 'potential corpses' – two young boys sentenced to death: an Irish rebel sitting in Belfast

Jail and a British hostage kept by the IRA in a Dublin whorehouse” (85). What is important for Boyle’s explanation is that the reality of death, especially politically caused death, is a current feature of Irish life, as inescapable as any death by natural causes, hence the idea of the wake as celebration of the oncoming execution, that the soldier will, in reality, for Boyle escape from the confines of his prison and his life. The time in prison in the brothel is merely the waiting for liberation from the hardships of the world (Boyle 87).

Why, then, is the wake so important to this play and its ending? Witoszek explains “If we remember that a function of the wake is to assure the dead that they are not really dead but remain among the living (16)^{lxix}, then in Behan’s comedy this function gets its *literal fulfillment*. The corpses are the resurrected heroes who mock at the idea of resurrection. They rise from the dead to sneer and jeer at the participants in the never ending national wake, the death dreamers and lovers of ruin” (90). Boyle asserts that there is some optimism present in the ending. He sees a possibility that man can somehow, if not endure, at least express defiance against fate. This is similar to Dylan Thomas’ expression of not simply accepting death quietly—“Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” This Celtic raging against death, of asserting life even in its face, is strikingly close to the ancient heroic code expressed in *Beowulf*—that of knowing death in evitable but facing it directly nonetheless. It is an assertion of strength and defiance, but not necessarily of hope. It is a declaration of life in the face of death. Behan, according to Boyle, gives hope in the ending, “That man does not acquiesce helplessly—that he shakes his fist at the universe—is to Behan sad, admirable, absurd, and funny” (101).

Among the numerous ways to read the extremely unusual ending of the play is Kiberd's view that it is a deep critique of the IRA and their being trapped in an obsolete view of the past. He asserts that Behan was "one of the first post-colonial writers to impinge on the consciousness of post-war Britain" (529). But Behan also impinges on Ireland in his post-colonial/post-conquest dramatic satire. He imbues the play with an implicit understanding that the point must be further than simply critiquing England, that it must also attack the very nature of the post-colonial society, that the play must compel the audience, and by extension, the Republic itself, to recognize that the past must be cut off, that society itself must be recreated, that Ireland has to move past simply a post-colonial mimicry of England and find its own way. A question remains, however, if this demand would be, like Leslie's warnings in the play, ignored. In speaking of Leslie's death at the end of the play, Kiberd states: "He may also be making a final point. When alive, he had repeatedly warned the IRA men, who foolishly thought that the British authorities cared for an army private, that this was not the case. The IRA did not heed his warning, *nor perhaps did people in the audience* [emphasis mine]" (528). That is the point and the risk that Behan makes and takes, that the audience might not understand his warning, and that Ireland would continue to be stuck in its political and social quagmire.

The various components of the different forms and voices merge in the ending of the play to create an unified, if ambiguous, message. Gillespie speaks to the importance of seeing unity in the ending: "In the end, all figures combine to form a single, choric identity articulating the dilemma of the Ireland that they inhabit" (104). Ireland, as it is, cannot dispel its contradictions and move forward, unless it discards the past and its false romanticism, unless the Irish move forward out of the stultifying past. "No figure, either

of heroic dimensions or of monumental corruption, arises to dispel the contradictions. To resolve the ambivalence would produce a polemical position impossible to sustain in the ambiance of the play and antipathetic to its intentions. *The Hostage* wishes the audience to recognize the function of violence in Irish lives, but it has neither the desire to justify it or the capacity to suppress it” (Gillespie 104).

Culbertson expands on the implications of the play’s endings in which she dismisses the easy view of the ending as simply flippant and comedic and that some critics “have been sufficiently disturbed by this antic mimesis of the world to recognize the futility of reciprocal violence, the madness of nationalistic fantasies, and the ingloriousness of so many political causes. Behan, like O’Casey and Frank O’Connor, has invoked a grudging recognition of the fate of little people in historic conflicts whose political origins are almost incomprehensible to those who suffer and die for them” (187). This point is frequently missed by critics, that Behan is not speaking for any political cause, even given his republican leanings, but for the ordinary people who inevitably suffer as a consequence of actions taken in the name of political causes by both governments and revolutionary groups.

This distinction is extremely important, one that is often missed by critics. For example, Cardullo argues that the ending of *An Giall* is superior to that of *The Hostage* and that “Leslie’s dead body, if properly displayed on stage, would become a stunning visual metaphor for the play, a sight whose value outweighs the thematic underlining achieved by the accidental shooting of the English soldier” (142). The problem with this reading is not that the displaying of the dead body would not work effectively but that it

would change the point of the play. It would not allow for the ambiguity of the ending which serves the play so well.

Cardullo recognizes that “*The Hostage* favors compromise: it neither worships the IRA nor vilifies the British. It legitimately criticizes both, only to lay down its verbal arms in the end and call for love and understanding between Ireland and England” (143). I am not certain if Behan goes this far. He does criticize both, but there is nothing in the end of the play to suggest that he wants the kind of rapprochement of which Cardullo speaks. That he disagrees with the extremes taken by both sides is clear, but it is equally obvious that Behan has abandoned neither his Irish country nor his Irish character for that of a diplomat.

These are not the only possible readings of the ending. Wickstrom offers a completely different and intriguing view on the play’s tragic ending. In fact, he offers a refreshing and unusual argument for Behan presenting an heroic view and speaks of the struggle for power of the three central aspects of the Ireland in which Leslie is a hostage (409). Even among the terrible strain of the multiplicity of rival factions trying to claim Ireland, a possibility for humanity still exists. Wickstrom argues, not so much for a standard happy ending, but for a humanist affirmation of life, one with which I would prefer to agree. He argues that despite the view that the play can be read as defeatist, ironic, or simply pessimistic, that Behan’s words “are affirmative, and affirmation of life’s tenacity and will-to-live is the main thrust of the play. As in Behan’s work as a whole, there is a spilling over of exuberance and compassion in *The Hostage* that can only be in praise of life” (411).

I am not certain that Wickstrom is entirely correct in his summation of the philosophic bent of *The Hostage*. My views are humanist, and I would like to argue that Behan is making a focused statement about the strength of the human spirit, but I do not think that would be a completely correct reading of this play. Wickstrom's analysis of the implicit humanism in the play is accurate, provided it is understood that it is tempered with absurdity. Being true to my humanist convictions, I think that Behan may be speaking beyond simple absurdity to common humanity and nearly abandoned heroism in the 20th century. According to Wickstrom, Behan's point is a new take on an old idea—the sacrificing hero, whose actions reinvigorate and repair society, that the 20th century cynical view of the hero is inaccurate and is replaced here by sacrifice and vitality. "So in *The Hostage*, Leslie, as hero, survives every absurdity and accident. He survives even history. By his sacrifice he becomes what every man or woman in the symbolic brothel requires of him. He may be the New Nation, the Son, the Brother, the Lover. . . . (409) Since Behan denies the simplicity of the political movements, and implicates all in his satire, it is possible to see that the play ultimately transcends even the boundaries of absurdity and argues for life and humanity. Behan demands that the Irish move away from the past perceptions and paradigms, that they abandon the old views of the Irish always as the victim, the British perpetually as the oppressors, that they give up the view that all Irish are heroic and all British are evil, that they see past the stultifying borders imposed on them by the old nationalistic ways.

Behan rejects the old Republican notion of Irish gallantry by making a British soldier the hero, who is himself completely apolitical. "There is implied the notion that Irish parochial allegiances can no longer be tolerated; the Irish world must be large enough to

accept Leslie” (Wickstrom 409). This is a national incarceration from which Behan demands the Irish must emerge, a national prison from which they must escape. They must be willing to push the understanding of who they are past the confines of ancient imprisonments and ancient grudges. In the underground world of the brothel, most of the characters do, indeed, move past their nationalistic impulses and learn not only not to hate Leslie but to embrace him as a fellow human being. They cannot, however, save the young man because “their lives are so distorted and warped by clinging to the phantoms of the past, their society so cruelly hung-up, that any effort to save him is grotesque and abortive, or else there is no effort at all” (409-410). The characters who might have saved Leslie are bound by their preconceptions of their world and made impotent by living in an Ireland obsessed with the revolutionary past. They have no hatred for Leslie, quite the opposite, but they cannot save the young man, because that would require a conscious choice to move away from what they were, to become people no longer trapped in their nationalistic paradigm.

Inherent in Behan’s interrogation of the outdated nationalistic paradigm is the portrayal of the relationship between Leslie and Teresa, one which is both star-crossed in the traditional way of Romeo and Juliet , but is also nationally crossed, bridging not familial enemies, but national enemies. This might have led to a romantic play or a melodrama, but Behan undercuts such possibilities with his form and satire. Their relationship is instructive; Leslie and Teresa embrace love and life, even though they are not successful, because of the interference of the competing political tensions, in completing their relationship. Behan does not place this failure on them but on the circumstances. They still stand for life. Is such an optimistic reading as Wickstrom’s

possible? “Leslie works toward unity and reconciliation. His inarticulate cry is for simple justice, love, and life” (411). Certainly, but as much as I would like to agree with him completely, I still have to maintain a distance—desire for something does not make it real. Rather, it is possible to read that Leslie, the character, wishes to gain justice and push for a world of equality and freedom, but Behan, the author, maintaining his cynicism, sees absurdity and hopelessness.

Behan does not mean, though, that humanity should acquiesce to the futility he sees. Rather, he pushes for the holding of strength against the chaos that he perceives. Similar to Dylan Thomas’ famous poem “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” in which Thomas urges his father not to simply fade away into oblivion but to fight against it, so does Behan use humor to keep the horror of perceived nothingness away, like keeping the beast from entering the front door of a home: “Doch reicht das Lachen nicht aus, um bestehende Zustände zu verändern oder den Menschen zu bessern. Aber es hilft, das Leben zu ertragen” (Buchloh 232), (But the laughter is not enough to change existing condition or to improve humanity. But it helps them to endure life. Translation is mine.) Just as Behan sees people captured in the grip of a random universe that must be endured, so it is also clear that Behan holds many characters and groups hostage in his play. Leslie, as well as the unseen Irish youth, is kept captive, but others are as well. All of the inhabitants of the brothel, like the rest of Ireland, are held captive by outdated and now useless ideas. The IRA, in particular, is caught up with outdated ideas: “To his IRA captors he appears less a person than an image: in capturing him, they believe they have someone important, who can force his superiors to the negotiating table (525)”.

The IRA is, however, mistaken. Leslie is simply a pawn who can easily be sacrificed. The IRA, Kiberd explains, are “accused of being hostages to an outworn belief in military chivalry: amazingly, it is the IRA which believes that British fair-play will see their boy right” (525-526). Behan continues to make the point that he drove home in his earlier play, that only the faces of the people in charge have changed not the reality—they stay the same as the British: “If the warders in *The Quare Fellow* were finally indistinguishable from the prisoners, so in *The Hostage* kilted rebels are interchangeable with moustachioed colonels” (526). Throughout the play the past, in which the IRA is trapped, is juxtaposed with the future, represented by Leslie and Teresa. Almost like in a classical comedy, Behan instills hope and life in the form of lovers, but as in a tragedy, he makes them star-crossed. Teresa understands that England had not only crushed Ireland but also exploited the English poor (526). “This cheerful pragmatism contrasts with the stylized gestures of the IRA men who talk little and mostly of the past, while Leslie thinks only of a future with Teresa. Everything about Leslie is real, from his unheroic reasons for enlisting in the army, to his desire that tea and cigarettes be brought in by Teresa” (726-527).

While the play can be read as Leslie being the hostage of the title, if viewed as a piece not only for Irish but also for world theater, then it reveals that peoples within countries under siege, experiencing civil war, or terrorism, can all be hostages of their situations; therefore, today *The Hostage* can be applied to the concept of social justice, but on a very wide scale. Not only are the Irish of the 1950s being held hostage but also anyone who experiences such a trauma today.

For Behan, *The Hostage* is the pinnacle of his theatrical success. While he will continue to write, this play represents the culmination of what he began with *The Quare Fellow*, a treatment of the political situation in Ireland, including scathing satirical attacks not only on the British and the Irish governments but also on the IRA, an organization that seemed to have become archaic in 1950s Ireland. It is also a full expansion of his experiment in form, moving away from the representational form that dominated so much of mainstream Irish theater.

Conclusion

In my examination of Seamus Byrne's *Design For A Headstone*, and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*, I explore the metaphor in this specific area of Irish Drama of interrogation, imprisonment, and sanction. I find in these plays that the issue of prison and confinement defines these works. I argue that these plays form a sub-genre of contemporary world drama in general and Irish drama in particular. Through a complex interweaving of dramatic writing and performance, these plays create an example of an eclectic vision of 1950s Ireland and its political, social, and revolutionary world. Within these plays, I find that their fluidity of staging and text set the groundwork for what would later emerge as a major characteristic in much of Irish drama: that Irish drama reacts swiftly and forcefully to its social, economic, and political environment; that this drama demonstrates true communication between performance and audience; that this drama incorporates ideas from theorists such as Beckett, Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski; and that it forms a dynamic expression about an extremely important condition of contemporary Ireland—being a place during the second half of the 20th century in which many people found themselves under interrogation, in prison, and some awaiting their executions.

In these chapters, I explore the structural and thematic elements of these plays, especially as they illustrate the issue of the dissertation. One important thematic concern that I identify in all three chapters is Byrne's and Behan's concern with the proletariat. While both playwrights are certainly concerned with the macrocosmic overview of the post-colonial situation in Ireland, they are more concerned with the microcosmic effects of this political and social construction on the members of the working-class. These are the people who dominate

these plays, and with whom the sympathy of the playwrights clearly rests. While issues such as how the government functions as it retains the legal structure imposed on it by British colonialism and the concurrent power of the Catholic Church are both important issues, they are not seen as abstract considerations. Byrne and Behan, instead, examine these deeply important social/political issues in terms of how they will impact the ordinary Irish man or woman, whether they are jailed or jailer, employed or unemployed, citizen or criminal. What connects them is that they are all members of the proletariat.

In Chapter One, I explore *Design For A Headstone*. I not only explicate the driving imprisonment metaphor of my project, but also I demonstrate that this nearly forgotten play is an important contribution to both Irish and world theater. Byrne examines both the issue of capital punishment as well as that of the treatment of prisoners. He also critiques effectively the function of the IRA in Irish society and argues that it is an outdated institution in mid-century Ireland, he implicates the Catholic Church in the problems of Irish society. He powerfully creates an inquiry into the nature of the Church in Ireland and its political connections with the government and how those intricacies create a difficult and powerful ruling structure in the country. Byrne also replicates the outside social construction with that of the social hierarchy within the prison. By creating a microcosm of the outside macrocosm, Byrne shines a harsh and elucidating light on his subject. The result is a direct, demanding, critical, well-drawn play filled with verisimilitude of place and time and complex and conflicted characters. *Design For A Headstone* is not only a valuable play for the time period in Ireland, but a play that deserves its place in the world canon of theater.

Seamus Byrne, the playwright whose work is the focus of my study in Chapter One is neither well-known on the world stage nor is he familiar to most in the Irish theater

community. This glaring lack of recognition of Byrne should not be seen as an indictment of the quality of his work; rather, it demonstrates the kind of reaction his plays experienced when performed in mid-century Ireland. I argue that instead of being a mere unknown playwright, Seamus Byrne should be seen at the least as a bridge between the representationalists and realists of the late 19th and mid-20th century and the experimental theater that would dominate the second half of the 20th century in general and as a foundation for Brendan Behan in particular; moreover, Byrne should be viewed as an important and powerful Irish playwright on his own. His work is strong, well-written, and significant.

It is unfortunate for the theater world that Byrne eventually abandoned being a playwright and returned to the legal world. It is likely that had he kept writing and having his plays produced that he might now be a much more well-known figure, one whose work would be actively produced by companies and studied by academics. I intend to address this lack of critical examination in terms of academic research in a future longer work on Byrne and his plays.

In Chapter Two, I begin my study of two plays by Brendan Behan. Unlike Seamus Byrne, Brendan Behan is well-known and a central member of the canon of Irish Drama. His work continues to be studied and performed. An abundance of critical writing on Behan exists in the Academy. In this chapter, I examine a play which I argue has a direct linkage to Byrne's *Design For A Headstone* and which established Brendan Behan as the central Irish playwright of the 1950s—*The Quare Fellow*. Like Byrne's play, *The Quare Fellow* also focused a skewering critique on capital punishment and on the inadequacies of the revolutionary movement in 1950s Ireland. In this play, Behan began a stylistic movement away from the strict representationalism of the late 19th century to the early 20th century.

While still somewhat realistic in nature, he included elements of the pantomime, including song and dance where they could never be in a strictly realist play. It should not be mistaken, however, for a musical comedy. Those pantomime elements exist to jar audience complacency by using familiar comic techniques in order to amplify the horror of what the audience is witnessing. Instead of seeing and hearing a song and dance routine aimed at producing laughter, the music and dance inspires discomfort in the audience as they see and hear the inmates singing and dancing various times in a play whose central dramatic element is the prison's preparation for an execution of "the quare fellow" by hanging.

Behan also begins to use a technique which he will continue in *The Hostage*, that of the inclusion of heteroglossia or the incorporation of several voices into the narrative. While this Bahktinian idea is usually applied to novels, I show that Behan incorporated it into his dramatic technique. Its inclusion allows Behan the freedom to explore his play's themes from a variety of directions, often reflecting the chaos of the prison situation.

Behan makes a crucial indictment of the Republic of Ireland in this play by establishing that while the government has changed and that England no longer rules Ireland, that the situation for prisoners has remained the same, that the leaders of the country still rule—only their accents have changed. This stinging indictment of Ireland's maintaining its British based judicial system makes for a clear post-colonial reading of the play. A post-colonial reading, however, is not the only theoretic approach possible.

Using a Marxist, class-based critique, I argue that Behan shows the leaders of the Republic of Ireland are not interested in the condition of the poor or the proletariat; rather, they represent the interest of the ruling class: the wealthy and the Church. This political-religious connection, a modern theocracy, imbues the government with extraordinary control over the

working-class person. Not only does it assert control over the physical life of the inmate but also over that prisoner's soul.

In Chapter 3, I give my reading of Behan's *The Hostage*. This play completes the movement of these plays from Realism to a syncretic form of absurdity. In this play, Behan's use of song and dance is the most developed, including the crucial ending in which the dead prisoner, killed in an exchange of gunfire, jumps to his feet and performs a song and dance routine. I explore the importance of the ending in depth—my point now is that it allows for critical debate, but this ending serves as a performative and dramatic lens through which to view the play's absurdity.

In addition to the greatest fluidity and absurdity of the three plays, *The Hostage* also shows Behan's strongest satire and critique of both the government and of the IRA. Given that Behan, like Byrne, had a revolutionary past and direct involvement in the IRA, his criticism of that organization as outdated and as lacking true justice and morality in the same way as the Irish government is overwhelming in its force. The secular government, the Church and its connection to that government, and the tired revolutionary IRA all are targets of Behan's effective and biting words.

Because I focused on prison drama, the issue of the setting is vital for this project. In *Design For A Headstone* and *The Quare Fellow* a prison was the setting. As such, the difficulties facing prisoners would be expected with such an environment. In *The Hostage*, however, the place of imprisonment is not a standard establishment of incarceration but a brothel. It is a place filled with people who are marginalized from bourgeois Irish society and a place in which the inhabitants can freely be who they are unfettered by the stultifying boundaries of the middle-class Catholic Irish world. It is also a place in which the same

bourgeois who would keep the denizens of the brothel away from their lives can themselves indulge their sexual fantasies and peccadillos. Ordinarily, it would not be expected to be the locale of an imprisonment.

Because of the then underground nature of the outlawed IRA in the Republic of Ireland, this brothel becomes a place in which a British soldier they have captured is held as a “prisoner of war.” This imposition of the IRA’s now tired political struggle on a place of sexual gratification and marginalization, inverts the audience’s expectations and shows that anywhere in Ireland could be a prison of an oppressive theocracy and a tired revolutionary movement.

An element of significant importance in these plays is not only the movement from representationalism to absurdity but also a movement from two plays—*Design For A Headstone* and *The Quare Fellow*—which are clearly historically focused and representing a particular point in Irish history to one, that while set in the same time, transcends its temporal and national setting to be applicable to any place with terrorism and hostages being held by potential assassins. *The Hostage*, while set in a specific locale in a particular time period—a brothel in 1950s Ireland—can be applied to almost any culture or country that struggles with terrorism and hostage taking. It can also be relevant to any country which is caught in the binds of a post-colonial existence, trying to find its own way while still trapped in the sub-altern existence of a land accustomed to being controlled by a foreign power.

In examining the British control of Ireland as expressed by the metaphor of prison, I originally had a much larger scope in mind for my dissertation. I decided, however, to include these pieces in other future projects. In the beginning, I had intended to cover playwrights from the 1970s and 1980s as one chapter and playwrights from the 1980s and 1990s as an area of examination. In the first group of playwrights, which I

refer to as the first wave of dramatists from The Troubles are Frank McGuinness, Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, and Stewart Parker. In the second wave are Anne Devlin, Ron Hutchinson, Martin Lynch, and Dermot Bolger. Among the plays I was intending to use are *The Interrogation of Ambrose Fogarty*, *Translations*, *Pentecost*, *Northern Star*, *Ourselves Alone*, *Famine*, and *Someone To Watch Over Me*. In these plays, the metaphor of Ireland as a place of imprisonment, interrogation, and sanction is developed fully. Because these plays were written during The Troubles, they develop fully the internal tensions and violence that plagued the island. I tightened the focus of my dissertation, and I will examine, in the future, the two waves of Irish Troubles playwrights.

I had intended a chapter on imprisonment, interrogation, and sanction in Irish film, but I decided not to include such a chapter for several reasons. I soon realized that such an endeavor should be a separate project of its own. Another and perhaps more important consideration is that Film studies is also a separate, but related, discipline to drama, and as such, is another reason for treating these pieces in a separate study. One of the specific filmic concerns that I would examine in such a project would be the importance of the director's use of mise-en-scene in creating and using visual imagery to convey the impact of interrogation and imprisonment on individuals and on their society. Film is a natural medium for such artistic expression because it allows a more intimate creation of the claustrophobia of prison setting and the close emotional reactions to such environments than typically can be accomplished in theater. I am not suggesting that cinema is somehow superior to drama, only explaining some of its artistic differences.

Drama, unlike film, is a more temporal art, and allows for a more heightened social experience of that art than does film.

Among the films that I plan to explore in a monograph are: *In The Name Of The Father*, *The Boxer*, *The Crying Game*, *Cal*, *An Everlasting Peace*, and others. I expect to find a focus on the issue of Britain's control of Northern Ireland and the abuses that go into a colonial situation. Certainly, I would expect to find in these films that an examination of this colonial political situation exists. The dynamic of the country and society attempting to emerge from the confines of actual control by Britain, while in the odd situation of part of the nation still remaining a portion of the United Kingdom, is an element that I would expect to find informing the message and content of these films. While drama is an actor's medium, with the performers having the last input on the interpretation of the playwright's words, cinema is a director's medium, with the intention of the director being the controlling force of the work. This distinction is important in considering film, because we see, in the finished product, the eye of the director. I expect to find in these directors' choices, a direct and pointed examination of the consequences of British control in Ireland, but not simply on a macro-national level but also on a micro-personal realm. This project, however, is potentially massive, so I decided not to keep it as an adjunct to my main examination but to put it aside for a future paper or, perhaps, monograph or book.

I hope that this dissertation will serve as a springboard for a series of future projects so that I can continue to explore, in more depth and in various other facets, the central issues of interrogation, imprisonment, and execution that I have investigated in 1950s Irish Drama in this dissertation.

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Notes

Introduction

ⁱ Dermot Bolger says in his introduction to *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction*, “For the past quarter of a century the most extraordinary violence has been an everyday reality in Northern Ireland” (ix). The experience of this violence is endemic to the reality of Northern Ireland and is in an incipient characteristic in its art.

ⁱⁱ McDonnell cites: Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland, the literature of the modern nation*. (London: Vintage, 1996): 204.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kosok cites: O’Connor, Frank. *The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1967.

^{iv} In speaking of the importance of Irish Drama to post-colonial studies, Duncan says:

While many postcolonial critics tend to privilege the novel as the genre most modern and therefore more likely to speak the postcolonial and postmodern dilemmas, I have found that drama, as both a literate art and an oral performance, reveals even more fully the political ramifications of issues of orality and literacy at work in colonial and postcolonial Ireland.

^v For the purposes of this dissertation, I am defining Contemporary Irish Drama to stand for all Irish drama that has been written since the 1950s, beginning with Brendan Behan and continuing to the most current active playwrights.

^{vi} While I am focusing on Irish plays and film in this study, it is important to note the broad range of these works in the body of world drama. I will briefly mention a few playwrights and their plays whose ideas correlate with those of the pieces in my project. Athol Fugard’s *The Island*, in a meta-theatrical expression, extends the entire theater, within the larger experience of the production, to the status of a prison representation of society. The audience becomes an audience to a play-within-a-play performed by characters, thus moving into the world of the play and having the world of the prison intrude upon the comfortable environment of the theater. This idea of the theater as prison is also suggested in Brian Friel’s *Translations*. Miguel Pinero’s *Short Eyes* recreates the larger society’s class and power structure within the subculture of the prison as the child molester is seen as occupying the lowest strata of the hierarchy created by both the inmates and the guards. Brendan Behan’s *The Quare Fellow* illustrates this prison hierarchy. Jose Martin Recuerda’s *The Inmates of The Convent of Saint Mary Egyptian* uses a convent that is converted into a jail for female political prisoners. In a similar manner a simple room in a house becomes an interrogation room in Anne Devlin’s *Ourselves Alone*, and a brothel becomes a prison in Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage*.

^{vii} It is important to understand that the audience for many of these plays is not an academic audience. It is not one dominated by a particular academic theory; rather, the audience is often one drawn from the particular culture from which the material arises. If these plays are truly to have political impact, then they cannot be confined to a particular audience. In fact, the audience for these plays is often made of so-called ordinary people who do not have the education of the members of the academy. They are similar to the “Common Readers” referred to by Maynard Mack in *Everybody’s Shakespeare*:

Today, in academic circles, it is alleged that our style of reader has vanished without trace. But I take this to be a self-serving illusion, witness the staggering number of books on all imaginable subjects, sometimes even including commentary on literature, sold weekly in bookstores. What has actually happened, it appears, is that Common Readers have

prudently lost interest in the tribal wars and Byzantine pedantries that now balkanize professional students of literature into new-critics, new-historicists, neo-marxists, feminists, structuralists, psychoanalysts, deconstructionists, and other cells of the elect, each claiming sole possession of the truth and each purveying in its windier moments prose indecipherable (to paraphrase Polonius) and nonsense unlimited: Heidegger cannot be too heavy nor Foucault too light. (ix)

^{viii} A play is only truly complete as a work of art when it is performed before an audience. Each performance is, therefore, a new interpretation of the text—the dramatic skeleton on which it is formed, but it is, nevertheless, always an expression of the dramatic script, which the playwright creates. Each performance is temporary in nature, always a liminal moment leading to the next performance, but potentially powerful in impact and extremely effective as an artistic medium for immediate, personal, and visceral audience reaction to political and societal circumstances.

^{ix} Numerous critics address the question of whether Irish Literature and Drama should be included in post-colonial studies and make a compelling argument for its inclusion, one that seems almost self-evident if it is recognized to be one of the oldest, longest-ruled, and currently, at least in the North, still held by Britain. Included in the self-evident nature of Britain's domination of Ireland is its imposition of British standards and society on Ireland.

Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins speak to the debate about inclusion of Irish Drama in post-colonial studies and make a convincing argument that it is a natural point of examination: "Ireland, Britain's oldest colony, is often considered inappropriate to the post-colonial grouping, partly because it lies just off Europe. Yet Ireland's centuries-old political and economic resistance to such control – fits well with the post-colonial paradigm" (7).

^x As an actor and director, I always was willing to use any idea that was applicable to a particular performance. I found not limiting myself to one way was the best way to expand both as an artist and in terms of production. Eclecticism rather than narrow focusing is often the approach I also apply to writing.

Luke Gibbons also address the particular issue of Irish colonial identity when he explains that for the North of Ireland, the colonizing is a present and not a post condition. (179)

Eóin Flannery, in "External Association: Ireland, Empire and Postcolonial Theory" speaks to the lasting effect of British colonization:

Despite the apparent constitutional parity granted to Ireland as part of its union with Britain, many contemporary Irish cultural critics and historians readily affirm its historical condition as that of a colonised society. This diagnosis is founded on readings of the impact of imperial modernity on Ireland. . . . Regardless of the patina of legal union that obtained in the nineteenth century, Ireland remained culturally, confessionally and economically recalcitrant to the civilisational calculus of imperial modernity. (451)

The Irish, or at least some of the Irish—notably the intellectuals and radicals—stubbornly refused to accept assimilation into the dominant culture, both historically and culturally, even as it was forced on them. The bourgeoisie and the government accepted and incorporated that influence because "domination remains domination" (455).

^{xi} Doyle cites: Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins. *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. (London: routledge, 1996): 146.

^{xii} Martin Esslin speaks directly to the nature of drama in his *Anatomy of Drama*: "So we can say that drama is the most concrete form in which art can recreate human situations, human relationships. And this concreteness is derived from the fact that, whereas any narrative form of communication will tend to relate

events that have happened in the past and are now finished, the concreteness of drama is happening in an eternal present, not there and then, but here and now”(18). While this temporal nature of drama is clear, it must also be acknowledged that dance and music, when performed live, also have this same concreteness.

Additionally, Esslin also speaks to the other aspect of live drama that must be recognized, even as we read the play as a form of literature – “The author and the performers are only one half of the total process: the other half is the audience and its reaction. Without an audience there is no drama”(23).

Chapter One

^{xiii} Byrne uses an abundance of early exposition and establishes, through the dialogue of Ructions, O’Shea and Corrigan, the importance of class in the prison and in the Republic of Ireland. Byrne uses a discussion of the class implications of chess vs. checkers to establish Ructions’ Marxists views.

Several of the prisoners speak in untranslated Gaelic early in the play to further emphasize their marginalization from the mainstream of society as well as their bona fides as revolutionaries. This is important early information that helps to create one of the main plot threads – that of the attempt of the IRA inmates to achieve recognition as political prisoners instead of being considered to be mere criminals. In this political fight, Conor decides that he will embark on a hunger strike in an effort to force the government to recognize their political status.

The second main plot thread is that of an attempt for a jail-break. The guard Geraghty becomes important as a man who can smuggle weapons into the prison for the attempt.

Near the end of Act I, the I.R.A. inmates hold a meeting to raise support for their attempts to repudiate the government’s labeling of the I.R.A. men as mere criminals and to solidify the necessity for the attempted prison break. In a technique that is traditional to Irish persuasion, one used by the Catholic priest as well, Aidan employs guilt as a motivating tool, warning the others about their everlasting shame if they fail

Act I ends with a raid by the guards, scattering the IRA troops, but it does not end their determination to fight.

Act II begins with a dismissal of the importance of the police raid and the news that Ructions has received a two year criminal sentence. A guard, Geraghty is recruited to supply guns for an attempted breakout, one of the central plot elements. Conor, the IRA man who will conduct a hunger-strike is torn by his devotion to his wife, so he decides to write to her, telling of his plans. This point will be central because Mrs. Egan, in her attempt to save her husband, informs the police of the attempted jailbreak.

As Act II completes, the plans for the escape seem to be nullified with a lack of weapons and disunity among the IRA men. The Prison Priest, Father Maguire attempts to dissuade Conor from his plans for a hunger strike, agreeing with Ructions that the action is suicide, but disagreeing over its inappropriateness—for Ructions it is too weak of an action and serves to aid the enemy, and for Father Maguire it is a mortal sin.

The Church’s opposition to the hunger strike flares up to an immediate conflict concerning the possibility of this political tool. Immediately after learning that there will be no guns from Geraghty, there is an interesting exchange between Ructions, Phelan, Conor, and Father Maguire about the hunger strike. Ructions, ever desiring to put his political views into forward action, pleads with Conor to lead a break regardless of the circumstances.

Act II ends with Jakey intercepting and reading a letter that clarifies who the real informer is—Mrs. Egan, Connor’s Wife.

Act III joins the outside world with the inner near-cloistered prison world through the appearance of Mrs. Egan – she is there to try to convince her husband to end his now thirty day long hunger strike. Byrne juxtaposes the triad of appeals to Conor to cease his very personal opposition to the Republic’s official view of the prisoners’ status: religious from Father Maguire, political from Ructions, and personal from his wife. In her attempt to regain control of her personal sphere, Mrs. Egan is eventually revealed as the real informer, even as others pay the penalty of execution. Her personal plight, deeply felt, casts further ambiguity on the justice from any end of the political struggle.

In Act III Conor dies, and we learn that, under pressure of excommunication, he broke his hunger-strike shortly before dying—an act which Father Maguire sees as a victory and which Ructions sees as a

failure. Hence, Ructions changes positions and decides to carry on Conor's failed hunger-strike and to abandon the prison break.

Ultimately, in *Design For A Headstone* all will end in failure in the manner of Greek tragedy. The prison break will end with a hail of gunfire from the guards, Jakey will be executed as a traitor offstage, and the audience is left uncertain about Ructions' fate. In the manner of Greek tragedy, the deaths occur offstage and are reported to the audience, and in the manner of Shakespeare, ambiguity about Ructions' fate remains at the close of the play.

^{xiv} "Byrne's last play, *Little City*, has been several times revised, but Byrne had to wait several years for a producer. The reason, in part, was probably the play's subject, abortion" (Hogan 74).

^{xv} Peter Berresford Ellis, in his book *The Druids* discusses and establishes the ancient tradition of the *Troscad* with the contemporary Irish political tool of the hunger strike. He explains:

Another method of exerting authority, available to all members of Celtic society, was the ritual fast—the *troscad*. As a legal form of redressing a grievance, this act emerged in the Brehon law system. That it was an ancient ritual can be demonstrated by the fact that it bears almost complete resemblance to the ancient Hindu custom of *dharna*. . . if the one fasted against ignores the person fasting then they would suffer fearful supernatural penalties. The *troscad* was the means of compelling justice and establishing one's rights. . . .

The *troscad* is referred to in the Irish sagas as well as laws and when Christianity displaced the pagan religion, the *troscad* continued. . . . Some people even fasted against the saints themselves to get them to give justice and wives also fasted against their erring husbands.

It is fascinating, as well as sad, that in the long centuries of England's sorry relationship with Ireland, the Irish have continued a tradition of the *troscad* which has become the political hunger strike. (141-142)

^{xvi} John Fulton, in *The Tragedy of Belief: Division, Politics, and Religion in Ireland* speaks directly to this Irish governmental-religious connection:

In fact, precisely because Roman catholic power was to be accepted as normative in an entirely natural way by the catholic-nationalist population, the church's part-active and part-passive acceptance of the capitalist system of government and thorough opposition to socialism had a significant legitimating function for the Irish state-form. . . . A Roman catholic ethos is not only present in the constitution of 1937 but has penetrated into affairs of state, legislation, and decisions over the destinies of individuals with frequency. (135)

^{xvii} I am not including Beckett in this study because he wrote his plays in a European setting, in which he was able to escape much of the often-stultifying nature of the Irish Republic. He can be seen as a world playwright more than an Irish author—although this point is certainly up to debate and outside of the purview of this paper.

^{xviii} Kosok refers to this dialogue:

RUCTIONS (*furiously to Maguire*): Did Christ accept criminal status? Did He
knuckle down to Caesar – and disclaim the title of Son of Man? Did
He? Or did He compass his own death? Was the crucifixion suicide?

(147)

^{xix} It is interesting that this technique of refusing someone absolution, therefore, threatening them with an eternity of hell is one that the Church had used for many centuries. In a similar way, Galileo was threatened with excommunication for his sin of refuting the Ptolemaic vision of the earth-centered universe.

I am not suggesting that Egan and his hunger strike is equivalent to Galileo's, along with Copernicus' new view of the sun-centered solar system; I am, however, pointing out that both are revolutionary in very different ways and were considered threats by the Church, needing similar techniques to suppress such revolutionary thinking.

^{xx} For a strong analysis of the human loss and suffering that was suffered in the Troubles, refer to McKittrick, David. *Lost lives : the stories of the men, women, and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland troubles*.

^{xxi} Thomas Ashe was a founding member of the Gaelic League and one of the leaders of the failed 1916 Easter Uprising.

^{xxii} Translation: May God have mercy on his soul.

^{xxiii} Anne Devlin gives a powerful feminist treatment of the condition of women in a male-dominated political movement that resides in a male-dominated society in *Ourselves Alone*.

^{xxiv} As seems to be a tradition by the public in reacting to Irish political plays that were staged at the Abbey Theatre, *Design For A Headstone* elicited a backlash, albeit not a lasting one, by members of a deeply right wing Catholic organization as well as invoking the displeasure of the IRA. Hugh Hunt, in *The Abbey Ireland's National Theatre 1904-1978*, speaks to this uprising: "The play, concerning a group of political prisoners, roused the anger of members of the I.R.A. on the grounds that the views expressed by one of the prisoners were Marxist, whilst members of a religious organization [Maria Duce] contended that the play was a smear on the Catholic priesthood." (175)

^{xxv} In *Little City*, Byrne exposes the usually unspoken topic of abortion in Ireland. In the conservative, heavily Catholic nation, speaking openly about such a taboo topic was not an approach that would lead to success in having his work produced. In speaking about this point, Robert Hogan says,

His most recent play, *Little City*, went through several revisions during the years it waited for a producer who would not flinch from the subject of abortion. Finally produced in the 1962 Theatre Festival, it proved a strong but grim play. Its several minor plots may not be well enough developed to hold their own with the abortion plot, but the several stories suggest that Byrne's purpose was to indict more than enforced abortions. He was really attacking the hypocritical respectability that so thinly covers a variety of ignominious motives in a little city like Dublin. (98)

It is clear that Byrne's words are potent barbs in his attack on what he saw as Ireland's problems.

^{xxvi} This level of bigotry is familiar in the United States in another form. Those who argue that gays should not marry, because such acts threaten the institution of marriage, are like Jakey. It is heterosexuals, and their divorce rates, that threaten marriage in the United States. It is a wonderful irony that gays would strengthen marriage, because they wish to partake in the tradition, not destroy it.

^{xxvii} This passage would have particular relevance and power in contemporary Ireland, especially considering the nature of the Catholic Priest abuse trials and their subsequent effect on the view of the Church in the Republic of Ireland.

Chapter Two

^{xxviii} A plot summary follows:

The Quare Fellow is a play in three acts. The play is set in Mountjoy Prison, and it focuses on the condemned man—the Quare Fellow—who is never seen. The action takes place within the confines of the prison.

Act I

The play opens with a prisoner singing a bawdy song and the day beginning with the prisoners cleaning their areas.

We learn that it is the day before an execution, and the prisoners are compelled to police their areas for an inspection. Little action occurs, but during conversation, Behan establishes that regardless of who is controlling the prisons, the British or the Irish, that the guards and the control of the prisoners is the same. Behan establishes that an execution will occur very soon, that of the Quare Fellow. Towards the end of Act I, there is a visit from a priest, called Holy Healey. The guards intervene and prevent a Lifer from committing suicide. Only the official state bureaucracy has the right to decide when to end a prisoner's life. The act ends with the recognition that for many of the guards, they are simply working for a living, not because they believe in the justice system.

Act I ends with the sound of the triangle.

Act II

The grave that the Quare Fellow will occupy is the central locus of the setting. Much of the action is focused on the preparation for the coming execution.

Like in Act I, Act II begins with a song.

An interchange between the older and younger generations of prisoners includes the use of Irish Gaelic. The grave is dug by the prisoners. In an instance of post-colonial clarity, the Hangman arrives from England for the execution and performs his preparations. Warder Regan is established as the most humane of the guards, and Behan uses the prisoners to establish his disdain for religion in Ireland.

By the end of the act, the preparation for the execution—the digging of the grave and the building of the scaffold are complete.

Act II ends with a song.

Act III

Scene One

Scene One takes place late that same night.

The guards debate the public's interest in the execution, with Regan suggesting that it should be seen by all, not out of viciousness but from a desire for the public to know what is being done in their name. The Hangman, in a very good mood with his preparations complete, sings.

The scene ends with a song and an empty stage.

Scene Two

The execution occurs in this scene, although the action is offstage, which reminds us of a classical Greek tragedy. The prisoners react with a group howl at the death of the Quare Fellow.

The prisoners perform one last practical action: the carving of an official designation onto the dead man's minimal gravestone.

Then the play concludes with an unseen prisoner singing a song that is very similar to the opening song.

^{xxxix} When he was sixteen, he was apprehended in Liverpool with a suitcase full of explosives that he had intended to use in blowing up a battleship. He was sentenced to three years in a Borstal prison, a British reform school for juvenile offenders. In 1944, after a wave of Republican violence, he was sentenced to fourteen years in Mountjoy, but was released in the general amnesty of 1946. He was arrested twice again, and the last time, in 1952, he was deported to France. When he made his way back to Dublin and half settled down, he acquired a local celebrity as a good minor poet in and major drinker of Irish. In February, 1955, he married Beatrice ffrench Salkeld, and in November, 1963, they had a daughter.

The first version of his play *The Quare Fellow* was a one-act in Irish called *The Twisting of Another Rope*, a wry play upon the title of Douglas Hyde's famous one-act. Behan's little play was rejected by the Abbey, so he rewrote it in a three-act English version which the Abbey also rejected, as did most of the other Dublin managements. Finally Alan Simpson and Carolyn Swift accepted it for the Pike, their little theatre in Herbert Lane. After the Dublin production, Behan succeeded in getting Joan Littlewood to produce it at her Theatre Workshop in May, 1956, when he also made his celebrated television appearance. Six months after the London opening, Ernest Bly accepted the play for the Abbey. (199)

^{xxx} The other playwrights whom Murray examines in this chapter are George Shields, Louis L'Alton, and M.J. Molloy.

^{xxxi} See Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* for a consideration of this juxtaposition of class and revolutionary politics in a powerful and important contemporary Irish novel.

^{xxxii} A contemporary production of *The Quare Fellow* might resonate even more strongly in the United States of America, which continues to allow capital punishment.

^{xxxiii} While my focus is not on the gradual extinction of Irish Gaelic as a living language, Russell's investigation of the confluence of the domination of Gaelic by the English language and the residual post-colonial judicial systems in Ireland is, nonetheless, insightful and important. 5 Watt cites: Anthony Roche *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994. 62.

^{xxxv} ----- cites: Anthony Roche *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994. 54.

^{xxxvi} In an endnote, Rankin refers to an exception, and I agree with his assessment of it being extremely important in addressing this issue—Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*.

^{xxxvii} Translation – approximately—fraud. (The translations from Irish Gaelic to English are done with the invaluable assistance and guidance of Dr. McKnight of DeSales University. Behan uses idiomatic Gaelic, and any mistakes in translation are mine.)

^{xxxviii} Translation – I am watching. God rhymes.

^{xxxix} Translation – A person has enough.

^{xl} Translation – Do you understand?

^{xli} Translation:

PRISONER C. Are you Thomas?

CRIMMIN: Here are a couple of cigarettes. Himself (I) is a guard; the other screw is going into hospital. The department outside doesn't have cigarettes. Here comes the the Governor. Try to have a delay. Do you understand?

PRIONER C. I understand, Thomas, thank you.

^{xlii} Boyle cites Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Penguin, 1961: 292.

^{xliii} Such tactics of employing comedy in the creation of *momento mori* have a basis in classical tragedy. Shakespeare, in the scene with the gravediggers in *Hamlet* uses this technique.

^{xliv} While the basis for this discussion of the definition of absurdity is predicated on Camus' writing, Martin Esslin points out the difference between the philosophical discussion of absurdity and its application in the theatre of the absurd:

Yet these writers [Sartre, Camus] differ from the dramatists of the Absurd in an important respect: they present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment or rational devices and discursive thought. . .The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images. (Esslin, 24-25)

^{xlv} In *The Island*, Athol Fugard uses an almost bare stage, the power of actors, and the inclusion of audience in the play to create a theatrical evocation of South Africa's island prison during the era of Apartheid. Through that re-creation, he posits an intense power struggle between the two characters, John and Winston, and, through incorporation of the audience into the performance, extends the island to represent the entire South African society. Fugard's theatrical vision was based, in part, on Grotowski's. Fugard says "His book *Towards a Poor Theatre* made me realize that there were other ways of doing theatre, other ways of creating a totally valid theatre experience..." (Fugard x).

Interestingly, Fugard's application of Grotowski's holy theater which seeks for truth and communal experience is diametrically opposed to Bertoldt Brecht's intentional distancing of his Epic Theatre. Fugard's communal intentions, rather than alienating his audience, brings them inexorably into the active production. The audience does not simply watch a performance, but they participate in it; the audience does not simply observe in a reserved, intellectual fashion, but they become incorporated into the body theater and have an emotional and moral responsibility for the characters whose lives they are watching from an uncomfortably close proximity.

^{xlvi} Behan emphasizes the horror of the execution by understating its reality through the euphemism of "topping." Even in the harshest of settings, the characters attempt to soften the ugly image of institutionalized murder. The state is not killing the prisoner; it is "topping" him.

^{xlvii} One of the difficulties I find in reading Foucault is his apparent political naiveté. While he makes interesting conjectures about the penal system and the eye of the government, he seems to place an unusual confidence in the ability of a people to control a system or for a system, such as the Panoptican to be self-governing and -policing. In his statement

There is no risk, therefore, that the increase of power created by the panoptic machine may degenerate into tyranny; the disciplinary mechanism will be democratically controlled, since it will be constantly

accessible ‘to the great tribunal committee of the world’. This Panopticon, subtly arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals, also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers. The seeing machine was once a sort of dark room into which individuals spied; it has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole. (207)

Foucault shows an unusual, perhaps Utopian, belief that such a system would remain in the power of a broad society and not the few. Clearly, history demonstrates over and over that all legal and penal systems have the potential for corruption, unless great diligence is maintained in their operation. I argue that his Panopticon, if used with such naiveté, could serve as a basis for suppression of freedom rather than administration of justice.

^{xlviii} As with the play’s opening, Behan’s recording is often used in production.

Chapter Three

^{xlix} A summary of the play follows:

Act I

The act begins with the entire company performing a dance, an Irish jig. After the performance, the company speaks of their setting, the brothel, and about the problem of many Irish living in the past in terms of the revolution.

Behan introduces the audience to the various characters, including prostitutes, straight and gay who inhabit the brothel, an officious IRA officer, and a young Irish girl who serves as a maid.

Act I ends with the introduction of the soldier who has been captured as a bargaining tool against the young man in Belfast who is awaiting governmental execution. As the act concludes, the soldier sees the maid Teresa singing and dancing. Behan suggests that they begin to fall in love.

The Act concludes with a panto song from the soldier.

Act II

In the beginning of Act II, Behan has the denizens of the brothel interact gently and with kindness to the soldier. It is clear that they do not believe he will truly be killed.

Behan continues to use song and dance as Mulleady and Miss Gilchrist sing a song replete with political and class overtones. As it becomes more clear that the IRA intends to kill the soldier if the boy in Belfast is executed, the soldier makes a reasoned argument against killing him. He then sings a very British song “The Captains and The King.”

Teresa and the soldier move into a prolonged section of romance, with flirting, singing, and dancing. It is clear that they are Behan’s star-crossed lovers.

Act II ends with the soldier reading a paper that makes it clear the government in Belfast will not bargain for his life. He knows that the IRA will kill him.

Like Act I, Act II concludes with the soldier singing—another British song “I Am A Happy English Lad.”

Act III

Act III opens with Pat singing about the ‘Tans. Pat, Meg, and Miss Gilchrist argue about the Irish Civil War, as Pat shows self-importance as a “hero” of that revolutionary time. They drink and offer a drink to Leslie, the Hostage, while engaging in class discussion.

Leslie is humanized in this section and questions what he has done to deserve this imprisonment and coming execution? Miss Gilchrist sings of maternal love for a lost child. The dialogue is intermixed with many panto-like songs, as the play moves to its climax.

The play's climax is the shooting, a scene of chaos in which the hostage is killed accidentally.

The final moment is when the dead Leslie jumps up alive again and sings the concluding song.

¹ It is not my purpose to debate the level of influence that Joan Littlewood had on the final product of *The Hostage*. That is a critical debate for another project. While many critics have already dealt with this question, perhaps one of the best treatments is in Michael O'Sullivan's *Brendan Behan A Life*, in which he asserts that Behan approved of Littlewood's influence:

Depending on his mood and to whom he was speaking, he alternated between cursing and rhapsodizing about what Joan Littlewood had done to his play. After the critical success of *The Hostage*, he claimed her ideas suited his purposes admirably. (238)

Additionally, Desmond Maxwell, in *Brendan Behan's Theatre*, argues that the play should be seen as a collaboration between Behan and Littlewood, one in which "The authority of the playwright's words and design abates; parts acquire a momentum of their own. *The Hostage*, then, is not so much Behan as a joint Behan/Littlewood creation" (88). While I feel it is important to include Maxwell's point, I think he mistakes the nature of the creative dramatic process—a discussion for another time.

ⁱⁱ "The production of a play is not the work of an individual talent, but the fusion of many talents" (Hogan 203). That virtually all plays in production undergo rewriting and changes necessitated by seeing rehearsals and early runs is certain; redrafting a play's script is an essential part of virtually all theater. While some changes might be relatively minor, some create great changes in a play's evolution.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since I am not fluent in Irish Gaelic, I am working on the assumption that Wall is correct in his analysis of *An Giall*.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The nature of the text of any piece of drama must be considered in any analysis. While any play is affected by the director and performance, I argue that Behan, and no one else, including Joan Littlewood, is the author of this play. This point of the fluidity of a script due to changes imposed during performance speaks to the larger interpretive and critical issue specific to drama. It is a question of critical debate about what constitutes a play—the written text or the complete production. One suggests a static view of the work, the other a complex and fluid perspective. David Birch, in *The Language of Drama: Critical Theory and Practice*, addresses this particular issue: "No text is ever completed. It is always meanings in process. Similarly, no matter how thorough and detailed the performance processes may be, a production does not complete those processes, it simply creates a new text for a particular time, place and reception" (12). It is crucial to understand the temporal nature of theater. Much critical examination of literature has explored the nature of signs and meaning in the written text, but even there an expectation of a given set text exists. In theater, no matter the existence of the written word, fluidity during production is the norm. "The process of changing meanings continues from writing to writing; reading to reading; analysis to analysis; rehearsal to rehearsal; production to production; reception to reception. The concept of 'page to stage', which has been central in much formal semiotic analysis and traditional criticism implies that the written text is merely 'stage-enacted' with all of its written meanings kept intact" (12-13). While my task is not to conduct an investigation into the connection of drama and criticism, I assert that drama can be viewed as literature, but that view of drama is necessarily incomplete. *This incompleteness must be acknowledged* [emphasis is mine], and the critic must remain cognizant of it during explication and examination. Drama

encompasses the text and the performance in a whole dynamic process. The primary characteristic of this dynamism is the temporal nature of theater—that every production of a play becomes a new and distinct performance—but each performance is a part of a whole, one in a larger group representing the entirety of that play. Each performance is a micro-application of the macro-existence of that play.

^{liv} Wickstrom cites: Flaszyn, Ludwik. “After The Avant-garde,” *The Theatre in Poland*. X (July-August 1968): 13.

^{lv} Much of the middle-east is plagued with this kind of violence, national, religious, and tribal—much like Ireland. In many parts of Africa as well as Asia, and in Eastern Europe, as in the horror of Bosnia in the 1990s, such violence continues to haunt the world.

^{lvi} Before discussing the structure of *The Hostage*, it is crucial to understand that simply reading the play as literature is inadequate for understanding it as a whole. While that approach can work with some plays, especially those which are completely representational in form, with a play such as *The Hostage*, it needs to be viewed in performance in order to comprehend fully its messages. At the very least, if this is not possible, then the reader must engage in a fully imagined internal dramatic production to attempt to gain this understanding.

^{lvii} This is a long-standing tradition in literature. Some examples, but only a few, can be seen in these pieces: *Gargantua and Panagruel*, *Utopia*, *The Praise of Folly*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

^{lviii} Like Pico in the Renaissance attempting to reconcile all religious and philosophic thought, Behan employs a hybrid, syncretic form in *The Hostage*. If seen in this way, the play has Renaissance echoes of the Humanists’ attempts to study and reconcile various forms of philosophy. Behan, however, uses this syncretism to examine Irish society and not the world of philosophy.

^{lix} This point should carry impact on Americans who supported both Catholic and Protestant terrorism through monetary donations to those organizations in Northern Ireland, especially later during The Troubles. Many such people never saw the carnage their money translated into; they only kept their highly romanticized view of the civil war.

^{lx} Maxwell explains the history of the play:

The Hostage began as *An Giall* (The Hostage) a play in Irish commissioned by Gael-Linn And performed in 1958. Behan then wrote a translation for Joan Littlewood, which by the time it appeared in London had acquired another half-dozen characters . . . *An Giall*’s immediate origin was an incident during the British invasion of the Suez Canal Zone in 1956. A British officer captured by the Egyptians was later found dead, suffocated in a cupboard – Leslie’s fate in *An Giall*.

^{lxi}

Fianna Fáil emerges from the side of Éamon de Valera who opposed the partition of Ireland in the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and Finn Gael comes from the side of Micheal Collins, the revolutionary who led the fight for Irish independence but who also negotiated the partition of the island. These now nearly one hundred year old tensions still inform the two parties.

^{lxii} *An Giall* is the earlier version of *The Hostage*, written entirely in Gaelic.

^{lxiii} Witoszek cites: Brown, M. *The Politics of Irish Literature*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968.

^{lxiv} Witoszek cites: Wickstrom, Gordon M. “The Heroic Dimension in Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage*” *The Art of Brendan Behan*.

^{lxv} This situation is starkly similar to that which will occur later in Ireland during The Troubles, which could only be ended by mutual acceptance of responsibility from both sides.

^{lxvi} Culbertson recommends, for a thorough discussion of audience/production interaction—Herbert Blau's *The Audience*.

^{lxvii} See *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. Trans. Michael Shaw.

^{lxviii} In continuing his discussion on *An Giall*, Kearney says
Any critical analysis of *An Giall* must disclose a related theme: the dehumanizing effect of strict political prejudices or ideologies. The critic tries to write a prose correlative of what the playwright has done, but there is an essential difference between the rational method of the critic and the imaginative method of the playwright. (133)

^{lxix} Witoszek cites: O' Suilleabhain, Sean. *The Irish Wake Amusements*. Cork: The Mercier Press, 1976.

