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MACULATE CONCEPTIONS:  
Irish film and drama of the 1930s

Emilie Pine

A thesis submitted to the School of English  
at the University of Dublin, Trinity College,  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

August 2004
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university.

I declare that this is entirely my own work.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the financial support I received from the Government of Ireland Scholarship, without which I would not have been able to complete this thesis. I am indebted to UC Berkeley for a visiting scholarship, which allowed me to study film; thank you to Robert and Rebecca Tracy in Berkeley for helping me to find my feet. I also owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Trinity College for electing me to scholarship as an undergraduate. It has been a great privilege to be a scholar of the College.

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Thank you to all my colleagues in Trinity College, in particular, Niamh Pattwell, Fionnuala Dillane, Jim Shanahan, Carole Jones, Brendan O'Connell, Pádraic Whyte, Myriam Perregaux, Edwina Keowne, Joanna Wydenbach, Deaglán Ó Donghaile, Bernice Murphy and Brenda Brooks; your company along the way has greatly added to the journey. Thank you also to Kevin Fox in Foster Place.

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My greatest debt of gratitude and admiration is for my parents, without whose unstinting encouragement I could not have begun, let alone finished, this project. Thank you for your strength, your inspiration and your love. This work is dedicated to you both with all my love.
for my parents
In the 1930s Ireland grasped the opportunity to define itself as a modern free state and the decade is thus one of the most dynamic in Ireland’s history since Independence. Within the space of ten years, Fianna Fáil came to power, the IRA were banned, an economic war occurred, the Senate was dissolved and the Constitution was rewritten. Crucially, this was a transitional period for Irish national identity as Irish nationalism was no longer anti-establishment but, rather, in a new position of authority and power. It is not surprising, therefore, to find in the thirties an equally dynamic cultural tradition as writers, artists and film-makers responded to the conditions of the time. Much of this response is critical of the emerging modern state or prescriptive in tone and it is this relationship between filmic and dramatic culture and the Irish state that will form the main focus of this thesis. The plays and films discussed here are representative of a wide range of attitudes, both conservative and subversive, and though they often share the desire to critique the Free State, they do so in many different ways and from different political perspectives. The aim of this thesis is to explore these different perspectives and in so doing to provide a window on a decade that has often been overlooked or sidelined.
This is the first study that has considered indigenous Irish film and theatre together. It is a detailed exploration of several works that defined the cultural climate of the thirties and that strove to speak to the new state. This thesis thus illuminates the processes of change and consolidation as the new state attempted to prove itself capable of self-government and, in the case of Éamon de Valera’s vision, of self-sufficiency. One of the defining characteristics of the new state was its ethos of strict censorship. Far from silencing artists, however, censorship and strict social policies provoked a very strong culture of dissent, and these moments of dissension reflect the continued vibrancy of the tradition of anti-establishment thinking, championed by the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic League. This struggle, between the individual and authority, runs throughout the culture of the thirties and, as this thesis explores, results most often in a questioning of that authority.

In particular, this thesis emphasises the links between the film and drama of the decade and the social, political and economic changes the country underwent during the period. The thesis thus pays particular attention to three themes: post-revolutionary Ireland, gender and modernity, and the extent to which these themes defined the culture of the thirties is accordingly emphasised. The thesis concludes with a consideration of the film and drama of the nineties, in order to further illuminate the culture of the thirties and to illustrate the persistence of the themes of conflict, gender and modernity between the two decades. Finally, the thesis calls for a renewed and imaginative exploration of the culture of the forgotten decades of Irish history.
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IN MEMORY OF BOUCICault AND BIANCONI  JACK B YEATS  1937
INTRODUCTION

In the 1930s, after a career of over forty years, Jack B. Yeats began to enter ‘the sublime phase of his late work’. 1 In Memory of Boucicault and Bianconi is typical of his late work as the elements of landscape, modernity and culture cohere into an organic whole. 2 The painting is set in an area of outstanding beauty, with Glencar Waterfall rushing down in the background and a troupe of actors gathered together, between the waterfall and the Bianconi car at the right hand side. The troupe almost merges with the landscape but there is no sense of threat, rather Yeats creates a sense of intimacy with and belonging in the landscape.

Yeats’s painting is a vibrant and energetic portrait, not only of a troupe of actors performing Boucicault, but of the 1930s as an era. In this period Ireland grasped the opportunity to define itself as a modern free state and the decade is thus one of the richest in Ireland’s history since Independence. Within the space of ten years, Fianna Fáil came to power, the IRA were banned, an economic war occurred, the Senate was dissolved and the Constitution was rewritten. Crucially, this was a transitional period for Irish national identity as Irish nationalism was no longer anti-establishment but, rather, in a new position of authority and power. It is not surprising, therefore, to find in the thirties an equally dynamic cultural tradition as writers, artists and film-makers responded to the

2 The Shaughraun by Dion Boucicault was the first play that Jack B. Yeats saw in the theatre.
conditions of the time. Much of this response is critical of the emerging modern state or prescriptive in tone and it is this relationship between filmic and dramatic culture and the Irish state that will form the main focus of this thesis. The plays and films discussed here are representative of a wide range of attitudes, both conservative and subversive, and though they often share the desire to critique the Free State, they do so in many different ways and from different political perspectives. The aim of this thesis is to explore these different perspectives and in so doing to provide a window on a decade that has often been overlooked or sidelined.

The breadth of cultural activity and the depth of debate in thirties culture has not been adequately represented in the cultural histories of the twentieth century. An early attempt to reflect on the decade’s importance was the Thomas Davis Lecture Series, broadcast on RTÉ radio in 1966. This series discussed the 1930s as a decade in which Irish culture, politics and economics were tested to their limits, leading to the formation of what we now understand as modern Irish identity. These lectures were published, edited by Francis MacManus, but by necessity of their form, provide only a short introduction to the decade. MacManus’s work unfortunately did not lead to a critical debate on the decade and it was not until relatively recently – the 1990s – that the thirties once more became a topic of interest.

The publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, edited by Seamus Deane, represented a concerted attempt to widen the canon of Irish literature and this attempt extends to the culture of the thirties. In his essay ‘The Counter-Revival 1930-1960: Drama’, Terence Brown notes that the Abbey Theatre ‘managed to produce 104
new plays by recognised and new dramatists between 1930 and 1940'. Yet, despite this acknowledgment of the scale of new productions in this decade alone, Brown mentions by name only four plays for these three decades. In his history of Irish drama, *Twentieth-Century Drama: Mirror Up to Nation*, Christopher Murray’s chapter on the thirties is tellingly entitled ‘Into the Twilight’,


4 while Nicholas Grene in *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicaut to Friel* features only one play from either the 1930s or the 1940s. These dramatic histories are thus very limited in terms of their reference to the thirties, a consequence perhaps of the view of the thirties as a decade lacking the dynamism and cultural output of previous decades.

Two titles from the end of the nineties address this attitude and aim to reverse the impression of the thirties as a ‘twilight’ era. In *An Age of Innocence*, Brian Fallon argues for the recognition of the cultural diversity of the thirties yet this work, though opening up the decade to critical scrutiny, is too general to give an in-depth portrait of the decade and fails to deliver a detailed argument. Likewise, *Ireland in the 1930s: New Perspectives*, edited by Joost Augusteijn, aims to explore the political and social nuances of the decade and fill ‘a void in Irish historical writing’ concerning ‘the somewhat shadowy period of the inter-war years’. This collection of essays addresses many key moments in the decade, for example, the Eucharistic Congress of 1932, but the subject of film and drama necessarily falls outside its remit.

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4 Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Drama: Mirror Up to Nation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).
Most recently, two new histories of Irish drama have recognised the importance of playwrights from the thirties. Both Lionel Pilkington in *Theatre and the State in Twentieth Century Ireland: Cultivating the People* and Christopher Morash in *A History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000* identify Denis Johnston and Teresa Deevy as key writers but do not have the space to explore their work fully or to place it in the context of other cultural developments of the decade, such as film. Johnston is both a playwright and a film-maker and so his work, in particular, demands to be placed in such a context.

Though Pilkington and Morash considerably further the study of drama in this decade, the limits of a one-discipline study are such that they cannot fully appreciate the decade as a cultural phenomenon. While W.B. Yeats is obviously exempt from the general lack of critical scrutiny of the decade, and individual playwrights, such as Denis Johnston and Teresa Deevy, have been the subject of renewed interest, no major study has been carried out on the theatrical production of the thirties.³

In the study of Irish film, the same limits apply. Kevin Rockett’s essay on ‘1930s Fictions’ is ground-breaking in its research into domestic film production, but in focusing on film alone, and on the film industry rather than the image of Ireland being constructed, it also fails to represent the decade in sufficient depth.⁴ Similarly, Ruth Barton’s *Irish National Cinema* addresses the construction of Irish identity in film, but as

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a history of the century of film production only it cannot fully address the cultural
breadth of the thirties as a decade of change.\textsuperscript{10} The recent series of monographs on
individual film adaptations by Cork University Press and film-makers by Liffey Press
have expanded Irish film history greatly but, again, do not address the key films of the
thirties.\textsuperscript{11} As with theatre, though individual films such as Denis Johnston's \textit{Guests of
the Nation} (1935) and Tom Cooper's \textit{The Dawn} (1936) have received screenings and some
critical attention, there has been no extensive analysis of the films of the thirties. As with
the drama explored in this thesis, these films deserve not only greater in-depth
appreciation as stand-alone works, but also further consideration as part of a vibrant,
performative and visual cultural tradition.

The immense popularity of film in the thirties demands that it be considered
alongside more ‘high art’ forms such as theatre, and it is for this reason that this thesis is
interdisciplinary in outlook. By studying the film and drama of the decade, I will
demonstrate the richness of the cultural production in Ireland in the thirties, as well as
exploring the themes of gender, modernity and post-revolutionary Ireland across the
boundaries of these two disciplines. This thesis will thus break new ground in
considering the film and drama of the decade together and in arguing that there is a
consistent desire to address the concerns of the decade in both films and plays.

\textsuperscript{11} The titles of the Cork University Press series are: \textit{The Dead}, Kevin Barry (Cork: Cork
University Press, 2001), \textit{December Bride}, Lance Pettit (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), \textit{This
Other Eden}, Fidelma Farley (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), \textit{The Informer}, Patrick F.
Sheeran (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), \textit{The Field}, Cheryl Herr (Cork: Cork University
Press, 2002), \textit{The Quiet Man}, Luke Gibbons (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) and
\textit{Dancing at Lughnasa}, Joan FitzPatrick Dean (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003). Of this
series \textit{The Dead} by Kevin Barry and \textit{The Quiet Man} by Luke Gibbons are the most
in-depth in terms of cultural understanding. The titles of the Liffey Press series are: \textit{Neil
Jordan: Exploring Boundaries}, Emer Rockett and Kevin Rockett (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003) and
\textit{Jim Sheridan: Framing the Nation}, Ruth Barton (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2002). This series is too
contemporary to make mention of the thirties, though Neil Jordan was inspired by Frank O’Connor’s
Chapter One: ‘Change and Consolidation’ will sketch the historical backdrop of the period under discussion, drawing out the extent to which major events such as the Eucharistic Congress, the dominance in politics of Fianna Fáil and the drafting of a new Constitution moulded the nature of the State and concurrently its culture. Chapter Two: ‘The Birth of a Nation is no Immaculate Conception’ examines six works in the context of the three themes that broadly characterise the decade’s culture. The legacy of revolution in Ireland is the subject of both The Moon in the Yellow River (1931) by Denis Johnston and Blarney (1938) directed by Harry O’Donovan. These works dramatise the complications arising from the post-civil war situation and the ways in which ordinary Irish citizens must change their lives to accommodate the changes wrought in Irish society over the past two decades.

Anticipating the gender stereotypes of the 1937 Constitution, Teresa Deevy in The King of Spain’s Daughter (1935) focuses on the situation of women in the new Free State and highlights the narrowness of roles available to them. Likewise, in Shadow and Substance (1937) Paul Vincent Carroll, one of the most successful dramatists of this period, both in Ireland and abroad, draws attention to the patriarchal nature of the Catholic Church and the limited space for women within the Church. Carroll also illustrates the inroads that modernity was making in Ireland in this period and the pervasiveness of modernity also provides the subject for two other films of the decade: Norris Davidson’s By Accident (1931) and Patrick Keenan Heale’s The Islandman (1938). Davidson, in the most experimental film of the decade, creates a nightmarish vision of the new, urban Ireland and implicitly questions whether Irish people in general, and Dubliners in particular, can have any secure sense of identity amid the flux of the
modern city. This question is explicitly addressed at the end of the thirties by Heale in *The Islandman*, as well as by Harry O'Donovan in *Blarney* (1938), who both propose that Ireland cope with the changes of modernity by reinvesting in its traditional rural identity, a similar outlook to Éamon de Valera’s hypothesised backward-looking, self-sufficient nation.

Chapter Three: ‘The Whole Truth’ picks up on the theme of post-revolutionary Ireland, raised in Chapter Two. This chapter focuses on the War of Independence as a formative moment in Irish history and examines two different versions of the war: Denis Johnston’s film adaptation of Frank O’Connor’s short story *Guests of the Nation* (1935) and Tom Cooper’s *The Dawn* (1936). Both films – though very different in tone – reassess the War of Independence from the perspective of the Free State and in terms of what legacy the war has left Ireland, in particular in relation to conceptions of landscape.

Chapter Four: ‘The Fall of the Beautiful’ is an in-depth reading of W.B. Yeats’s penultimate play, *Purgatory* (1938), and explores his despairing and desperate vision of the cultural and social landscape of modern Ireland. Yeats is clear on the legacy of the past few decades and sees little or no hope in the country’s future unless it is swiftly rescued from its own materialism.

The future of the country – and its citizens – is questioned, at least implicitly, by all of the thirties works in this thesis. The events of this period and their concordant cultural reactions are so significant that their reverberations are still with us today. In a major shift, in Chapter Five: ‘The Persistence of Memory’, this thesis turns from the thirties to the nineties, in a bid to examine how much has changed in cultural representations of Ireland in the intervening fifty years. Through this juxtaposition, this
study aims to bring each decade into greater focus and to highlight how the central concerns of the thirties remain to the fore of Irish cultural debate in the nineties and, by so doing, illustrate how relevant the 1930s are to the Ireland of today – a fact implicitly acknowledged by the contemporary growth in the study of the thirties. Though many aspects of Irish culture changed over the course of sixty years, often the central tropes have remained the same, and it is perhaps this continuity that is the most interesting feature of this chapter. In addition to the new works explored, this continuity is confirmed by the revival and adaptation of three key thirties works: *Katie Roche* (1936) by Teresa Deevy, *Moses’ Rock* (1938) by Frank O’Connor and Hugh Hunt and *The Words Upon the Window Pane* (1930) by W.B. Yeats.

As with the thirties, the nineties represent a foundational moment in the definition and consolidation of Ireland’s identity as a modern state and, as illustrated in the four nineties works examined in this chapter, is characterised by many of the same themes. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1991) by Brian Friel and in the film adaptation by Frank McGuinness and Pat O’Connor (1998), the position of women in Irish society is again dramatised. Cathal Black’s film adaption of John McGahern’s short story *Korea* (1995) focuses, like so many of the works of the thirties, on the aftermath of war while Marina Carr, in *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998) explores, through the character of Hester Swayne, the divides within Irish society and the detrimental influence of modernity. These three works are all characterised by a backward look and highlight the need to resolve issues from the past so that Ireland can move on and become a modern, forward-looking state. Finally, this thesis concludes with a call for a renewed and imaginative exploration of the culture of the forgotten decades of Irish history. The ideal Ireland may remain, infinitely,
waiting in the wings, yet perhaps by comparing these two decades, we can remind ourselves of where we have come from in order to remember where we are going.
CHAPTER ONE
CHANGE AND CONSOLIDATION

INVENTING IRELAND: THE 1930s
Politics, Economics and Society

The politics of the 1930s were at once both volatile and stable. Following the end of fighting in the civil war, Cumann na nGaedheal, under William Cosgrave, held power for just under ten years. In 1932 Cosgrave’s party was defeated at the polls by Éamon de Valera’s relatively new party, Fianna Fáil, which had been formed in May 1926. After the election, Fianna Fáil held the majority, in coalition with the Labour party under the leadership of William Norton. The newly launched *Irish Press*, the voice of Fianna Fáil, declared that it had been the ‘hardest fought general election for years’ yet the following year when the party called a snap election, they were returned to power with a working majority, confirming de Valera’s hold on the public’s loyalty and imagination.\(^1\) Fianna Fáil was to retain this position of power for an unbroken fifteen years, lending the country a sense of political stability. From the beginning of their power in government, Fianna Fáil clearly signalled that they would find constitutional means to attain a more complete independence from Britain, illustrated by the passing in 1933 of the Constitutional (Removal of Oath) Bill.

\(^1\) *Irish Press* 17 February 1932: 1.
The thirties were not without conflict, however. In its first years of power Fianna Fáil had to deal with two major opponents to its government: Eoin O’Duffy and the Blueshirts, and the IRA. O’Duffy, disillusioned after his departure from his role as Garda Commissioner, founded his own military group, the National Guard, known as the Blueshirts because of their distinctive uniforms. He also briefly became president of the new political party – raised from the ashes of Cumann na nGaedheal – Fine Gael. The Blueshirt movement was a quasi-fascist movement and initially attracted support from figures such as W.B. Yeats.\(^2\) Fianna Fáil dealt with the Blueshirt movement by introducing the Wearing of Uniforms (Restriction) Bill in early 1934 and in August banning the National Guard entirely.\(^3\) Though O’Duffy established the League of Youth to replace the banned organisation, the movement was in such decline by the end of 1934 that it no longer posed a threat. The onset of the Spanish Civil War further drained the movement as O’Duffy led a brigade to Spain to fight for Franco.\(^4\) O’Duffy’s brigade was only one of several groups that went to fight in Spain as Irish men travelled in large numbers to fight for both sides, though public opinion was overwhelmingly pro-Franco. As Fearghal McGarry argues, ‘Ireland, like other nations responded to the ideological civil war which gripped Europe throughout the 1930s’, indeed, the Spanish civil war resulted in ‘clashes between Catholic Action activists and left republicans in Dublin’s streets’.\(^5\) This divisiveness can be read in the altercation between Kate and Gerry in


Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* when Kate accuses Gerry of going to fight for ‘godless communism’.6

Fianna Fáil’s main military concern was the IRA as de Valera knew that the presence of a terrorist organisation was extremely problematic in a time of peace.7 Though it is generally argued that Fianna Fáil owed much of the support that brought them to power in 1932 to the votes of IRA members, in the thirties the self-proclaimed republican party strove to distance themselves from the organisation.8 As films like Johnston’s *Guests of the Nation* and Tom Cooper’s *The Dawn* show, the IRA and their role in the War of Independence still played a central role in the public imagination, yet both of these films – despite their differing perspectives – stress comradeship over violence, pointing to the country’s need in the decades following two wars to move away from violence. This need is reflected in Fianna Fáil’s policies towards the IRA in this decade. In June 1936 the IRA was declared an illegal organisation and its annual march to Bodenstown on June 23, the focus of republican memorialism, was banned, as was their publication, *An Phoblacht*.9

In the same year as the IRA was outlawed, de Valera abolished the Seanad, after it had tried to obstruct Dáil proposals on the Wearing of Uniforms (Restrictions) Act. This left him with the freedom and the room to redraft the Constitution and, in July 1937, a new Constitution was enacted, and Article 18 redesigned the Seanad along lines agreeable to de Valera. This new plan for the Seanad illustrates that de Valera ‘had no

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9 This ban was lifted in 1970.
intention of permitting his new upper house an effective mind of its own. In addition, the new Constitution lays out de Valera’s model of Ireland, which is centred on the family. The Constitution was, in some senses, liberal, with less emphasis on the Catholic Church than might have been expected, but there are strikingly conservative elements to the document, in particular, the representation of women. Article 41 firmly enshrined Irish women as mothers and homemakers. Though there was a limited amount of campaigning by feminist groups against this restriction of women, they were given ‘short shrift’ by Fianna Fáil and produced ‘a stir in Dublin, but not beyond. Yet, despite the Constitution advocating that women should remain within the home, roughly one third of the adult female population were gainfully employed in the thirties, with professional women making up the biggest proportion of women working outside of either the home or agriculture. However, though women were entitled to vote, they were not electing other women, with only six women in the Seanad between 1922 and 1936, while fewer than 4% of TDs were women in fifty-five years of Irish Statehood.

Politically, other than the re-design of the Seanad, the most notable feature of the Constitution is its references to Éire as a sovereign state and the absence of any acknowledgement of the Commonwealth. This followed the direction already indicated by the 1935 Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act and the Aliens Act of the same year, both of which defined British citizens as aliens. In these points the government took

10 Lee 272.
11 Alvin Jackson, *Ireland: 1798-1998: Politics and War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 297. The Constitution compounded the 1935 Conditions of Employment Bill which limited the number of women who could be employed in industry and, indeed, gave the minister the power to proscribe them from such work entirely.
advantage of the crisis in British administration upon the abdication of Edward VIII. The British, for their part, ‘accepted these repudiations’ partly because of the lack of desire for an international incident, and partly due to the vagueness of the terms of the 1921 Treaty.

Though Fianna Fáil changed the Free State’s relation to Britain and the Commonwealth through these initiatives, it could not alter partition. In 1938 De Valera led a negotiating group to London to begin talks for a new Anglo-Irish Agreement, winning concessions on certain points, in particular on Irish imports and the return of the Treaty Ports. However, there were no concessions to be won on the partition of Ulster. The Boundary Commission, established following the War of Independence to review the exact location of the Border, had dissolved in 1925 unable to reach a conclusion, and a similar divisiveness has plagued the region ever since. Though the six counties remained the dominant concern of republicans in this period, most nationalists were realistic about the chance of reunification and the minority nationalist population in the North were isolated from the Free State as de Valera concentrated on severing the Free State’s ties to Britain and the Commonwealth. Northern Ireland suffered economically in this period with high unemployment rates due to the recession-hit shipbuilding and linen industries. To make matters worse there was no cross-border cooperation to try to ameliorate this situation or to address the shared physical resources such as inland

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14 Jackson 295.
15 See Jackson 293-296.
waterways. By refusing to acknowledge the North as a legitimate entity, as Michael Kennedy argues, de Valera’s policies ‘did more to consolidate partition and prevent Irish unity than [he] and his party cared to believe.’\(^{19}\) Most southerners were either resigned to the situation or still viewed it as temporary, and the reception of the border film *Blarney*, released in 1938, amply illustrates this with the *Dublin Evening Mail* remarking ‘What a laugh this Border business is. It is a blessing to the comedians of North and South. Any reference to it or the complications which arise from it is sure to fetch the laughs from an Irish audience.’\(^{20}\)

Despite this joviality among cinema-goers – and the booming box-office receipts – Ireland was far from being a prosperous nation during these years. In 1938, when de Valera went to London to negotiate the Anglo-Irish Agreement, Britain and Ireland had been engaged in an Economic War for the previous six years. When Fianna Fáil came to power de Valera decided to withhold the land annuities payable to Britain. In response, the British government had imposed import duties on Irish livestock and livestock products to which de Valera retaliated by imposing duties on British coal. The withholding of the land annuities was an important step in the future that de Valera envisioned for Ireland: a self-sufficient nation. De Valera’s action was a political statement and the British response enabled him to establish high tariff walls around Ireland, thereby encouraging Irish industry and adding to the country’s economic isolation. Yet Ireland’s separatist stance towards Britain in this period was not the case in the country’s relationship to the rest of the world. Indeed, at the beginning of his role as Taoiseach de Valera had presided over the council of the League of Nations (1932), a

\(^{19}\) Michael Kennedy, *Division and Consensus* 69.

\(^{20}\) *Dublin Evening Mail*, 8 January 1938: 9.
connection fostered by the previous Cosgrave administration, and at the end of the decade de Valera also presided over the League’s Assembly (1938). Despite these roles in international politics, however, the dominant political and economic rhetoric was one of isolationism.

Emigration rates were relatively low during the first years of Fianna Fáil rule. The American and British Depressions affected Irish emigration patterns and net emigration to Great Britain fell to about 8,000 in 1933.\(^1\) However, by the second half of the decade these figures had recovered and reverted to their usual high levels, with a peak of nearly 30,000 emigrating to Great Britain in 1937.\(^2\) As Joseph Brennan put it in 1937, ‘At the present time the number of Irish-born (not those of Irish origin) living outside Ireland is only a little less than half the number living in Ireland, a fact which makes this country quite unique among the nations.’\(^3\) Compounding this problem were the issues of population distribution, marriage and birth rates within Ireland.

Though Fianna Fáil marketed itself as the party of the small farmer, this rhetoric was not matched by action, and small farmers found it increasingly difficult to survive. This economic contraction heightened the existing sense of the social atrophy of the west of Ireland as, though Irish society was in this period overwhelmingly rural-based with an agricultural economy, the Irish population was rapidly urbanising. In particular, there was a drift to Dublin from the west and southwest of the country: between 1926 and 1936 the population of Irish towns grew by 10%, while the rural population of Connaught

\(^{22}\) Brennan 113.
\(^{23}\) Brennan 113.
decreased by 6.2%, and both the rural and town population of Munster declined.24 The majority of Irish women, in particular, lived in the eastern half of the country, as young Irish women deserted the often barren rural areas for jobs in towns and cities. These demographic trends resulted not only in the depopulation of rural areas, but a crisis in marriage rates, with over half of women between twenty-five and thirty-four unmarried in the west and more than one quarter of all Irish women never marrying at all.25 Indeed, based on the 1926 Census, Ireland had ‘a larger proportion of unmarried persons of all ages than in any other country for which records are kept.’26 These statistics provide a stark background to films such as Patrick Keenan Heale’s The Islandman and Harry O’Donovan’s Blarney, both released in 1938, which extol the joys and virtues of rural life. Rather than these film versions of the countryside, it is Patrick Kavanagh’s poem ‘The Great Hunger’ (1942), which provides a harrowing, but more faithful portrait of Ireland in this period.

Fianna Fáil recognised that if the Free State were to become self-sufficient it was necessary for Ireland to industrialise, and the party thus sought to continue developments initiated by the Cosgrave administration, such as the Shannon Scheme, as well as to begin other initiatives.27 By the end of the 1920s the German firm, Siemens, had begun work on the Shannon Hydro-electric Scheme, which would provide electricity for over half the country as well as providing the background for Denis Johnston’s tragi-comedy The

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25 O’Briain 76.
Moon in the Yellow River (1931).²⁸ Fianna Fáil’s initiatives included the founding of the Irish Sugar Company in 1933 and in 1936, Aer Lingus. These initiatives had limited impact, however and, as plays such as Teresa Deevy’s The King of Spain’s Daughter (1935) and Brian Friel’s retrospective Dancing at Lughnasa (1990) reveal, the impact of industrialisation in the thirties was, to a great extent, felt most by women. Previously carried out by cottage industries, crafts such as knitting were transferred to new factories around the country, further encouraging women to move to urban centres for work.

These migration and work trends led to the growth of the urban proletariat and city slums, a problem heightened by unemployment rates, which hovered around 100,000 in this decade.²⁹ Cumann na nGaedheal’s inability to deal with this urban population in the twenties meant that a serious problem had developed regarding housing in Dublin and other cities. The sense of insecurity which underlies Norris Davidson’s urban film By Accident (1930) is thus a consequence of the rapid growth of Irish cities and the sense that Irish society could not cope with these changes. This is acutely indicated by the distressingly high rates of infant mortality. Indeed, ‘one hundred and twenty out of every thousand babies under the age of one in urban Ireland died in their first year in 1926.’³⁰ These figures were not much improved upon by Fianna Fáil in the thirties.³¹ The infant mortality rate represents a crisis in Irish urban life, but birth rates were not any more

²⁸ For the background to this important development, see The Shannon Scheme and the Electrification of the Free State, ed. Andy Bielenberg (Dublin: Lilliput, 2002).


³⁰ Lee 124.

³¹ Between 1930 and 1940 infant mortality rates stood at between 63 and 74 deaths per 1,000 births, see for example, the Irish Medical Journal (2001) 4.7 (available on-line at www.imj.ie). This matter was debated in the Dáil frequently, see for example, Dáil Éireann - Volume 75 - 31 March, 1939, Committee on Finance - Vote 41 - Local Government and Public Health (available on-line at http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/).
heartening. Low birth rates led to an ageing population, with the numbers of children aged less than fifteen decreasing in the inter-censal years (1926-1936) by sixty thousand. The only increase in birth rates in this period was of illegitimate births. In 1922 there were around fifteen hundred recorded illegitimate babies born. By 1929 this figure had risen to nearly nineteen hundred, a staggering 3.1% of all births that year in the State. Furthermore, these figures only represent part of the story; many illegitimate births would have been hushed up, or the girls sent away to England. These bleak statistics point to the atmosphere of anxiety of the period surrounding marriage and children that forms the background to Teresa Deevy’s work, in particular *Katie Roche* (1935), and to Heale’s film *The Islandman*.

**Culture**

The reaction to social changes, such as the rise in illegitimate births, by the Church and State was, in the main, to try to repress them – for example, by encouraging families to send unmarried mothers to the Magdalen Laundries – or to blame popular culture for these changes. As J.H. Whyte notes:

> Irish bishops, in the years after the Civil War, appear to have been deeply pessimistic about the state of their country ... Many pastoral letters deplored the growing craze for pleasure, and the slackening of parental control.

These establishment anxieties found legislative expression in the 1935 Public Dance Halls Act, which was intended to curb the ‘craze for pleasure’ and replace ‘parental control’. Overall, an atmosphere of strict adherence to Church orthodoxy prevailed in this era, aided by such public spectacles of devotion as the Eucharistic Congress, held in

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the Phoenix Park in June 1932. The Congress was hugely significant in terms of asserting the identity of the Irish Free State as a leading Catholic nation, and for the spectacle it provided to the massive number of people who attended it. Religion was not only important in terms of spectacle, however, but also as an institution representing and promoting social stability. Indeed, Whyte argues that 'the role of religion [was] to reconcile the Irish peasantry' to the fate of low marriage and birth rates and a changing society.\textsuperscript{34} Certainly, the emphasis in this period on the limiting of popular culture and censorship led by the conservative joint forces of the Catholic Church and Fianna Fáil, seemed to be motivated by the dual desire to promote the myth of Irish rural innocence and harmony, and to prevent the exposure of the Irish people to outside influence and the possibility of opening up Irish society.

One of the first pieces of legislation by the new State was the Censorship of Films Act (1923), powers that were increased by the Censorship of Films (Amendment) Act of 1930.\textsuperscript{35} In 1926 a Committee of Enquiry on Evil Literature was set up, leading to the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 and the Censorship Board, which was directly under the influence of the Catholic Church as it was chaired by a Catholic priest. These Acts led to an era of cultural conservatism and in the thirties we see their full power being used with, for example, the banning of 1,200 books and 140 periodicals between 1930 and 1939.\textsuperscript{36} Public attitudes to this level of censorship, the diktats of Fianna Fáil, and the country’s overall atmosphere of moral vigilantism were found by some to be ‘odiously heavy-handed in a democracy beginning to feel and anxious to express a

\textsuperscript{34} Whyte 32.
\textsuperscript{35} Between 1924 and 1987 some 3,000 films were banned and 8,000 significantly cut. See Kevin Rockett, ‘1930s Fictions’, Cinema and Ireland 53.
developing self-assurance. However, many in the country broadly agreed with the Church and State’s attitude to popular culture and ‘Hollywood’ morality. As Alvin Jackson argues, the 1937 Constitution, along with Fianna Fáil’s social policies, ‘did not so much impose as reflect a shared value system.’

While it is important to understand the extent of censorship in Ireland in this period, encompassing literature, journalism, music, film and art, it would be misleading to paint an unremittingly bleak picture of Irish cultural life in the 1930s. The deaths of figures such as Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats, who had led the vanguard of culture in previous decades, were tempered by the emergence of new voices such as Frank O’Connor, Teresa Deevy, Paul Vincent Carroll and Denis Johnston in the theatre. Filmmakers such as Denis Johnston and Norris Davidson pushed at the conventional boundaries of film and introduced a more expressionistic tone to indigenous film, while more conservative film-makers such as Tom Cooper made technical strides, directing the first Irish sound feature film. These new voices give the lie to the misrepresentation of the thirties as an era when censorship successfully repressed Irish life, a representation which is simply not the case. As Brian Fallon argues, ‘the tendency has been to see [the thirties] as dominated by insularity, defensive-minded nationalism, the Church, censorship, a retreat from the outer world. This attitude has fossilised into a kind of dogma.’ Yet, as this thesis will argue, there was in fact a considerable cultural effort to explore and expose the issues of nationalism, religion and tradition as the country began to consolidate its identity as a state.

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37 Brown, Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 141.
38 Jackson 297.
39 Brian Fallon, An Age of Innocence 2.
The theatre and film of the thirties were produced within a cultural context of progressive work on the one hand that seemed to question the status quo and, on the other, conservative work that sustained the dominant ideology. By the thirties Jack B. Yeats, Ireland’s leading landscape painter, had begun to produce some of his finest work, the ‘apotheosis’ of which he would reach in the forties. Standing in contrast to Yeats, were Seán Keating and Maurice MacGonigal, leaders of the academic realist school of painting, who produced landscapes that reflected the peasant realism of much literature of this period. Keating’s work ‘had a strong element of patriotism’ and this led him to document in paint the building of the Shannon hydroelectric scheme, his theme being ‘The Dawn of a New Ireland’. As Dorothy Walker argues, Keating and MacGonigal’s art extolled the virtue of ‘upright young men of strong arm and clean morals, who had fought for Ireland but had now become model farmers.’

This vision of Ireland is echoed in Heale’s *The Islandman* and, indeed, in the founding of the Folklore Commission in 1935. However, while this vision was in line with the Fianna Fáil and Church view of Ireland, in fact it ignored the real patterns of Irish rural life. Though Paul Henry’s work may superficially seem to have more in common with Keating and MacGonigal than with Yeats, his landscape painting is unromantic and post-impressionist in style, more in line with Yeats’s version of the Irish countryside.

Standing apart from the realist school were two artists who, much influenced by French art, pushed the boundaries of realism: Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone. Both artists used colour dramatically and imaginatively, though Jellett worked in paint while Hone specialised in stained glass, a far cry from the browns and muted greens and greys of

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Keating’s work. Indeed, the energy, colour and focus on shape and purity of expression in Jellett’s work is striking in its modernism and breaks with the representational tradition of Irish art. Ireland would become more open to these influences by the end of the decade as, with the onset of war, the White Stag group held its first exhibition in Dublin in 1940, which exhibited the work of Jellett and others while in the same year Louis le Brocquy, at the beginning of his career, helped to found the Irish Exhibition of Living Art.

Irish writing in this period includes many notable names: Flann O’Brian and Samuel Beckett who attempted to push at the conventions of realism, Elizabeth Bowen, Kate O’Brien, Seán O’Faolain, Liam O’Flaherty and Frank O’Connor who all held to a more realist style. W.B. Yeats, in the late stage of his work, addressed the sublime power of beauty, as did Louis MacNeice, while other poets such as Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh and Denis Devlin diverged from the spiritual themes of Yeats’s work to concentrate on moments in Irish history.

Theatre and Film

On his tour of Ireland in 1937, Lord Longford commented on the fervour for drama in Sligo and Waterford, though Limerick was apparently ‘cinema mad’. In particular, Longford noted the excellent smaller companies and venues, such as the Little Theatres at Birr and Waterford. Dublin also had its own independent theatrical ventures with the Dublin Little Theatre Guild founded in 1935, and the Dublin Little Theatre Group and the

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43 O’Flaherty’s novel Famine (1937) is reckoned to be the classic novel of the period and his novel The Informer (1925) was adapted in 1935 by John Ford into an Oscar-winning film.
44 Lord Longford, quoted by Sean Ó Meadhra, Ireland Today March 1937: 70-1.
New Theatre Group starting up in the period 1936-7. Indeed, amateur dramatics had reached such a level by 1932 that the national Amateur Dramatic Association was formed and remarkably, asChristopher Morash argues, ‘many of the same social changes (and, indeed, many of the same individuals) responsible for the repressive religiosity of the period were also responsible for the growth of amateur theatre.’

In Dublin, new voices in the theatre world were seen and heard on the stages of the established Abbey Theatre and the new Gate Theatre, founded in 1928 by Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir. The Gate initially used the Peacock Theatre as its premises, before moving to the theatre in the Rotunda hospital complex, where it remains today. The Gate was renowned for its productions of European and American drama, as well as fostering Irish talent, such as staging Denis Johnston’s first play *The Old Lady Says No!* in 1929 after it was rejected by the Abbey Theatre. Other playwrights performed at the Gate include MacLiammóir himself, Hazel Ellis, Mary Manning, and both Lord and Lady Longford. Lord Longford had been the theatre’s patron since 1931 but in 1936 founded Longford Productions after the partnership with MacLiammóir and Edwards split. The two production companies continued to share the theatre space but each toured for the period when the other was performing. Though the Gate tends to be seen as the antithesis of the Abbey Theatre, there were a number of playwrights who moved between the two with Johnston, Lennox Robinson and Ria Mooney all having productions at both theatres. Indeed, Johnston’s greatest Abbey play, *The Moon in the Yellow River*, examined in Chapter Two, was in the repertoire for the first national Irish

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45 It is not clear whether each of these was a separate venture or whether they were the same venture, under the same title, or successive theatre groups.

46 Morash 193. See Morash 192-5 for a discussion of amateur drama in the period 1930-50.
tour by Longford Productions and, according to Longford himself, was the most popular play of the tour.\textsuperscript{47}

The continued \textit{grande dame} of the Irish theatre world, however, was the Abbey Theatre. Though the theatre was beset by financial difficulties and the boardroom rife with political squabbles, the theatre continued to produce the now-classic plays of the repertoire, including J.M. Synge’s \textit{The Playboy of the Western World} and Sean O’Casey’s \textit{The Plough and the Stars}, the two most frequently revived plays of the decade. Yet new drama seemed to be scarce and at the beginning of the decade, ‘The Abbey directors themselves were convinced that there was, at this time, a shortage of good new plays, and they mounted a competition in 1931 to encourage new writing.’\textsuperscript{48}

The joint winners of this prize in its inaugural year were Paul Vincent Carroll for \textit{Things that are Caesar’s} and Teresa Deevy for \textit{Temporal Powers} and both of these playwrights would go on to become two of the most articulate voices in Irish theatre in the thirties. Carroll’s \textit{Shadow and Substance} and Deevy’s \textit{The King of Spain’s Daughter}, in particular, are notable for their identification of key issues to do with gender relations and power politics in the Free State.

Another new venture for the Abbey was its Festival of Irish Theatre, held in August 1938 and inaugurated to represent the work of the Irish National Theatre over the preceding thirty years. The festival included morning lectures on topics such as ‘The New Realism’ by Andrew E. Malone, while during the two week festival the theatre staged seventeen plays by twelve authors. Overall, the festival was a success with over 400

\textsuperscript{47} Longford 70-1.
people attending the lectures, the only controversy being provided by the premiere of Yeats’s penultimate play, *Purgatory*, to be discussed in Chapter Four.

In the mid-thirties the addition of Frank O’Connor to the Board of Directors, and Hugh Hunt as the theatre’s resident producer, led to a departure in terms of style as Hunt and O’Connor encouraged deviations from the Abbey’s comfortable yet staid tradition of representation. The Abbey was not immune, however, from censorship and, when in 1935 it decided that the time had come to stage Sean O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie*, it fell foul of the conservative mood of the Catholic Church. Following a series of complaints made by The National Council for the Federation of the Catholic Young Men’s Societies of Ireland and, in particular, the Galway branch, which appeared in the national newspapers, the play was withdrawn from the stage. It was not only the subject matter of O’Casey’s parodic play that was the cause of these objections, but also the perception of the Abbey as anti-Catholic and therefore anti-national. Following this very public scandal, the Abbey rejected two plays, W.B. Yeats’s *The Herne’s Egg* in 1937 and Carroll’s *The White Steed* in 1938, on the basis that they might lead to similar public outcry, a powerful example of self-censorship and the fear that motivated it.49

Due to censorial actions such as these, and increasing tensions in the theatre, Hunt and O’Connor both left and, following Yeats’s death in 1939, the theatre’s ethos became increasingly conservative as it entered the forties. The theatre came under the control of Ernest Blythe, an Irish enthusiast and previous Minister for Finance who pushed the Abbey to perform Irish plays, staging *Casadh an tSúgáin* by Douglas Hyde in May 1938. This play marked the beginning of the professional production of plays in the Irish

49 Indeed, *Shadow and Substance* suffered also, when the play was pulled from the Birr Theatre following objections from the local Catholic vigilance Society, see Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre* 190.
language as a regular feature of the National Theatre's policy. To this end a prize for the best one-act play in Irish was established in 1938 and in 1939 Frank Dermody was appointed as the new Play Director. Dermody moved to the Abbey from An Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, which had been established in Galway in 1928, and together with An Comhar Dramaíochta, established in 1925 at the Peacock in Dublin, provided another outlet for drama in Irish.

Theatre, at this point, received analysis from a range of publications with Andrew Malone in the *Irish Times*, Gabriel Fallon in the *Dublin Magazine* and Sean Ó Meadhra in *Ireland Today* discussing its weaknesses and absences as well as its triumphs, with an eye to the theatre of the Continent and America. Theatre as a force for social change was still very much on the agenda with Ó Meadhra declaring in 1936 that 'our theatres can do much to foster progressive thought, if only by showing the actual state of affairs and pointing out its origins'. The dominant mode of theatre production in this decade was the domestic comedy with writers such as Mary Manning, Lennox Robinson, George Shiels and T.C. Murray excelling. However, in a more critical vein, writers such as Deevy, Carroll, Johnston, Frank O'Connor, A.P. Fanning, and Shiels in his later plays, strove to hold a mirror up to the new state and expressed a deep and underlying sense of disappointment and disillusion with post-revolutionary Ireland.

As in theatre, the leading film genre in this decade was the domestic comedy, with American and British films dominating the box-office. Cinema was enormously popular throughout the country with thirty-six cinemas in the greater Dublin area, nineteen in Cork, Limerick and Waterford, and one hundred and ninety, comprising over one

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hundred thousand seats, in the Free State altogether.\textsuperscript{51} J.T. Beere, in an analysis of cinema-going in this decade estimated that between 1934 and 1935 there were approximately eleven million admissions to Irish cinemas. As Lord Longford remarked, Ireland was indeed ‘cinema-mad’. However, as Liam O’Leary – film critic for Ireland Today and the Irish Press – frequently lamented, cinema output was relatively homogenous and low in quality with many international and foreign language films never receiving releases in Ireland.\textsuperscript{52} Positive developments included the formation of the Irish Film Society in 1936 which struggled against high import duties on 35mm film but nevertheless filled a space in the market for more challenging films, while also supporting indigenous film.\textsuperscript{53}

O’Leary argued that there needed to be an Irish film industry which did not imitate the style of Hollywood and which was resolutely local in tone. Teresa Deevy was of the same opinion, writing in a letter to the amateur dramatics organiser Mathew O’Mahony, that ‘We – many of us – dislike the Pictures yet I think, since so many will seek their recreation at them, that we writers here in Ireland should rush out and “take possession” as far as we can!’\textsuperscript{54} As I will discuss, in the thirties this taking possession included By Accident (1930), Guests of the Nation (1935), The Dawn (1936), The Islandman (1938), and Blarney (1938). However, this native production should also be placed in the context of the Irish-themed films made by foreign companies that abounded. Films such as Juno and the Paycock (Alfred Hitchcock, 1930), Man of Aran (Robert

\textsuperscript{52} See, in particular, Ireland Today 1936-8.
\textsuperscript{53} The Irish Film Society revived Denis Johnston’s film of Guests of the Nation (1935) in 1938 and in 1939 was made exempt from paying these import duties.
\textsuperscript{54} Teresa Deevy, letter to Mathew O’Mahony, October 9\textsuperscript{th} no year (probably mid-1930s), NLI Ms. 24,900. As this thesis will argue, this was achieved by Denis Johnston, who worked for both stage and screen.
Flaherty, 1934), *Riders to the Sea* and *Ourselves Alone* (Brian Desmond Hurst, 1936), *The Informer* (1935) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1936), both directed by John Ford, represented Ireland from the perspective of British and American film-makers. Though *Riders to the Sea* was singled out by O'Leary as one of the best Irish films to date, many of these representations were viewed with distrust, such as the British made War of Independence film *Ourselves Alone*, which was widely rejected in favour of Tom Cooper's *The Dawn* released a few weeks later.

**Themes**

It should be clear from this discussion that the thirties was a period when the massive social, economic and political changes of the previous thirty years provoked Irish cultural producers to express and explore the dynamism of Irish life. Far from silencing artists, censorship and strict social policies provoked a very strong culture of dissidence led by figures such as Seán O'Faoláin and Frank O'Connor, and these moments of dissent reflect the continued vibrancy of the tradition of anti-establishment thinking, championed by the Irish Literary Revival and the Gaelic League. However, this tradition was now played against a very different background when nationalism was suddenly no longer anti-establishment but in a new position of authority and power. This struggle, between the individual and authority, runs throughout the culture of the thirties and, in the film and drama explored here, results most often in a questioning of that authority.

Three main themes are discernible in the film and drama of this decade. First, the issue of Ireland’s post-revolutionary status is evident in both film and drama, often

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55 There was also a 1929 version of Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer*, directed by Arthur Robison. See *The Informer*, Patrick F. Sheeran (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) for a full discussion of adaptations of O'Flaherty's novel.
represented, as in Johnston’s *The Moon in the Yellow River*, as violent and repressive. Second, the question of gender is apparent in several of the works, as Irish women struggled against economic hardship and political disenfranchisement. Third, and perhaps most prevalent, is the issue of modernity as the nation sought to define itself as a modern state and, in a related development, strove to industrialise the country. This thesis will pursue these three themes as they emerge from and shape the film and drama of the 1930s.

**Persistence: Thirties <> Nineties**

The themes of gender, modernity and post-revolutionary Ireland do not simply resolve themselves at the end of the decade, however, but persist in Irish political and cultural debates. This persistence can still be read by the end of the century, and a comparison of the film and drama of the thirties with a number of films and plays from the nineties reveals a series of echoes between the culture of the two decades. These echoes – and the differences – enable us to judge the distance Ireland as a state has travelled since the thirties and also to identify those issues which remain to the fore of Irish culture.

This thesis identifies three themes in order to establish the commonality of culture in both the thirties and the nineties and, by so doing, to trace the effects that the thirties – a vital decade in the formation of the modern Irish state – have had on the rest of the century. In the thirties a new Constitution of Ireland was enacted and this remains, to a great extent, the same Constitution that the Republic holds to today. Yet, the modern state has not merely accepted this document, as de Valera did not accept the 1922 Dáil Constitution. Indeed, not since the Constitution of the Irish Free State was re-written in
1937, have there been as many changes to it as in the nineties, when there was a total of ten amendments made. These acts of definition and redefinition are key to understanding both decades as significant moments of change

**INVENTING IRELAND: THE 1990s**

[1990s Ireland saw] a continued increase in average levels of educational attainment; ... a decline, and subsequent collapse, in the influence of the Catholic Church; a revival, or perhaps reinvention, of Irish culture, and a much increased confidence in Irishness; the emergence of a culture of revelation and investigation, which is a step on the road to a stronger culture of accountability; the spread of information technology through a large segment of the society; increased inequality in access to these new economic and social resources; and, finally, the discovery (or invention) of the Irish diaspora.


The 1980s had been a harsh decade for Ireland. Unemployment reached crisis levels, emigration soared and morale was at perhaps an all-time low, with a third of the country living below the poverty line.[^7] Terence Brown, writing in 1985 foresaw, however, the nineties as a decade when the ‘worry and insecurity’ of the eighties might cease to be a burden:

... only the ebullient, vital, impatient energy of a youthful, increasingly educated population gives grounds for hope. The new Ireland in which economic wellbeing and political resolution of the northern problem can allow for a creative freedom in which the imagination and the mind can have full fruitful expression will be theirs, if anybody’s for the making.[^8]

Brown’s reference to a ‘youthful’ population is revealing of one of the major changes between the thirties and the nineties: Ireland had one of the youngest populations in

[^6]: O'Donnell 195.
[^7]: This figure applies to 1988, when emigration rates stood at 61,000 per annum and there were 218,000 unemployed with this figure soaring to 60% of the population in new urban developments. Labour Force Survey, 1988.
Europe and this young population, 'increasingly educated', provided the economic engine to drive Ireland into the black.\textsuperscript{59}

Two of the signposts that Ireland was changing were the investiture on 9 November 1990 of Mary Robinson as the first female President of Ireland and, in the same year, Ireland’s hosting of the presidency of the European Community, both of which lent the country a sense of import, vitality and innovation.\textsuperscript{60} Yet the country’s finances were still at crisis point. By 1992 public confidence in Fianna Fáil and, specifically, in Charles Haughey, had fallen due to the failure of the party to deliver economic security and the increasing number of financial scandals implicating senior TDs.\textsuperscript{61} Albert Reynolds took over as party leader and Taoiseach and in the following election Fianna Fáil formed a coalition with Labour, led by Dick Spring, a partnership not seen since 1932. By 1994 this coalition had failed, leading to a Rainbow Coalition, headed by Fine Gael, which held power from 1994 to 1997, when Fianna Fáil once more returned to power.

The nineties was also a decade of social upheaval, following the revelation of clerical abuse scandals linked to the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{62} These scandals have meant two things. First, the eventual cathartic release and acknowledgment of the hurt perpetrated against the victims of this abuse. Secondly, it has led to the widespread crisis in the

\textsuperscript{59} The two largest age groups in the Irish population were the 0-14 year olds and the 25-44 year olds. The smallest age group was 60-64 year olds (www.cso.ie).

\textsuperscript{60} For a discussion of Mary Robinson’s Presidency, see Mary Robinson: The Authorised Biography, Olivia O’Leary and Helen Burke (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998). For a full discussion of the impact of the membership of the European Union (EEC), see O’Donnell.


Church, both internal and external, as it faced public outrage and dwindling numbers in seminaries. This crisis continues today as there has as yet been no satisfactory resolution to the revelations, be it in a court of law or otherwise.

Though Ireland was declared a Republic in 1948, the issue of partition still remained, with increasing levels of violence in Northern Ireland. However, the signing of the Downing Street Declaration in 1993, ushering in a paramilitary ceasefire, seemed to indicate a move towards reconciliation and peace. Cathal Black's *Korea* is a symptom of this mood of change and recognition as it articulates the divisive power of the civil war and its legacy in the present. But in February 1996 the ceasefire broke down with the bombing of Canary Wharf and the peaceful search for a political solution was once more in jeopardy. Despite the Good Friday Agreement signed in the spring of 1998 and elections for the first Northern Ireland Assembly in June, the Omagh bombing in August reminded the country that violence had not been defeated and this shock seemed to push both sides into searching for a peaceful solution once more.

From 1994 Ireland’s economy took on what is now referred to as the Celtic Tiger phase, when Ireland’s ability to attract and foster international industry led to an unprecedented period of economic and employment growth. Indeed, between 1995 and 1999 Ireland had the fastest growing economy in the OECD. Many commentators, such as economist Rory O'Donnell, have read this as a period of ‘reinventing Ireland’

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when economic growth led to a cultural boom and a perceived shift in outlook.\textsuperscript{67} While in the thirties, de Valera had pushed for the greater separation of the Irish and British economies, in the nineties this was achieved, with far greater independence from the British economy than previously, largely due to the twin forces of European Union funding and management, and the international market.\textsuperscript{68} This new orientation towards an international market has led not only to economic expansion but cultural change also. As Fintan O’Toole argues, ‘the disappearance of a fixed Irish identity and the emergence of a set of provisional, contingent identities has manifested itself in Irish life in the 1990s.’\textsuperscript{69} The lack of a unified identity is a strong contrast with the previous unifying sense of Ireland as a predominantly rural, isolated and traditional nation.

In the 1930s emigration was a significant problem, but by 1996 the number of immigrants, many of them of Irish origin, exceeded the number of emigrants.\textsuperscript{70} These shifts stand in marked contrast to the response to change and insecurity of identity in the first years of the state when the disappearance of a secure sense of knowledge, as Ireland was transformed by its recent history and colonial past, led to the allegiance to de Valera’s vision of Ireland. No longer, however, did this vision hold sway and Irishness seemed confident and attractive, on both the local and the global stage, as epitomised by the phenomenon of Riverdance, which began at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest and became one of the biggest theatrical and dance events of the decade.\textsuperscript{71} Other cultural sensations of the decade include Brian Friel’s play \textit{Dancing at Lughnasa}, which enjoyed

\textsuperscript{68} Crotty and Schmitt 217.
\textsuperscript{70} Indeed, as one sociologist noted, the number of tourists to Ireland in 1998 exceeded the number of Irish residents. Eamonn Slater, ‘The lure of colour’, \textit{Encounters with Modern Ireland}, eds. Michel Peillon and Eamonn Slater (Dublin: IPA, 1998) 27.
\textsuperscript{71} Barbara O’Connor, ‘Riverdance’, \textit{Encounters with Modern Ireland} 51-62.
huge commercial success on Broadway. Film was also an expanding area as the Irish
government instituted Section 481, a tax-break system designed to encourage indigenous
and foreign film production in Ireland. In 1935 John Ford’s *The Informer* won four
awards at the Oscars and this level of success was repeated in the nineties as Irish
filmmakers won prizes at the Venice and Berlin festivals and three Oscars at the
Academy Awards, a sign of both commercial and critical success.

The economic boom of the nineties has also been credited with encouraging the
increasing liberalism and outward looking aspect of the country. In 1991, following the
outrage over the conviction of the Irish Family Association for selling condoms in the
Virgin Megastore in Dublin, contraception became increasingly available. Two years
later homosexuality was decriminalised, while at the end of the nineties, educational
initiatives such as the Exploring Masculinities programme, though controversial,
addressed issues of male identities with secondary school boys in single-sex schools.
While abortion remains illegal, the divorce referendum passed in 1996, albeit by a slim
majority. These changes all point to the increasing liberalisation of the country in the
nineties.

Yet, as has become increasingly evident, the economic boom primarily led to an
increase of wealth for the already wealthy elite, and those individuals coming from a

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72 Section 481 (Formerly Section 35) tax incentives have been central in the growth of film production in
Ireland in the '90s. There has always been a great deal of confusion about Section 481 and how it operates.
The Act allows motion picture projects under 5,078,952 euro to raise 60% of their Irish spend and motion
picture projects budgeted over 5,078,952 euro to raise 50% of the Irish spend. <http://www.iftn.ie/handbook/index2.htm?Fuseaction=article&file=40>

73 *My Left Foot* directed by Jim Sheridan (1989) won two Oscars (Best Actor, Best Supporting Actress) in
Neil Jordan triumphed again in 1996, winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival for *Michael
Collins* (1996). These names and titles are merely the most well-known, as Irish film has continued to
attract critical praise internationally.

74 The Yes vote was 50.28% with the No vote at 49.72%. <www.adnet.ie/divorce.html>
socially deprived background have not found that their prospects have been made much brighter. According to the Combat Poverty Agency: ‘Ireland had one of the more unequal income distributions in the EU in the mid-1990s.’ Though university fees were abolished in 1995, levels of government grants remained low, thereby not resulting in the desired increase of working class third-level students. Though the quality of life had steadily improved in Ireland since the 1950s, mortality and infant mortality rates for the most marginalised groups of society were still high. The case of Irish Travellers brings this inequality into focus, with Traveller men living on average ten years less than settled men and Traveller women an average of twelve years less. Furthermore, the infant mortality rate for Traveller children is three times higher than that of the settled population. The quality of life for Irish Travellers is only now what it was for the settled population in the 1940s and this reality provides a stark social background to Carr’s play By the Bog of Cats....

Culture and Change

Perhaps it is the sense that there are aspects of Irish society that, despite the Celtic Tiger, have not changed, as well as those that are finally in the slow process of changing, that manifests itself in the backward look of much of the culture of the nineties. Though the nineties was often avid in its desire to distance itself from its poor and rural past,

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75 See Bust To Boom? The Irish Experience of Growth and Inequality, eds. Brian Nolan, Phillip J. O’Connell and Christopher T. Whelan (Dublin: IPA, 2001) and Brian Nolan, Bertrand Maître, Donald O’Neill and Olive Sweetman, eds., The Distribution of Income in Ireland (Dublin: Oak Tree Press & Combat Poverty Agency, 2000) for two examples of studies of economic inequality in modern Ireland.

76 Nolan, Maître, O’Neill and Sweetman 90.


nostalgia allowed a cultural continuity between past and present, thereby somewhat offsetting the sense of rapid and chaotic change in the nineties.\textsuperscript{79} This cultural continuity brings with it a stabilising influence and allows a generation to adapt to these changes. As Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase argue, nostalgia is ‘comfortable and conveniently reassuring …thereby suppressing …negative aspects’ of contemporary society.\textsuperscript{80} As Clare Wallace argues, there are ‘familiar elements’ to Irish theatre: ‘the sovereignty of language, storytelling, frequent recourse to myth and folklore’.\textsuperscript{81} This diagnosis is not limited to Irish theatre alone but is also prevalent in Irish film of the decade, and perhaps most obviously, in Riverdance. These familiar elements bolster our nostalgia and our sense of ‘authenticity’, itself the result of ‘postmodern insecurity’, at least partially brought on by the sense of change associated with the Celtic Tiger.\textsuperscript{82} Yet, the nostalgic tone of much of nineties’ culture and its concomitant attitude both to the past and to change turns this culture into what Declan Hughes calls ‘a time capsule’.\textsuperscript{83}

In the 1990s Ireland became ‘postmodern’, a process of modernisation begun in 1923 and consolidated in the thirties.\textsuperscript{84} The disillusionment of the thirties – evident in the work of writers and directors such as Johnston, Carroll, Deevy and Davidson – emerges in the nineties as nostalgia. Both nostalgia and disillusionment can be read as a reaction

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\textsuperscript{79} See Kirby et al.’s commentary on the attitude that the Celtic Tiger marked ‘a break with the past and the coming of age of an enlightened, tolerant and liberal Ireland.’ Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin 2.
\textsuperscript{80} Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, eds., The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 1.
\textsuperscript{82} Wallace 50.
to the context of change – be it postmodern or modern – of the decade of each, as Shaw and Chase contend, both are symptoms of ‘contemporary malaise’. Yet, whereas the malaise of the thirties was often radical in tone, that of the nineties was much more conservative. Nevertheless, the film and drama of both decades are often at odds with their context. As Dr. Trench, a character in W.B. Yeats’s 1930 play The Words Upon the Window Pane, remarks about purgatorial souls, ‘It is in vain that we write requiescat in pace upon the tomb’. Similarly, we might say that it is equally in vain to inscribe rest in peace upon Irish film and drama and it is to the voices of unrest that this thesis now turns.

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85 Shaw and Chase 1.
86 Yeats, Collected Plays, 604.
CHAPTER TWO
‘THE BIRTH OF A NATION IS NO IMMACULATE CONCEPTION’

INTRODUCTION

The six plays and films looked at in this chapter each explore different issues and implications for Irish society and culture in the 1930s. In this chapter we see the debate between the conventional vision of Ireland as Catholic, Gaelic and rural and the new Ireland with an increasingly modern, urban and outwardly looking character. These six works, whether conventional or subversive in outlook, push the boundaries of Irish culture in order to test out what it meant to be Irish in the new Free State.

Though the dominant genre in the Abbey Theatre was the domestic comedy, three writers came to prominence in this decade for their resistance to the easy resolution of comic drama. Denis Johnston is the first of these playwrights and, though the Abbey rejected his first play, initially entitled *Shadowdance*, he re-titled it *The Old Lady Says ‘No!’* and it was staged to great success and critical acclaim by the Gate Theatre in 1929. Two years later Johnston’s second submission to the Abbey met with approval. Yet *The Moon in the Yellow River* (1931), though more in line with the Abbey’s realistic, domestic style, combines this with violence and cynicism and this led to public controversy over its first performance run. The play, which dramatises the conflict between the IRA who attempt to blow up the local power station, and the new forces of the Free State that try to prevent them, thus veers away from any cosy sense of either
domestic or political harmony. Johnston was to develop this critique of the State most fully when he came to adapt Frank O'Connor's short story 'Guests of the Nation' to film, yet we can see his central themes of disillusion, abandonment and ambivalence about nationalism start to emerge in *The Moon*. Thus, as Philip Edwards writes in *Threshold of a Nation*, due to its blend of tragedy and comedy, *The Moon in the Yellow River (The Moon)* is 'perhaps the most interesting of all attempts to create a theatrical mode which will declare the national situation'.

Johnston's attempt to 'declare the national situation' was also picked up by two other new playwrights: Paul Vincent Carroll and Teresa Deevy. Carroll and Deevy were joint winners of the Abbey's inaugural best new play prize in 1932, for *Things that are Caesar's* and *Temporal Powers* respectively. Carroll had had his first play accepted by the Peacock in 1930 while Deevy had already had two one-act plays produced by the Abbey.

Carroll's most successful play, *Shadow and Substance* (1937), won accolades in Ireland and abroad – winning the New York Drama Critics' Award for best foreign play of 1938 and, until Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, it had the longest run of any Irish play on Broadway. As Christopher Murray argues, *Shadow and Substance* portrays the Catholic Church's need to control 'what was thought as well as what was done in a community'. Carroll had emigrated to Scotland following a short time spent teaching in his native Louth. His time in Louth was a period of stark disillusionment. He:

> found the family grocers, the public and the clergy richer than ever as a result of the war. There was no learning or culture of any kind in the town. No one had ever heard of the Abbey

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2 Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* 132.
Theatre or of the Irish dramatic or literary revival. They fed the school kiddies on the bathos of the mid-Victorian mamas, and hid from them the works of the poets and writers who were putting Ireland on the international map.³

Carroll’s strong reaction against small town small-mindedness and his disgust at the manner in which the education system reproduced this is apparent in the depiction of the community and the parish priests in both *Shadow and Substance* and his next play *The White Steed* (1939). The drama of *Shadow and Substance* revolves around a controversial book called *I Am Sir Oracle*, which is critical of the Church and the national school system, written by the local schoolmaster Dermot O’Flingsley under the pseudonym Eugene Gibney. Canon Skerrit, though an idealistic man at heart, is shown to be callous and manipulative in his treatment of his parish, in particular, in relation to O’Flingsley. The powerful subplot to the play is the story of the Canon’s servant Brigid who has visions of St. Brigid and who dies at the end of the play in an attempt to save O’Flingsley from the community mob intent on destroying the book.

The role of the community as oppressor is central in Teresa Deevy’s work also, as Deevy focuses on the choices for women in Irish rural society and the social hegemony pressuring women into marriage. Deevy was from Waterford and though she managed to write for both stage and radio, she was almost completely deaf, having contracted Menieres disease in her early twenties and her deafness is perhaps one reason for the emphasis on vision in her work. Deevy, though initially a supporter of the Volunteers during the War of Independence, became disillusioned with nationalist politics after the war had ended. This distrust of male-dominated politics can be discerned in all of her theatrical work, in particular in *Katie Roche* (1936) and *The King of Spain’s Daughter*

³ Paul Doyle, *Paul Vincent Carroll* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1971) 17. This is from an interview between Doyle and Carroll.
(1935). The later play, the three-act *Katie Roche* was extremely successful and was performed on both the Abbey’s Irish tours and at its festival of Irish drama in 1938. Deevy was also noted as a writer of one-act plays, however, and as a reflection of the concerns of the period and an example of what the form of the one-act play can achieve, Deevy’s play *The King of Spain’s Daughter* (1935) deserves to be revisited. The play was first produced in the Abbey in April 1935, was revived twice in the next few years and went on the Abbey’s 1939 national tour. The play also achieved success in Britain, being broadcast on 25 February 1939 as play of the week on the BBC, directed by Denis Johnston who had moved to work with the new television service the previous year.4 *The King* presents the story of a young girl, Annie Kinsella, forced by her father Peter to choose her future between labouring in a factory or marrying Jim Harris, a man she doesn’t love. The set is unusual – the action is played out on a country road, echoing Jack B. Yeats’s 1933 play *The Old Sea Road* and prefiguring the set of his brother’s *Purgatory*.5 The road is dominated by barricades and a sign reading ‘Road Closed,’ and this accurately represents the play’s portrayal of the claustrophobia of rural Ireland.

Deevy’s work articulates the lack of fulfilment and emotional, as well as economic, poverty for the Irish rural peasant. Indeed, all three playwrights are concerned with exposing the changes – or lack of change – for rural Ireland following the achievement of an independent state. While Deevy focuses on the role of the community in preventing change and innovation, Johnston and Carroll each highlight the role of

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4 *The King* was also produced on BBC radio by Denis Johnston in February 1936, and revived in September 1946 and August 1949. RTÉ produced the play in February 1979 and broadcast it again in July of the following year. In 1936 Johnston also produced Deevy’s *A Disciple* (1931) for BBC Radio, under the title *In Search of Valour*.

5 Though *The Old Sea Road* was not performed until 1939, in the Abbey’s ‘Experimental Theatre’ program.
Church and state authority in repressing subversive individuals. Rural Ireland is by no means a peaceful or harmonious place for these three plays, yet two of the films looked at in this chapter envisage rural Ireland as a welcome escape from urban chaos. Both released in 1938, *Blarney*, directed by Harry O’Donovan, and *The Islandman*, directed by Patrick Keenan Heale, view rural Ireland with nostalgia as a space which is capable of healing modern Ireland’s various ills. *Blarney* is a collaboration between Jimmy O’Dea and Harry O’Donovan, both well-known stage comedians, and is a spoof about the Border. Initially titled *Border Blarney*, the film strives to undermine the seriousness of the role the Border plays in the lives of those who live on either side of the divide. Set near Dundalk, the film tells the story of a hapless out-of-work mechanic, Billy Brannigan, who becomes unwittingly involved in a jewellery heist but works with his new found friends to solve the mystery. The film is also a romance as two of Billy’s friends, Maura and Mac, struggle to pursue their cross-border relationship.

While *Blarney* stresses the unity of Ireland and side-steps the divisive aspects of the Border, *The Islandman* strives to establish a distinct divide between the country and the city. Though *Blarney* is also concerned with this distinction, it forms the central focus of *The Islandman*. While Deevy’s characters strain to escape the claustrophobia of rural Ireland, *The Islandman* idealises the quest to go westward and aims to, in W.B.

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6 Billy (Jimmy O’Dea) becomes involved with the heist when he helps to fix the thieves’ car. Once the car is fixed the thieves speed off, anxious not to be caught by the RUC and, in the disorder, Billy accidentally takes the bag with the jewels in it. Realising that he has helped the criminals (but not that he has the jewels in his possession) Billy becomes a witness in the case and stays at the local Border Inn, run by Mr. O’Connor (J.H. Edwin) and his daughter Maura (Hazels Hughes). Billy befriends Annie Burke (Myrette Morven), a barmaid at the inn, Maura and her friend from the RUC, Sergeant MacAleen (Rodney Malcolmson), known to his friends as ‘Mac’. The four work together and eventually catch the thieves; for which Mac gains a promotion, while Billy picks up the £500 reward. Billy and Mac join forces, partly in dislike of and opposition to the Southern Civic Guard, Sergeant Nolan (Noel Purcell), who is Mac’s rival for the affections of Maura O’Connor. Maura is in love with Mac but Nolan wheedles his way into her father’s affections with the promise that he will inherit land. In contrast, Mac has ‘no prospects’. The end of the film sees Maura and Mac united despite Nolan’s best efforts to divide them.
Yeats’s words, ‘express a life that has never found expression.’ In May 1937 Patrick Keenan Heale and Donal O’Cahill went to the Blasket Islands to make The Islandman, from an original story by O’Cahill. This was not O’Cahill’s first film; in 1936 he had been involved in another film-making project, The Dawn, directed by Tom Cooper, which is discussed in the next chapter. The Dawn dramatises a brief chapter in the War of Independence and champions the volunteers who fought for Ireland’s freedom. The Islandman, though different in its focus, is likewise a homage to the Irish nation. The Blasket Islands represent the ideal of Catholic, Gaelic, traditional Ireland and signify ‘a common bedrock of Irish culture, before the sectarian splits of more recent centuries.’

This is illustrated by the popularity of the literature that emerged from the islands in the 1920s and thirties, such as, Tomás O’Crohan’s The Islandman (An tOileánach) (1929), Maurice O’Sullivan’s Twenty Years-a-Growing (Fiche Bliain ag Fás) (1933), and Peig Sayers’ Peig (1936).

The Islandman follows in the footsteps of that most well known of island films, Robert Flaherty’s Man of Aran, a British production, released in 1934. Indeed, one review went so far as to say that The Islandman took Flaherty’s film as a model for some of its seascapes. Both films lay great emphasis on the simplicity of the islanders’ premodern, traditional way of life and both seek to place this island life at a remove from the rest of the world. Though The Islandman initially appears to be presenting a subtly different message to modern Ireland, ultimately it maintains the image of island life and islanders as a ‘race apart’. The story of the film is fairly simple. Neal O’Moore is a

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7 W.B. Yeats first told the story of his advice to Synge, to go westward, in his preface to the 1905 edition of Synge’s The Well of the Saints.
9 Saturday Herald 1 April 1939: 9.
young medical student from Trinity College, Dublin who, upon reading O’Crohan’s *The Islandman* decides to go to the Blasket Islands himself. Once there he meets and falls in love with Eileen who returns his affection. However, Eileen is already engaged to Liam, but at the end of the film Liam dies in a fishing accident, freeing her to marry Neal.10

The sea is a clear and present danger for the Blasket islanders and, though they may battle against it and the stormy weather to establish their lives on the Great Blasket, they constantly risk being overwhelmed by the power of the sea and the elements. Similarly, the sea is a threatening force in *By Accident*, directed by Norris Davidson, in which a young man is drowned by the incoming tide. By using double photography, flashback and non-linear narrative Davidson tells the story of a ‘soul-tortured youth’ with an extraordinary fear of heights. Despite his fear he climbs Nelson’s Pillar but, at the top of the pillar, he experiences vertigo and terror at his elevation over the city and the vision of it stretching below him. Later on the young man again suffers from vertigo and falls from a tall cliff. He lies paralysed at the base of the cliff awaiting his death from the incoming tide.11 *By Accident* premièred on August 25 1930 in Dublin’s Peacock Theatre.

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10 Neal (Cecil F. Ford) reads *The Islandman* in the Phoenix Park, and it inspires him to go to the Blasket Islands. Neal tells his drinking friends that he may even ‘go native’ and that is exactly what he does. After a long hike, Neal arrives at Dunquin, on the Kerry coast. Meeting Father O’Sullivan (Gabriel Fallon), the priest from An Blascóid Mór or, the Great Blasket, he is persuaded to cross the choppy seas in an island currach. Once on the island Neal tends to a local fisherman’s hand and, in gratitude, the islanders hold a céili in his honour, at which Neal meets and falls in love with Eileen Guheen (Eileen Curran). Eileen happens to be the island’s best singer and, in a cruel twist of fate, is already promised in marriage to Liam O’Kane (Brian O’Sullivan), the very fisherman that Neal had earlier helped. However, Eileen will not abandon Liam and, when he is called back to Trinity College, Neal leaves the island and returns to his louche lifestyle in Dublin. Several months pass and one day Neal hears, through his drunken stupor, Eileen singing on the radio. This has the power to summon him back to the island. Eileen is delighted to see Neal and, despite his protests, tells Liam of her love for Neal. Soon after, Liam is hurt in a fishing accident and though Neal manages to get him to shore, he dies almost immediately. Before he dies, however, he takes Neal and Eileen’s hands and brings them together and the film ends with Neil and Eileen gazing out over the stormy seas.

11 In *By Accident* when the young man (C. Blake Clifford) stands at the top of the Pillar, the film cuts briefly to a shot of him standing on a cliff-top, then back to the pillar. When it seems that he is about to fall from the pillar, the film cuts back to the cliff scene to show him falling from the edge of the cliff. It is not made clear by the film what has transpired; whether, in standing on the cliff-top, he remembers his terror.
Theatre and on the second night Lennox Robinson made a speech from the stage, declaring that it represented the first attempt by Irish filmmakers to develop an ‘Irish art of the cinema.’ As the reviews were quick to point out, By Accident suffered from technical difficulties to do with lighting and editing, yet simultaneously it manages to express the changing nature of Irish social life in a decidedly imaginative way with references to both James Joyce’s Ulysses and the European surrealist art movement. Furthermore, the experimental treatment of a young man in Dublin was perhaps influenced by Johnston’s play, The Old Lady Says ’No!’, staged at the Gate just one year earlier.

The Irish Independent asserted that ‘in experienced hands’ By Accident could ‘prove a masterpiece’ and judges Davidson’s major flaw to be that he does not recognise the ‘present limitations of Irish amateur films’. While the film does suffer from technical problems, perhaps indicating that Davidson was being over-ambitious, the film’s lack of clarity is also attributable to Davidson’s attempt to create a new vision of Ireland through an expressionistic and surrealist film style. Davidson’s use of editing, where he juxtaposes images of the city and the countryside, creates an impression of modern Irish life, and the young man’s reaction to it, without using any dialogue or conventional plot lines. This editing technique surfaces again in Johnston’s Guests of the

on the pillar and thus falls, or vice-versa. This confusion is compounded when later in the film we see a billboard printed with the words ‘Death on the Pillar’. It does seem more likely, based on the film’s emphasis on his fall over the cliff, that he falls from the cliff and that this is linked in his memory to his previous vertigo on the Pillar. For the rest of the film the young man remains lying at the bottom of the cliff, remembering his life in a series of flashbacks. He dwells on his mortality and is panic stricken at the idea that his death will be interpreted as suicide. He dies, at the end of the film, of the combination of his head wounds and his inability to move and thus save himself from the incoming tide.

12 Davidson went on to make several conservative films in the thirties, one, Dancers of Aran (1934) a short ethnic film which is consistent with the style of Robert Flaherty’s Man of Aran (1934). Indeed, Davidson had been the one to bring Flaherty to Aran in the first place. Davidson also made several tourist board films in this decade and continued as a film-maker for television for the rest of his career.


14 Irish Independent 26 August 1930: 10.

46
Nation, illustrating that films made in Ireland during this period certainly engaged with sophisticated modes of filmmaking.

By Accident demonstrates the ability of the developing Irish film industry to simultaneously look to the outside world for technological and stylistic influences, while also tackling subjects crucial to 1930s Ireland. Indeed, this is an impulse common to all six plays and films discussed in this chapter as they attempt to tackle the themes which were most relevant to this period: Post-Revolutionary Ireland, Gender and Modernity. It is important to recognise, however, that no simple consensus emerges from these works, but rather that their value in reflecting on these themes is partly because of their varied responses. For example, though works such as The Moon and Blarney are clearly set against the background of the wars of the previous decade, other works such as The King or Shadow and Substance make no reference to this recent violent history. Further, in the context of responses to modernity, two main areas become clear, first the role of the Church in relation to modern Ireland and secondly, the increasing polarisation of the divide between rural and urban Ireland. In terms of division, however, the most obvious are, on the one hand, that between Free-Stater and Republican and, on the other, that between the Free State itself and the six counties of Northern Ireland. Despite these divisive realities, the young Free State was attempting to live its life and this sense of the practicalities of life emerge, in differing ways, from The Moon and Blarney.
POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRELAND

The Moon is set in a remote fort on a river mouth, once a British barracks, now converted into a house. Adjoining the house is an armoury run by George and Captain Potts, while near to the fort is a powerhouse, run by German engineer, Tausch. The play’s set signals the changes in the landscape of the new Free State as Dobelle’s home was once the officers’ quarters of the fort and people and belongings from the house move between the armoury and the house, illustrating the ongoing process of decolonisation. While the military aspects of Dobelle’s home are slowly changing, however, militarism itself has not been banished; the Irish barracks have merely been built on a site further off.

In addition to these shifts in spatial relations, post-civil war Ireland demanded the renegotiation of personal relationships. The IRA leader and instigator of the attempt to blow up the powerhouse is Darrell Blake, a romantic figure who stands in opposition to the Free State government’s plans to industrialise the country. The binary opposition between the IRA and the Free State is complicated, however, when the Free State troops arrive to arrest Blake and his column. The officer in charge is Commandant Lanigan, who was once himself a member of the IRA. Moreover, he and Blake served as Volunteers together. As Francis McManus puts it, ‘Something of the tension of the civil war’ emerges in this stand-off between the former friends.\(^{15}\) The relationship between Blake and Lanigan throws into focus the political and personal confusion of those who

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\(^{15}\) Francis McManus, ‘The Literature of the Period’, *The Years of the Great Test* 117.
were once allies and are now made enemies by the changing nature of the idea of the nation.\footnote{This can be seen in Johnston’s other work, such as \textit{Guests of the Nation}, discussed in the next chapter, in which the IRA are not seen as a homogenous group and Johnston explores the tensions between different perspectives on war.}

In contrast to Blake, Lanigan is impersonal and cold. For, while Blake’s position may be illogical, he is a very attractive and dynamic character, and these qualities increase the shock of his death at Lanigan’s hands. Lanigan represents the pragmatism of the Free State in branding Blake’s outlook redundant, and his sudden shooting of Blake is in accordance with what Lionel Pilkington argues was the ‘policy of summary executions’ practised by the Cumann na nGaedheal government.\footnote{Lionel Pilkington, \textit{Theatre and the State} 110.} It is hard to agree, however, with Pilkington’s assertion that \textit{The Moon} represents ‘Johnston’s advocacy of capital punishment for anti-State activity’.\footnote{Pilkington 109.}

Lanigan’s explanation to Tausch for Blake’s death is cynical in tone: ‘I was a rebel once. What I’ve done was war then. Now I’m on the other side and it’s murder. I admit it.’\footnote{Denis Johnston, \textit{The Moon in the Yellow River and The Old Lady Says ‘No!’: Two Plays by Denis Johnston} (London: Jonathon Cape, 1932) 138.} Lanigan underscores the problems inherent in a country still divided by the issues behind the civil war. Now that he’s ‘on the other side’ Lanigan is still killing the enemy, but in 1930s Ireland the enemy is within. Referring to guarding the powerhouse, Lanigan tells Tausch that he and his men ‘are here to stay whether you like it or not.’\footnote{Johnston, \textit{The Moon} 136.} This statement refers as much to the powerhouse as to the existence of the Free State, as he points out, ‘These works are a National affair.’\footnote{Johnston, \textit{The Moon} 134.} The struggle over the powerhouse

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illustrates the extent to which the post-revolutionary nation remained a contested territory.

Johnston was one of only two playwrights dealing with this subject in the 1930s. In 1932 the Abbey produced A.P. Fanning’s play, *Vigil*, which portrayed the hours before the execution of several IRA men by their former comrades, now Free State officers.\(^{22}\) The irony of the situation is most felt when it becomes obvious that one of the prisoners was once the leader of a flying column in which several of the Free State officers had served. The striking difference between Fanning and Johnston’s plays, however, is that in *Vigil* the men are led off-stage to be executed, while in *The Moon* Blake is shot in full view of the audience, and with no warning, in a dramatic refusal to cover up the violence that continued into the Free State.

**Reconciliation?**

Blake, then, represents the romantic vision of the past, beyond which he cannot progress. In contrast to him stands Lanigan, the epitome of a heartless and pragmatic present-day Ireland. For either side to move on effectively, Lanigan and Blake need to be reconciled, however, this is impossible following Blake’s death. Paralleling this past/present dichotomy is the story of Dobelle, who cannot move on from the death of his wife. Dobelle’s previous career as a railway engineer seems to identify him as an advocate of modernity and indeed this is why Tausch admires him. Yet Dobelle tries to opt out of politics and life in general and is not only no longer an idealist, but declares that he has no passions whatsoever. Living in a remote fort, however, does not protect Dobelle, as he finds himself surrounded by politics and life despite his efforts to the contrary,

illustrating the futility of retreating from society. Throughout the play Dobelle scarcely acknowledges the presence of his daughter Blanaid, fobbing off her attempts to tell him that she loves him and refusing either to educate her himself or to send her to school. Dobelle blames Blanaid for her mother's death during childbirth, seeing in her only proof of what he has lost, rather than what he has gained and in this he bears comparison with the Old Man in W.B. Yeats's *Purgatory*.

Dobelle's anger is not directed at Blanaid alone, but also at the Catholic convent where she was born, whose nuns chose to save the baby's life instead of the mother's. Like Blake's dogmatic refusal to see any good in industrial progress, Dobelle wilfully neglects his daughter, preferring to remain isolated and buried in the past:

> It is right that a woman should die so that a child's immortal soul should be saved from Limbo, therefore I say that I am against right. It is right that men should murder each other for the safety of progress. I admit it. That is why I am against right and believe in wrong.\(^{23}\)

Once again, as with the conflict between Blake and Lanigan, right and wrong for Dobelle are in disarray. Yet by the end of the play Dobelle has reconciled himself to Mary's loss by accepting Blanaid and, by extension, accepting what is 'right'.

Near the end of the play, Dobelle mistakes Blanaid standing in her nightgown at the head of the stairs for his wife Mary. When he realises his mistake he says, 'It's Blanaid! I didn't recognize you. You're so changed, child. You seem to have grown up suddenly.\(^{24}\) In this moment Dobelle finally recognises his daughter and, in so doing, brings the past into the present. It is only by opening his eyes to the present that Dobelle can reunite himself with his memory of his wife and move on. Dobelle thus achieves

\(^{23}\) Johnston, *The Moon* 130.
\(^{24}\) Johnston, *The Moon* 151.
what Blake cannot and Johnston seemingly implies that reconciliation is possible on a personal, if not political, level and thus puts forward a possible solution for the wider social breakdown. As Christopher Murray puts it, 'is there not hope that Ireland’s political differences might also be solved by acceptance of the other rather than by confrontation of ideologies?'

Yet Dobelle and Blanaid’s reconciliation is not that simple. Though Dobelle has finally recognised Blanaid, his belated gestures of paternal love do not fully heal either his previous mistreatment of her nor the loss of Blake, who acted as a surrogate parent to Blanaid, and he interprets their reunion as the result of a change in Blanaid and not in himself. Furthermore, Blanaid asks her father to ‘take my education in hand from now on’ which he agrees to do.\footnote{\textit{Murray, Twentieth-Century Drama} 127.} Yet as soon as she is asleep he says ‘Well, I think that puts an end to my part in your education.’\footnote{\textit{Johnston, The Moon} 152.} This is in response to a question from Blanaid as to why people aren’t happy. Unable to answer his daughter, to make sense of the world for her naïve position, Dobelle gives up. His final words, the final words of the play, are: ‘Darkness ... death and darkness. No, there’s no curing that I’m afraid.’\footnote{\textit{Johnston, The Moon} 153.} The light of hope offered by Johnston in the reconciliation between father and daughter seems questionable in the face of ‘death and darkness’.

\textit{Blarney} also sees reconciliation in terms of the personal overcoming the political. The first sign for the Border appears when a couple, who have been kissing over a wall, pull apart to reveal a placard which reads ‘This Wall Marks the BORDER between

Northern and Southern Ireland’. The couple is Maura and Mac and, by literalising the idea of a love divided, O’Donovan acknowledges the divisive power of the Border, while simultaneously mocking and undermining it. The failure of the Border to divide people is echoed again in a scene between Mac, Maura and her father. Mr. O’Connor tells Mac that though the Border may not keep him from Maura, he must respect the borders of O’Connor’s house. However, Mac flouts both political and patriarchal authority when he retorts that love defies all bolts and borders.

In one of the film’s earliest scenes, the RUC park on the southern side of the Border-line. Sergeant Nolan, the local Garda, tries to get rid of them by telling them that they’re trespassing and asks them whether they have a Southern license for their car. Unlike the first shot of the Border sign, which emphasises its inability to separate people, this scene trivialises the Border as a meaningful partition, implying that it results in the acting out of petty rivalries between the two jurisdictions of North and South. Nolan’s insistence on the Border as a legal divide is also played out at the end of the film when Billy throws the recovered jewels to Mac, who stands on the northern side of the Border, thus thwarting Nolan’s attempt to capture the jewels and win the reward.

Though Mac and Billy use the Border-line in the end to thwart Nolan, in general, the North is not seen as a hindrance to the characters. It transpires that O’Connor doesn’t object to Mac on nationalist grounds but because Mac has ‘no prospects’, while Nolan is preferred as a suitor because he is set to inherit his aunt’s farm. O’Connor tells Mac that he has ‘nothing personal’ against him, just that he has ‘plans for me daughter in me own part of the country.’ It is the traditional importance of land in Irish culture that is the

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29 Eunan O’Halpin argues, however, that ‘Reciprocal local permission for the RUC and Garda to cross the border as a matter of convenience’ was in place. Eunan O’Halpin, Defending Ireland: The Irish State and its Enemies since 1922 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 77.
crucial factor in O’Connor’s plans for his daughter. As Maura tells Mac, O’Connor is ‘bitter about poverty’ which he holds responsible for his wife’s death. This is a reminder of the harsh economic realities that governed Irish lives, North and South, in this period and which kept Irish marriage rates drastically low.

*Blarney’s* romance and humour reconfigure the idea of a divided Ireland and illustrate that the Border can be overcome by love and friendship. Indeed, the characters of *Blarney* redefine the idea of borders. O’Connor’s remark that he has plans for Maura in his ‘own part of the country’ implies that the North is viewed, by the majority of the characters, less as a separate nation than as a distinct region within the larger country. In response to Nolan asking him, ‘have ye no respect for your own country?’, Billy says, ‘I have, but the grass is as green in Antrim as in Kerry and the same blue sky is above us all, North and South.’ Billy appeals to the lack of a natural division between the North and the South in an attempt to point out the artificiality of the man-made Border line. Nolan’s reply, that he’ll ‘change the colour of your sky Mr. Billy Sexton Blake Brannigan’ is inherently ridiculous. The impossibility of changing the natural world to reflect the sectarian partition between North and South illustrates the film’s message: North and South constitute a natural whole that, like Maura and Mac, will not and should not be kept apart.

When Nolan concedes defeat to Mac, it appears that he accepts this vision of the Border as a regional divide. He takes Mac’s hand, saying, ‘You’ve won. It takes a good man to know when he’s beat. There’s my hand, man of the North.’ Mac reciprocates, saying ‘And mine, man of the South.’ The two men shake hands over the boundary line and, against a shot of the line itself, O’Connor pronounces, ‘I’m thinking that this Border
will vanish one of these days before such a power as this: the friendly shake of Irish hands.’ The film ends with Billy throwing aside the road barrier in order to kiss Annie, a visual echo of the first shot of Mac and Maura kissing over the Border wall. This final scene emphasises the comic nature of the film – ending with a prospective double marriage – and cements the Border as merely a regional divide, one that will inevitably be removed ‘one of these days’.

The film maintains its comic stance in part because of the absence of religious conflict. As recently as 1935 there had been serious religio-political riots in Belfast. Yet, within the film no mention is made of religion. It is, of course, much easier to cooperate when you’re already on the same (religious) side. By ignoring the sectarian aspect of the Border, the film sidesteps one of the most divisive issues concerning Northern Ireland.

_The Moon_ also uses humour to subvert and undermine the seriousness of the issues being represented in the play. The play saves itself from being merely a dry debate through its comedy, evident throughout the play, but nowhere more so than at the end of the second act. Blake’s death scene has a bizarre quality to it in that Lanigan’s actions are sudden and shocking, intruding into a scene that is somewhat farcical. Lanigan shoots Blake just as he finishes playing the piano and immediately after Tausch’s comment that Ireland is ‘no country! It is a damned debating society! Everybody will talk – talk – talk – … But nothing ever happens.’30 The juxtaposition of humour – Blake’s insouciant piano recital and Tausch’s growing frustration – with decisive action is at the heart of Johnston’s creation of ‘a theatrical mode’ to ‘declare the national situation’. _The Moon_ is full of these contradictions because, as Johnston implies, so too is modern Ireland.

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30 Johnston, _The Moon_ 122.
Unlike *Blarney* Johnston combines humour with violence. As Johnston says to Tausch, ‘Why not call it War? That’s a well-known palliative?’ illustrating the sharply satiric tone of the play.\(^{31}\) Dobelle’s dryly comic claim that the ‘birth of a nation is no immaculate conception,’ in fact, draws attention to the bloodiness of Ireland’s emergence as a Free State and raises the spectre of the civil war.\(^{32}\) This statement, combined with the comic attitude to bombing the powerhouse, held by George and Potts, at once calls attention to the violence of the recent wars while also maintaining a somewhat blasé attitude to it. In this, *The Moon* is somewhat similar to the later works *The Dawn* and *Blarney*, which both strive to downplay the violence of the recent wars and the resulting partition of the country. Yet Johnston insists on this violence and, to some extent, then, his dramatisation of the conflict between Irregular and Free Stater puts the body back into Irish history. Considering this combination of violence and humour, it is perhaps unsurprising that the play made audiences and readers uncomfortable as in Dobelle’s statement that ‘the birth of a nation is no immaculate conception’ Johnston collapses the boundary between comedy and all too real and bloody tragedy.

Thomas Kilroy views Blake’s comic moments, and his side-kick Willie Reilly’s actions, as farcical. As he writes, ‘A grave political situation exists without but this is reflected within the inner world of the play (and, therefore, to a degree, is neutralized) in terms of farce...’.\(^{33}\) This is evident when Willie first appears as an anonymous ‘gunman’ who brusquely orders the men to be searched for arms. Yet, as their housekeeper Agnes’ son, Willie is instantly recognisable to Dobelle and a farce ensues in which Dobelle calls

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\(^{32}\) Johnston, *The Moon* 140.

Agnes into the room. Upon seeing Willie, Agnes threatens to put him ‘across my knee and give you a good skelping where you least expect it’ and demands to know ‘who, may I ask, let you in here with them boots on?’ The slapstick comedy of this scene and Willie’s resemblance to the stage Irishman does, as Kilroy asserts, neutralise the seriousness of the political situation. Yet it is important not to underestimate the subtlety of this scene which does dramatically, albeit comically, illustrate the problems of communities in adjusting to a situation where politics intervenes in personal relationships. Dobelle, as both host and hostage, represents the paradoxical position of many Irish people in this period and Willie as both son and captor illustrates both the impossibility of remaining anonymous in such close social proximity, and the personal ramifications of political actions.

What is explicit in The Moon is implicit in Blarney. Though the film apparently eschews political realities when Billy throws the road barrier that represents the physical Border to one side at the end of the film, the film simultaneously suggests that the real Border is much more concrete than that. The film’s opening image is a map of Ireland, on which the boundary line is drawn in stark white. This line is echoed both by the wall that Maura and Mac embrace over and by the painted white line on the road at the Border, both of which seem to counter the flimsy road barrier that Billy throws aside.

Irreconcilable?

The barrier that Billy casts aside is the same barrier that the thieves, fleeing from the RUC, crash through at the beginning of the film. By making it across the Border they are outside the jurisdiction of the RUC and thus cannot be pursued further. In the Free State

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34 Johnston, The Moon 59.
they have different identities – posing as tourists and renting a country cottage near Ballydann. While Nolan takes up the hunt for them, the lack of cooperation between the two police forces means that the search is not thorough enough. Further, when Billy and Annie kiss at the end of the film, in the background is the Southern Customs Barrier. Though the film’s Foreword jokes that it is set at ‘one of the many frontier customs posts where almost everything is dutiable except a sense of humour,’ the spectre of the economic war looms behind the presence of the Customs barrier, as does the recent memory of IRA attacks on customs posts in 1937.

The inability for North and South to cooperate at an official level goes beyond the example of the jewel heist. For example, from 1923 to 1932 the Free State and Northern Ireland had been involved in disputes over whose jurisdiction Lough Foyle fell under. As Michael Kennedy notes:

> as the boundary between the Free State and Northern Ireland was also the boundary between the Free State and the United Kingdom, the Lough Foyle question became a fully blown Anglo-Irish issue involving the Dublin, Belfast and London governments.

This conflict came to a head over the disputes about fishing rights between local fishermen from Moville in County Donegal and the Irish Society in Derry, almost resulting in a violent clash. In 1930 Neil Blaney, Fianna Fáil TD for Donegal County, ‘called for the Free State to take action to safeguard the fishermen of County Donegal; otherwise, he warned that he would “take damn good care to see that force will be used, and I will take care to be there, even if nobody else is”’. Blaney was not alone in

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35 Of course, the image of criminals escaping justice in the Free State is a powerful one in this period, as the fears of the North’s Unionist population centred on the freeing of IRA prisoners in 1932.
36 These attacks were prior to and during the visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in July 1937.
37 Michael Kennedy, *Division and Consensus* 29.
38 Neil Blaney, quoted in Kennedy 34.
calling for violent protest; Frank Carney, a party colleague, seconded Blaney, saying ‘that he was prepared to go to jail over the defence of the fishermen.’ Following a discussion of the issue in the Dáil, the Irish Independent declared that a violent ‘clash [was] inevitable’. The dispute remained unresolved and, after Fianna Fáil’s election in 1932, ‘merged with other outstanding issues in Anglo-Irish relations that were being addressed by the de Valera government’. The disputes over territorial claims and fishing rights to Lough Foyle illustrate the acrimony and conflict that existed in Border regions. It also demonstrates the inability of the opposing sides to compromise or reach a mutually acceptable solution.

The Lough Foyle dispute is relevant to the understanding of Blarney precisely because of the film’s title. The two Fianna Fáil TDs who threatened a violent response to the fishermen’s dispute were called Blaney and Carney and this suggests that ‘Blarney’ may not merely be designed to evoke smooth talking and high jinks, but may also be a pun on the Lough Foyle dispute. Furthermore, the thieves are not only posing as tourists in Ireland, but are on a fishing holiday and, when Nolan hears of their true identity, he remarks that they ‘didn’t cod me’ and that he always ‘knew there was something fishy about that pair’. These comments are standard jokes but may also be oblique references to the Foyle dispute and this background of territorial disputes undermines the straightforward humour of the film.

Behind the joviality of the film’s attitude to the Border lie the realities of living with the Border, which seriously challenge O’Connor’s pronouncement that it will one day ‘vanish’. While Mac and Nolan shake hands over the boundary line, neither of them

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39 Frank Carney, quoted in Kennedy 34.
41 Kennedy 35.
crosses over onto the other man’s side and they are still called ‘man of the North’ and ‘man of the South’, indicating that their regional identities remain unchanged. Their cooperation, like the handshake at the end, is a single example of individual cooperation, rather than an official collaboration and, like the customs barrier indicates that at an official level the Border is very much a reality.  

The cultural avoidance of the realities of revolutionary aftermath is challenged to a much greater extent by *The Moon*, yet it seems that it compromises this impulse by the end of the play. Though Dobelle pronounces that ‘death and darkness’ lie ahead, a more hopeful tone is introduced into the play through emphasis on the female characters. Words may fail Dobelle but there is another solution proffered by Johnston. Just as will be explored later in *Shadow and Substance* and *The King of Spain’s Daughter*, it is women who provide the anchor and strength in the play. After Dobelle closes his eyes, Agnes returns and, as she opens the door and shutters, ‘sunlight floods into the room from behind her …with a sigh of intense satisfaction [she] smiles out at the flowers and the ivy that grow around the frame [and] …she softly hums a lullaby and surveys a new day.’ The dawning of a new day cancels out Dobelle’s pronouncement on death and darkness and reminds us of Agnes’ purpose in leaving: to help her neighbour, Mrs. Mulpeter, with her labour. Agnes’ comment at the beginning of the play, ‘If some of them fellows could be made to suffer half what a woman has to put up with!’ combined with her return, puts the action of the night in a new perspective. While Blake and

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42 O’Halpin argues that while publicly ‘formal relations were’ ‘frosty’, there was a ‘propensity to maintain cross-border co-operation at local level’. O’Halpin 77.
Lanigan have been engaged in fruitless and, one could argue, unnecessary violence, Mrs. Mulpeter has suffered pain in order to bring new life into Ireland.

Though Johnston links Agnes with the natural rather than intellectual world and characterises her purely in terms of her body and the physical senses, this is still a powerful answer to the violence and despair of the play. Indeed, Agnes had previously walked out on the hostage taking, saying ‘Have it your own way. It’s no concern of mine if you turn the place into a pigsty. But don’t ask me to clean up after you.’ Following her wilful misunderstanding and dismissal of the situation, Agnes leaves, slamming the door behind her, in a moment reminiscent of Nora in *A Doll’s House*. When Tausch seems bewildered by Agnes’s speech and behaviour, Dobelle warns him to watch what he says in front of her, as she ‘is very puritanical’. Yet Agnes seems to be the least constrained character in the play, as compared with the politicking and philosophising of the male characters. The new day that she heralds brings new hope and stands in contrast to the irreconcilable conflict of Blake and Lanigan.

Blanaid, too, represents new hope for Ireland as she is, in one sense, not just her father’s future, but also Ireland’s future. As the youngest member of the play it is she who will inherit a divided Irish society. She is also an allegory for the Free State in that they are both ‘born’ out of conflict and death. The old and gloried Mother Ireland could be said to have died in the civil war out of which the Free State emerged, just as Mary Dobelle died giving birth to Blanaid. Furthermore, Blanaid and the Free State both hero-worship the romantic figures of the past such as Blake, and for Blanaid, as for the Free State, Lanigan’s actions serve as the most forceful education possible on the deep

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45 Johnston, *The Moon* 60.
divisions in Irish society and the expurgation of the past, necessary to complete Ireland’s transformation from colony to modern state. While Lanigan’s actions are heartless, however, Blanaid represents a more hopeful future, providing a link between the natural ‘all-enveloping matriarchy’ of Agnes and the intellectual and political world of Dobelle and Blake.  

Public perceptions

The reception of both The Moon and Blarney is revealing of contemporary attitudes to the violence which had continued since the War of Independence and civil war. In 1931 The Moon’s ambivalence sparked reviewers and audiences to criticise the play for failing to provide a solid viewpoint. The reviewer in the Irish Times noted:

Last night’s audience was frankly bewildered and so divided in its opinions that prolonged hissing was mingled in the dominant applause when the curtain fell. Looking at the Ireland of the days subsequent to 1922, [Johnston] has found little cause for satisfaction.  

Yet the reviewer goes on to say that ‘this play [should be] high on the list of modern Irish plays’ suggesting that the audience’s reaction was not one of hostility to the quality of the play but, rather, to the ideas which it put forward, and that about those ideas there was a great deal of ambivalence. Joseph Holloway was incensed, writing in his diary that ‘The son of a public official should not be let write such lying things about Ireland and Catholicism...’. This statement reveals the anxiety about issues relating to national identity in the 1930s. Holloway, who was a devout Catholic with republican sympathies,

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presumably objected to Dobelle’s opposition to the Catholic patriarchy’s role in Mary’s death as well as the representation of the IRA and nationalism in general. Yet he also remarks that, while the play ‘was laden with untruths’ what ‘it was all about was a puzzle to the world.’ Holloway’s anger and confusion can be read in the same vein as the audience’s mixed reaction; they both object to the combination of the play’s actions and dialogue with the comic manner in which they were put forward, resulting in an unacceptably parodic and ambivalent treatment of war.

During *The Moon*’s revival at the 1938 Abbey Theatre Festival, however, the play met with only good reviews, with the *Irish Independent* review praising the ‘many brilliant passages of this hard-searching exposition of the conflicting idealism and materialism that clashed so violently in the nascent years of the Irish Free State.’ This reviewer’s recognition of the value of *The Moon* suggests that the play’s subtleties were more easily understood seven years after its first performance and one year after the new Constitution. For 1938 audiences, then, the ambivalence of *The Moon* was much less of a problematic issue. Thus, as with J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), both of which had provoked riots during their first productions yet were the two most revived plays in the Abbey in the thirties, *The Moon* had now entered the Abbey canon where it could be appreciated and placed ‘high on the list of modern Irish plays’. Its ambivalence, which had caused bewilderment and annoyance, is what we can now consider to be one of its strengths in provoking not only a strong reaction from audiences but also as a lasting testament to the level of engagement of 1930s drama with the politics of the nation.

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51 Holloway 75.
52 *Irish Independent* 18 August 1938: 12.
Politics and violence do not mar the surface of *Blarney*, in which humour and general obfuscation of the issues surrounding the Border result in a light and entertaining film. The Irish reviews were positive, urging people to go and see a film whose humour would be ‘enjoyed by audiences in all parts of Ireland’, here picking up on the film’s pan-Irish tone. The *Irish Press* argued that *Blarney*’s ‘banter cuts out any real Border rivalry’, while the *Evening Herald* noted that ‘some fun is poked at the existing situation’. The reviews did not mention any bad feeling or negative issues which might arise from a film dealing with the Border. On the contrary all reviews stressed, as in the *Irish Times*, the comic ‘possibilities latent in the partition of Ireland’, while the *Dublin Evening Mail* remarked ‘What a laugh this Border business is. It is a blessing to the comedians of North and South. Any reference to it or the complications which arise from it is sure to fetch the laughs from an Irish audience.’ These reviews imply a determination not to acknowledge the underlying rancour of the idea of a divided Ireland, nor admit in the least to the violence and resentment resulting from the ‘complications’ of partition. This may seem to be an unrealistic attitude yet reflects, to a large extent, the attitude to the Border that was held by most nationalists immediately after its creation by the Government of Ireland Act (1920). Initially, the Border was intended to be a temporary measure which would enable Irish independence but that was not intended to divide the country permanently. As Michael Kennedy puts it, ‘the rhetoric of Irish nationalism [was] that national unity was simply a matter of time.’ The common-sense approach, and comic attitude, to the national situation in *Blarney* is therefore in line with

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53 *Irish Times* 11 January 1938: 4. Though the review also referred to Northern Ireland as ‘another nation’, interestingly it echoes O’Connor’s description of the South as ‘my own part of the country’.


56 Kennedy 7.
the prevailing consensus on the Border in the Free State. Yet, while *Blarney*’s comedy is in some ways similar to *The Moon*’s tone, *The Moon* also conveys a sense of immediate and present violence, a sense absent from *Blarney* but by no means absent from either political or even everyday life in the thirties.

In laughing, however, at the renegotiation of identity and the complications inherent in dividing a country and a community in half, the film’s comic tone enables it to address and deal with issues that would otherwise be too traumatic. Billy’s humorous capers around the Border help to normalise north-south relations and thus bring the country one step closer to accepting the Border and moving on with their lives despite it. Significantly, only ten days after *Blarney*’s release, de Valera led a delegation to London to begin negotiations over the Anglo-Irish trade agreement (1938); *Blarney* could not have been more topical.

For both *Blarney* and *The Moon*, comedy enables them to explore nationally sensitive issues. Yet, in each comedy the emphasis on personal rather than political reconciliation seems to evade the realities of the post-revolutionary situation. In *Blarney* the unrealistic – yet popular – attitude to the Border as a temporary inconvenience is reinforced, with little to actively trouble the smooth ending. However, despite *The Moon*’s closing emphasis on resolution and Agnes’ role in ushering in the new day, the shooting of Blake onstage puts the body back into Irish politics and, with Dobelle’s vision of ‘death and darkness’, destabilises the image of the future simplistically suggested by, and embodied in, Blanaid and Agnes.
GENDER: Women of Vision

Johnston’s representation of Agnes as silent but physically powerful and aligned with natural rhythms, illustrates a tendency to view women in terms of their bodies. Yet the female characters of both *The King* and *Shadow and Substance* are represented as much more than merely physical beings. For both Annie and Brigid, though they must sacrifice themselves in the end, they are at least the equals of the male characters of both plays.

In *Shadow and Substance* the intellect of the Canon Skerrit is matched by the visionary mind of Brigid, his servant. Initially the Canon respects this intelligence and when Brigid first stands up to his questioning he sees in her an ‘incongruous pride’:

> My God, my God, that – that is what we have come from ... Pride ... loyalty ... a classic race ... a royal conception ... A thousand years ago, someone with that brow and that face held up his head and died like a prince ...

The Canon’s reaction is a passionate adulation for Brigid’s integrity and he sees her as a heroic figure from a foundational myth of ‘a classic race’. However, as Brigid continues to stand up to his demands, the Canon becomes wary and disapproving and, finally, condemnatory.

Brigid knows both the Canon and Dermot O’Flingsley well enough to predict their actions: with dramatic foresight she predicts that O’Flingsley will leave the community. Yet, to those around her, Brigid is an unknown quantity. When the Canon questions her about her secret – her visions of St. Brigid – she refuses to answer and, seeing in her ‘an incongruous pride’, he respects her silence, saying ‘I shall ask you – nothing.’ Later in the play when the Canon has ordered Brigid to be confined to her room she leaves it to go to Mass and he unwittingly gives her communion. Brigid tells

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58 Carroll 25.
him that he 'didn't know me in me white dress. I was near laughin' ...' 59 Brigid is not recognised or understood by the Canon indicating how little he knows her, beyond her role as his confidante and servant.

Brigid surprises the Canon in her assertiveness and her dedication to the idea of serving St. Brigid. Her level of faith, which at first provokes him to admire her princely demeanour, later provokes him to anger. For Brigid's faith is outside the realm of the Church's authority and, as Brigid persists with her devotion to St. Brigid, the Canon realises that she is moving beyond his personal authority also. The Canon tells Brigid that visions of saints are just myths 'that may or may not be true.' 60 When Brigid replies that they 'could be true' the Canon retorts that he knows 'best about these things'. 61 Brigid's seizing of the space of possibility and ambivalence outside orthodox religious doctrine undermines the Canon's rigid belief system.

Brigid's dedication also threatens the Canon's chauvinist attitude to religion in which authority is always the domain of educated men. The Canon admires her while she resembles a 'prince' but mocks her intention to join an order of nuns and this is as much a sign of his dislike of female-centred religion, as it is a slight on Brigid's ability to be a nun. The Canon dismisses the 'myth' of St. Brigid and, in dismissing Brigid's desires to serve the Saint, saying that he needs her more, he reveals his reservations about women's incursion into the traditional world of the Church. Female religious orders provided one of the few opportunities for women to take on leadership roles in Irish society and, reflecting this need, the proportion of Irish nuns to lay people had grown faster over the

59 Carroll 59-60.
60 Carroll 42.
61 Carroll 42.
last century than the proportion of Irish priests.\textsuperscript{62} The Canon’s reluctance to let Brigid go reflects his refusal to conceive of women as knowledgeable religious figures and not merely domestic servants. Furthermore, this refusal is compounded as the message that Brigid brings from the Saint is not only female centred but challenges the Canon’s orthodoxy by emphasising traditional, Gaelic spirituality.

One of the elements of Brigid’s messages from St. Brigid is the Saint’s emphasis on the importance of being connected to landscape. At the beginning of the play Brigid tells O’Flingsley that people should be more like the eternal hills – meaning the Mourne mountains – and pay less attention to meaningless materialistic goals. In her final message St. Brigid urges the Canon and Brigid herself to kneel in the chapel yard and pray to her, while the Canon should say ‘Mary of the Gael, show us the way through the dark.’\textsuperscript{63} Upon saying this a holy spring will come out of the earth. These two messages and Brigid’s absolute faith in them represent Carroll’s perception that the Church, and by extension Ireland, had become too far removed from both an organic sense of spirituality and from their own past. The joint invocation of ‘Mary of the Gael’ and the landscape harks back to a more pagan spirituality. Brigid’s version of Christianity is thus integrated with a pagan belief system and this pushes the Canon to declare her ‘very ill. You are even more ill than I suspected.’\textsuperscript{64}

The Canon’s refusal to contemplate kneeling on and kissing the flagstones of the chapel yard is indicative of how ill he perceives Brigid to be. Yet there is also the

\textsuperscript{62} In 1841 the proportion of Irish Catholic priests was 1:3,500 lay people, while in 1960 it was 1:600. The proportion of nuns to lay people in 1841 was 1:7,000, yet in 1941 it was 1:400, a staggering rise in the number of women in religious orders. See J.J. Lee, ‘Women and the Church Since the Famine’, \textit{Women in Irish Society} 37-45.

\textsuperscript{63} Carroll 65.

\textsuperscript{64} Carroll 65.
implication that the Canon is extremely uncomfortable, not only with the brand of Christianity being propounded by Brigid, but also with the idea of such close contact between him and the landscape. This reluctance to leave the safety of the parochial house is illustrated by his movements on the stage. The main entrance and exit to the living room is through a set of french doors set in the back wall and most of the characters use these doors freely. Yet the Canon only uses the doors once and, before doing so, 'pauses a moment to look out pensively at the hills'. The initial set description states that through the french window is a ‘view of the Mourne’s rugged peaks’ and that the windows are ‘very tastefully curtained to the ground with crimson art brocade’. The Canon’s pensive gaze onto the hills and the thick curtaining of the windows visually illustrate his deliberate withdrawal from the outside world. For the landscape does not just represent nature but, further, an implicitly feminine, powerful, and powerfully evocative space outside the Church’s control. Brigid not only encourages the Canon to embrace the landscape but she also changes the curtains to white ones, thereby drawing attention to the window and the view beyond and consequently drawing attention also to the insulation of the room and the Canon from the landscape.

In response to Brigid’s recounting of her visions the Canon tries to remove her from the world; as he cannot repress the problematic signs of rebellion, he instead represses the person. First, he orders Brigid to be confined to her room, then he organises for her to be sent away to a convalescent home. He does nothing to dispel the impression that Jemima has that Brigid is mentally ill, just as he encourages Francis’s conviction that O‘Flingsley is insane, as O’Flingsley also opposes him. Both Brigid’s faith and

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65 Carroll 50.
66 Carroll 5.
O'Flingsley's direct criticism threaten to destabilise the authority of the Church and the Church's response – through the Canon – is to destabilise their authority, remove them from the public and thereby dismiss the threat they pose. Brigid's death is an indictment of both the Church and O'Flingsley for, as Carroll wrote in the programme note to the New York production, Brigid is the 'spirit of the Nation', crushed by the conflicting forces of O'Flingsley and the Canon.67

Brigid is, at the beginning of *Shadow and Substance*, a mere servant girl, yet through her visions and her death she is revealed to be a noble, sincere and heroic character. Similarly, Deevy in *The King*, attempts to portray Annie not as a mere peasant girl, but as someone capable of vision, with dreams and aspirations. To this end Deevy uses the popular genre of the peasant play and, though Annie is dressed as a typical peasant girl in a red dress and dark shawl, her appearance belies her rebellious interior and throughout the play her words and actions strive to break the image established by her costume. Deevy uses Annie as a symbol of what is wrong in modern Ireland and portrays what Cathy Leeney terms, 'the crushing orthodoxies of post-colonial Ireland in [the 1930s]' 68 These orthodoxies ensure that Annie's future is not one of independence but of subjection.

Throughout *The King* Annie struggles against her father and the wider community to assert her voice and her vision. Before Annie appears on stage she has been discussed twice. The first conversation is between Jim Harris and her father Peter Kinsella, who

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67 Quoted by Gabriel Fallon, 'Mr. Carroll's “Shadow and Substance”', *Irish Monthly* 1938 (LXVI): 858.
'Laughs contemptuously' at Jim for not forcing Annie to marry him. His reaction makes it clear that Jim should be able to tame Annie into marrying him and take her off the older man's hands. The second discussion of Annie is between Mrs. Marks and Jim. Mrs. Marks describes Annie as 'a bold wild thing' who shirks her duties to her father at every turn. Annie's first appearance seems to confirm her reputation for waywardness. Though we know that she is tentatively engaged to Jim, she first appears with Roddy Mann, another suitor. She fobs Roddy off when he tries to kiss her, insisting that he let her speak. Annie is absorbed by the wedding she saw earlier that day and wants to relate the details of the bride's gown to Roddy, saying, 'Wait first till I tell you how she looked.' Annie's use of her sexuality as a manipulative tool and her use of narrative to keep Roddy at bay are clear signs that she will not remain within socially prescribed boundaries.

**Imagined differences**

It becomes clear that this is not the only tactic that Annie has developed for circumventing the unpleasant aspects of life. Annie uses her imagination as a strategy to move beyond the harsh facts of poverty and abuse. When her father beats her, rather than answer Jim's entreaties to tell him how she is, Annie responds 'Ah, leave that now! Let us leave that behind us ...'. As with Roddy, Annie insists on recreating the story for Jim. Jim is angered that her story differs both from what she told Roddy Mann earlier

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69 Teresa Deevy, *The King of Spain's Daughter and other one-act plays* (Dublin: New Frontiers Press, 1947). The play's title and Annie's references to the King of Spain's Daughter also appear in Padraic Colum's poem 'A Drover', which describes a cattle drover who tends his cattle faithfully but still manages to live in his imagination.

70 Deevy 27.

71 Deevy 30.

72 Deevy 27.
and from what he himself saw from above the wharf. Annie tells Roddy that the bride 'was dressed in flamin' red from top to toe and – (puts her hand to her breast) – here she had a diamond clasp. To Jim, however, Annie says that the bride wore 'pale, pale gold and (hands to breast) – two red flowers were crushed agen her here.' Her different versions of the bride seem like a child's storytelling and enrage Jim. Yet the different versions all contain some of the same elements, in each story the colours red, white and gold feature. Annie herself is associated with red and gold, her shawl and her hair respectively and the colour white represents both the innocence and the freedom which Annie sees in the bride. She confirms this when she says ‘It is myself I seen in her – sailin’ out into the sun, and to adventure.’ Annie thus projects herself onto the bride and romanticises the bride's departure precisely because she herself is incapable of leaving. Though she may dally with Roddy on her way to her father, in the end, she must turn up to meet Kinsella as she ‘belong[s]’ to him.

Jim confronts Annie about her differing versions of the bride's dress. He insists that she is ‘tellin’ ‘lies’ and that she must stop and ‘tell the truth, – an’ it just as easy?’ Yet Annie will not admit that her story is lies but maintains her vision of the bride – ‘It was in pale gold I saw her.’ Even when confronted with the fact that Jim saw the bride dressed in grey Annie is steadfast and, in her turn, accuses Jim of being blind: ‘You are a pack of blind owls all the lot of you! I saw what I saw!’ Annie’s insistence reveals that she really believes in what she has said. Rather than mimic what Jim has said and insist

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73 Deevy 28.
74 Deevy 30.
75 Deevy 31.
76 Deevy 29.
77 Deevy 30.
78 Deevy 30.
79 Deevy 30.
80 Deevy 30.
that she is telling the ‘truth,’ Annie repeats that ‘It was in pale gold I saw her.’ By using the word ‘saw’ rather than the word ‘truth’ Annie draws a distinction between reality and vision. For Annie does not dispute that the bride was dressed in grey, rather that she ‘saw’ her in gold. She thus thinks outside of the binary of ‘truth – lies’ and opens up a third way – the way of her imagination. In this the play is close to J.M. Synge’s *The Well of the Saints* in which Mary and Martin Doul assert the greater veracity and quality of their visions over the realities of sight. Just as Synge evokes these romantic sights through the Douls’ poetic use of language, Deevy never shows us the bride herself, but relies on Annie and Jim’s evocation of her, thus maintaining a space of possibility as to what the bride was truly wearing. This means that Jim’s version of the bride is never sanctioned as the ‘truth’ and, whereas Annie sees the bride in colours of freedom and adventure, his description of her as all in grey, in fact, suits his narrow and confined vision of a woman’s married life. Jim’s refutation of Annie’s visions is similar to the Canon’s inability to countenance Brigid’s visions and, just as the Canon does not recognise Brigid in her white dress, so too Jim is incapable of ‘seeing’ Annie.

Annie insists that anyone who disputes her claim is ‘blind’, that is, unable to make an imaginative leap into vision. To her, Jim’s version of the bride is all too literal. Annie is, like the theatre audience itself, looking for a more metaphorical interpretation. As Lionel Pilkinton argues, Deevy’s plays in general are a ‘departure from the strict naturalism and social and political polemics that was so regularly adopted by Deevy’s NTS [National Theatre Society] contemporaries’ and this ‘fantasy allowed Deevy’s plays to achieve an unprecedented level of social critique.’

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80 Pilkington 134.
lambaste Jim’s blindness but ‘all the lot of you!’ It is society – Jim, Kinsella and Mrs. Marks – that Annie is angry at as, as becomes apparent, it is this society which not only tries to limit her imagination but that tries to put an end to the idea of freedom at all.

Annie’s fictions and her insistence on being given the freedom to define and express herself and her voice seem particularly germane when taken in the context of the social and political milieu of the mid-1930s. Within two years of the play’s first production the new Constitution would prove that Éamon de Valera could and would use words to achieve his political goal of separation from Britain. Though it was another twelve years before Ireland was declared a Republic and left the Commonwealth, under the Inter-party government, the Constitution represented a major step towards that goal. Annie’s attempts at creating a personal fiction as an escape from a claustrophobic reality should therefore be set against this background of the renegotiation of national identity through language rather than force.

Deevy is not, however, merely content with identifying the subjection of women in Ireland, but rather extends her consideration of the ways in which people are controlled to Jim’s situation. For Annie is not the only character that indulges in fantasy. Jim is far more like her than he admits and Deevy illustrates this through his language. When Mrs. Marks first appears she asks Jim if she can get past the roadblocks to which Jim replies with a question: ‘Are you a motor car, ma’am?’ Mrs. Marks is annoyed and tells him that she ‘thought you had sense in your head, Jim Harris.’ Her quip is a pre-echo of Jim accusing Annie of not having ‘sense’. Further, when Annie is scared of her father she

81 Deevy 30.
82 Deevy 26.
83 Deevy 26.
84 Deevy 30.
says ‘He’ll have my life!’ while, when Jim is scared of losing Annie, he says, ‘Give up my life, is it?’ Each of these statements is melodramatic and each indicates a personality given to seeing their life in terms of extremes. Jim is thus of a similar disposition to Annie and never more so than when fantasising about the future.

When Annie asks Jim what he wants for his future he begins to tell her about how he plans to evict his sisters from the house they currently share so that he and Annie will have the house just for themselves. He envisions a future where ‘When we shut the house door I’ll have no one in it but you and me.’ Jim’s attachment to this fantasy shows that while he is capable of imagining, he is incapable of seeing this as similar to Annie’s behaviour, thinking of his own imaginings as normal and hers as ‘lies’.

Annie is shocked at Jim’s plan to turn out his sisters. She cannot contemplate this future and is loath to live ‘without a woman to talk to’. Jim in turn is threatened by the idea of a female community which would weaken his relationship with Annie. When she asks him why his sisters cannot stay in the house he replies, ‘They’d be in it – spoilin’ the world.’ Annie thinks Jim ‘crazy’ for having such a narrow view of the future. Yet, while Jim may fantasise as much as Annie, his fantasies have some chance of success as his are sanctioned by society and he has both social status and power. The mass of tradition and community values supports Jim’s fantasy and, against this weight, Annie has little chance of reversing her fate.

\[85\] Deevy 28.  
\[86\] Deevy 27.  
\[87\] Deevy 32.  
\[88\] Deevy 32.  
\[89\] Deevy 32.  
\[90\] Deevy 32.
Jim’s reaction to Annie’s happiness in telling the story of the bride is anger, saying accusingly: ‘We’d all be happy if you’d have sense.’ The ‘we’ of this statement is revealing as, like Annie’s invocation of a whole ‘blind’ society, it encompasses an entire community that Annie affects with her irrational story. Jim’s anxiety that she tell the ‘truth’ indicates the threat to the community implied by her flights of fantasy. If Annie would only ‘have sense’ the community could continue without upset but Annie’s flouting of the ‘truth’ and by extension the norms of society threatens the community’s stability and happiness. Jim’s paranoia is reminiscent of a sermon, given in 1926 by Archbishop Gilmartin, and reported in detail by the *Irish Independent*. Gilmartin argued that women’s fondness for fashion and dance halls was the driving force behind the corruption of Irish morality and, further, that ‘The future of the country is bound up with the dignity and purity of the women of Ireland.’ Annie is fighting not only her role as daughter and lover but also as symbol.

Marriage is the key to the continuing stability of the family and the wider community and, as far as the play is concerned, is the opposite of love. For Annie love is a chance for freedom, a force that could liberate her from the social expectations which limit her: ‘Stop your fool talk! The truth! Burstin’ in where you don’t know. Oh, if I could have love!’ Love is thus a third way, similar to the power of imagination in its ability to transcend the binaries of normal social expectations. For Jim, however, love is equated with marriage and the status and lifestyle which are associated with being married. When Annie says ‘Oh, if I could have love!’ Jim replies, ‘Will you leave talkin’

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91 Deevy 30.
93 Deevy 30
of love when I’m tired of askin’ you’d come to the priest with me!" Rather than answer Annie’s prayer for freedom, Jim tries to enmesh her even further in the patriarchal system of society seeking, as Shaun Keogh does in Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, the priest’s blessing as a way of settling Annie in one place. Yet, just as Pegeen yearns for a bit of ‘savagery’ and ‘fine words,’ Annie longs for more than Jim’s version of the future.  

Annie is fully aware of these attempts to limit her. She recognises that she will always be a servant whether she works in England, at the factory or, indeed, marries Jim. For women, class is irrelevant – the bride at the wharf is just as subject to the social convention of marriage as Annie is. Annie admits defeat once her father has made her sign her name on the factory card, which he then uses to blackmail her into marrying Jim. She says to Jim, ‘You have me ruined.’ In Annie’s terms being ‘ruined’ means having to resign herself to the prospect of a future without freedom. Yet the phrase ‘a ruined woman’ generally implies a different meaning and, in fact, calls attention to the fear of female promiscuity in 1930s Ireland with rises in illegitimacy rates and a continuing decline in marriage rates. These facts go some way towards explaining the growing fear in the thirties surrounding women’s behaviour. Efforts to control women’s bodies led to one startling case in which a young girl was sentenced to prison for the outrageous crime of ‘kissing and embracing in public’.

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94 Deevy 30. In this moment, *The King* is particularly reminiscent of *The Playboy of the Western World* by J.M. Synge, in which Shaun Keogh is obsessed with getting the dispensation from the priest so that he can ensure that Pegeen Mike will marry him.


96 Deevy 34.

97 Pilkington 134, citing an article in the *Irish Times* 22 October 1937: 5.
This kind of moral vigilantism emerges in the references to Annie’s free sexuality when Mrs. Marks calls her a ‘bold wild thing’ and says that she ‘will be romancin’ all her life with whoever she can.' Deevy uses Annie’s wildness to illustrate the level of fear of women’s sexual independence in this era of sexual repressiveness. Annie is indeed promiscuous and cannot even remember which nights she was with Jim and which with Roddy, implying that she sees men as indistinguishable from each other. Not only is Annie’s imagination threatening to the community’s norms but her body is an unstable, dangerous element also.

It is inevitable, from the beginning of the play, however, that the force of Annie’s spirit will be contained. Not only does she have to fight the united front of her father, Jim and the wider force of social norms, but she must also face the limits of imagination. Despite Annie’s ability to place herself outside the binaries of truth and lies, she cannot entirely free herself of the dominant attitudes towards women and marriage. The image of freedom that she worships throughout the play is itself an image of entrapment. Annie fantasises that the bride leaving the wharf is ‘sailin’ out into the sun, and to adventure.' Yet earlier in the play Mrs. Marks tells Jim that it was not a happy marriage: ‘They say he wanted the money. They say it was signed and settled before ever he seen her. Well, she’ll have her red carpet and all her fine show for her poor heart to feed on.’ Annie’s romanticisation of the bride illustrates her ignorance of the reality of the situation.

The discrepancy between Annie’s image of freedom and reality prefigures the way she approaches her future life. Once she has accepted marriage to Jim, Annie turns once more to her strategy of re-inventing and thus subverting reality. In Jim’s notebook,
where he has documented his savings over two hundred weeks, Annie sees the possibility of a man with adventure about him after all, saying: ‘He put by two shillin’s every week for two hundred weeks. I think he is a man might cut your throat.’ Annie is ‘Quiet, and exultant’ at this image of Jim as a man of action. Yet this ‘startling decision’ is the most disturbing image of the play. Though, to Annie the idea that Jim ‘might cut [her] throat’ is exhilarating, to Mrs. Marks and to the audience this must seem a shocking image. For, rather than representing a chance for freedom, Annie has created ‘an image of Jim which casts him as the oppressor.’ As Shaun Richards argues, Annie is ‘dynamic’ but ‘finally dramatized as emotionally unstable rather than purposeful.’

Annie cannot escape from the cycle of abuse and imagines freedom and power in the terms of further subjection, and thus finally it is her imagination which prevents her from achieving freedom.

Annie falls prey to the pressures on women to conform to marriage, and Deevy makes clear the potentially fatal consequences of this, to Annie’s voice, if not her life. Similarly, Brigid is silent by the end of Shadow and Substance. Brigid rushes to save O'Flingsley from the community mob, which is bent on destroying the author of the work I Am Sir Oracle. A rock, flung at O'Flingsley, hits Brigid instead. The blow proves fatal, but it also brings Brigid closer to her patron saint. St. Brigid disfigured herself so that men would not find her beautiful or sexually attractive and the rock, hitting Brigid in the face, disfigures her in the same way as St. Brigid. Her self-sacrifice demonstrates her

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101 Deevy 35.
103 Deevy 35.
104 Leeney, ‘Themes of Ritual and Myth’, 94.
total commitment to what she believes in; in contrast to this, both the Canon and O'Flingsley seem superficially committed to their respective causes.

Though Brigid is dead in the play’s last scene she still manages to disturb the two men who have been, throughout the play, the representatives of authority and, in the Canon’s case, patriarchal power. The final moments of the play see O'Flingsley leaving and the Canon alone. Stage directions describe the Canon surveying with ‘heavy, weary eyes ... the empty room.’ Finally, the Canon says ‘I am not well...’ Though Brigid has died, seemingly needlessly, that the Canon says he is ‘not well’ indicates that he may realise that it is he who has been ill all along and who needs healing and not Brigid. Brigid’s value, like Agnes in The Moon, is ultimately recognised through the authority of her body.

Stereotypes

The power of gender stereotypes is most clearly illustrated in The King. Deevy’s skill lies in not merely exposing the pressures upon Annie but in illustrating the extent of the reach of these pressures. The King is a prime example of the ways Deevy articulates Irish society and its problems, in particular, representing the ways in which women in thirties Ireland were limited and the extent to which these limits were based on and perpetuated by the essentialising of women. Although Jim tells Mrs. Marks that Annie only behaves wildly because of the way her father treats her, earlier he says to Kinsella that, ‘If she goes on a bit aself ‘tis because she must; she’s made that way, she can’t help it.’ Jim also implies that all women are made senseless by weddings, saying ‘They don’t feel

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106 Carroll 76.
107 Deevy 26.
time or weather when they’re waitin’ for a bride.'\textsuperscript{108} Even Annie falls prey to this, mythologizing the bride as an exotic creature rather than seeing her as a real woman with feelings. Furthermore, Annie’s projection of herself onto this image reveals a tendency for self-objectification. Mrs. Marks also defines women’s position in society when she tells Annie that it is a woman’s role to ‘suffer’ childbirth, without exception.\textsuperscript{109} The oppression of marriage is one form of social control but the implication here is that Annie is also being oppressed by the cultural idea of ‘Mother Ireland’. The essentialised view of women, held by all the play’s characters, save Annie, was made national two years after the play’s first performance. The 1937 constitution, which aimed to redefine Ireland as an independent nation, enshrined women not only as mothers but as homemakers too. In the continual process of othering, women thus become the colonised of the ex-colonised.

By implication, if a woman’s place is in the home, then the man’s place is out of it. For, it is not only women who are oppressed by the expectations and orthodoxies surrounding their sex. Jim is, once more, similar to Annie in being subject to his gender. When Mrs. Marks is trying to persuade Jim to treat Annie with some authority she tells him, ‘if you were a man at all you’d make her marry you.’\textsuperscript{110} She echoes this a moment later, admonishing him to ‘Be a man now! Be a man’.\textsuperscript{111} Mrs. Marks and Peter Kinsella both view Jim as less than a man because he refuses to ‘force’ Annie to marry him. Annie herself echoes these words, yet it is a different type of man she has in mind: ‘A

\textsuperscript{108} Deevy 25.  
\textsuperscript{109} Deevy 34.  
\textsuperscript{110} Deevy 30.  
\textsuperscript{111} Deevy 30.
good “man” he’d make to begin by turnin’ his two sisters on the road! It seems that Annie desires a more sensitive man. However, this changes by the end of the play when she alters her perception of him and sees him as ‘a man might cut your throat!’ By the end of the play, Annie comes closer to desiring the kind of man that her father might admire. It is not just Annie therefore who is forced into a role that does not suit her, but Jim also. Deevy thus not only challenges Irish culture and society to change its modes of thinking about women, but destabilises other gender roles also.

In *The King* Deevy articulates, through the attempts to control Annie’s body and imagination, the crisis of gender at the heart of rural, Irish society. This is a feature of her work that, as Robert Welch argues, ‘opens up a complex tangle of emotion and social psychosis which remained, to a large extent, unexplored in theatre until the work of Samuel Beckett’. Deevy’s emphasis on the ‘emotion[al] and social psychosis’ of rural Ireland, together with the emotional intensity of Carroll’s *Shadow and Substance* and Johnston’s endorsement of women as the key to the future of Ireland, refute the notion of women as merely subject to patriarchal power and open up a space of resistance – albeit a minor or temporary one – to that power.

**MODERNITY**

As discussed in Chapter One, Ireland was increasingly urban, and modernity was evident in other aspects of the country such as industrialisation, dance halls, contemporary music and media. In many ways, such as the improvements made by the spread of electricity,
modernity was a positive force. Yet, for many the industrialisation of rural Ireland did not signal improvement but merely the death of traditional ways of life. The presence of modernity, in the guise of a factory in *The King*, is not a force for emancipation but represents, instead, an even greater threat to Annie’s freedom than marriage. One arena in which modern technology was extremely popular, however, was leisure, and cinema and the dance hall became exceptionally popular in Ireland over the first few decades of the twentieth century. Living in an increasingly modern society, Irish men and women demanded an increasingly modern culture. Though the Church and State preached abstinence and return to a simple peasant lifestyle, Ireland was irretrievably changed. This phenomenon filtered into and affected both Irish drama and film and the presence of modernity, though peripheral in works such as *The King*, is central to *Shadow and Substance*, *By Accident*, *Blarney* and *The Islandman*. In *Shadow and Substance*, Carroll’s focus is on the reaction of the Catholic Church to modern popular culture while in *By Accident*, *Blarney* and *The Islandman*, to a greater or lesser degree, it is specifically the urban Irish space that is focussed on.

**The Catholic Church**

In *Shadow and Substance* it is the Catholic Church, through Canon Skerrit, which most actively represses Brigid. In order to maintain his influence over his parish’s morality, the Canon attempts to remain aloof from the community. The Canon, loosely based on Carroll’s conception of the character of Jonathan Swift, is a learned but haughty man and his home is the reflection of his very good taste, with works of art on the walls and sumptuous furniture. Yet while the Canon is in Dublin, his curates, Fathers Corr and
Kirwan, hang a picture of the Sacred Heart on the living-room wall. Upon his return the Canon sees the picture and is so disgusted that he almost experiences physical pain at its crudeness, calling it 'the nightmarish conception of some uncouth vulgarian.' The Sacred Heart oleograph represents for the Canon not just the disturbance of his own well-ordered room but, on a wider level, the disturbance of 'great classic ideals and the steady vulgarization of our life...'. The Canon's tirade on vulgarity is his response to the increasing power of popular culture in modern society and its intrusion into his living room, a previously sacred space.

The Canon is not only shocked at the images of popular religious culture but, as his treatment of Fathers Corr and Kirwan makes clear, he is also concerned for the future of the Church. The two curates are far less removed from both modernity and the community than the Canon, owning a motorcar and coaching the local football team. They engage in the culture and community that the Canon so strongly detests and, what is most disquieting for the Canon, is the distance and perspective that the curates seem to lack. When the community reads the controversial book, *I am Sir Oracle*, they demand instant censorial action from the Canon. When he refuses, the curates lead a protest against the book themselves. It is not clear whether the curates are the instigators of the protest or whether they are swept along by the passions of the community, but nevertheless they relish their roles as figureheads of the mob. The Canon, despite the unpleasantness of his hauteur, thus initially emerges as a far more impressive figure.

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115 Carroll 21.
116 Carroll 22.
117 Yet, as one review noted, the Canon's snobbery makes him unable to see that the vulgar picture might 'mean as much to a simple, uncultured mind as a masterpiece of Giotto meant to him.' 'Remarkable Play at the Abbey', *Irish Independent* 26 January 1937: 10.
Yet the Canon is as guilty as his curates in holding and worshipping idealised myths and images. His reaction to Brigid’s steadfastness is to see her as a member of ‘a classic race’. This is similar indeed to the ‘prevalent deluge of sentimentalism’ and ‘being merely heroic’ that the Canon deplores as the basis of Irish nationalist culture.

This similarity comes through also in his idealisation of Spanish culture: ‘the grave courtesy and grace of the people and their walk’. Yet the play is set in the late 1930s, and references to Spain must necessarily bring to mind the Spanish civil war. It is thus not a real Spain that the Canon longs for but a sentimentalised image and, just as in Deevy’s play, Spain thus functions as a mythologized image of exotic freedom.

In response to the Canon’s rage at the oleograph Brigid asks him ‘Please, Canon, are ye not well again?’ Brigid’s concern reveals that the Canon is not as stable as he might appear. The Canon often contradicts himself with Brigid, telling her one minute to go, the next to stay and, when under pressure, he stutters. The most dramatic occurrence of this last is when he confronts O’Flingsley about his identity as the real author of *I am Sir Oracle*. The Canon’s language breaks down:

> I’ll be – calm, O’Flingsley. I’ll be – logical. I – I won’t descend to you. ... I note from these cuttings of your book “I am Sir Oracle,” that the Church in Ireland is controlled by a – a red army of turkey-cocks. ... our education system is the – the sewage of European culture...

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118 Carroll 40.
119 Carroll 42.
120 Carroll 23.
121 Carroll 21.
122 See Carroll 13: ‘But go, Brigid, see to lunch immediately.’ Brigid: ‘Yis, Canon.’ Canon: Stay, Brigid.’ and ibid.: ‘Go, Brigid!’ Brigid: ‘Yis, Canon.’ Canon: ‘Wait, Brigid.’ and 23-4: Canon: ‘Go Brigid.’ Brigid: ‘Yis, Canon.’ (She goes.) Canon: ‘Come back, Brigid.’ Also see 31: Canon: ‘Excess in anything is bad, Brigid – in work, in play, in religion – it is not – classical. I am going to send you away for a holiday. And you must have a new hat too – a new hat with – with a feather in it. There now!’ and 52: Canon: ‘You have complaints, O’Flingsley? I did not think it was considered a – a suitable attitude in a teacher to have complaints.’
123 Carroll 54.
The Canon’s insistence on being ‘logical’ is revealing; he fears irrationalism, specifically O’Flingsley’s irrationalism, as a force which might overwhelm him. Thus, while the Canon represents the longing for a grace and order, away from the ‘modern mental turmoil in Ireland’, he is not himself immune to this ‘turmoil’ and this is perhaps why he is so vehement in his hatred of O’Flingsley.\(^{124}\)

**Church rule**

The Canon criticises the handling of the scandal surrounding *I am Sir Oracle*. When the community sends a deputation to his home to seek approval for the informal banning of the book, the Canon condescends to the group and manoeuvres them into admitting that they have read it. Upon this, the Canon admonishes them for behaving in an immoral way and sends them packing. He also admonishes the curates for pandering to the demands of the mob, ordering them to desist from protesting against the book and assuring them that he will deal with it. Yet the Canon’s authority is not strong enough and the zealous curates pursue O’Flingsley, resulting in the death of an innocent.

The Canon does not, in fact, stand up for free speech but, instead, takes his own measures to censor the controversial book. He discovers that O’Flingsley is the real author by looking up the parish records and discovering that the pseudonym Eugene Gibney is a combination of his father’s second name and his mother’s maiden name. This illustrates the control of knowledge that the Church has and the Canon uses this as a weapon to counter rumour and violent emotionalism. Yet, while the Canon prides himself on reacting to O’Flingsley’s book with dignity and efficacy, his actions are not so

\(^{124}\) Paul Vincent Carroll, quoted by Fallon, ‘Mr. Carroll’s “Shadow and Substance”’ 858.
different from the curates and the community. Rather than censor the book, the Canon suppresses the man, reacting in an out-of-sight-out-of-mind way, despite his intelligence and his ‘catholic’ attitude.

The role of the Church in guiding public morality was bolstered by its control of the national school system. As J.H. Whyte puts it, the Catholic Church had ‘a grip on education of unique strength’. He goes on to explain that ‘In Ireland … local control of a primary school rests not with an elected board, but with a single officer, the school manager, who in the case of a Catholic school is usually the parish priest.’ This fact underpins Shadow and Substance and the drama surrounding the suppression of the book must be read in the context of the initial reason why O‘Flingsley and the Canon are in conflict.

O‘Flingsley first visits the Canon not because of the book but because of his dissatisfaction with conditions at his school. The school is ill equipped with both teaching and recreational resources and O‘Flingsley is both schoolmaster and caretaker. This reflects a very real conflict between schools and the Church. Since 1926 the INTO had waged an intermittent campaign ‘to secure the transfer to local authorities of responsibility for the cleaning, heating and sanitation of primary schools.’ This battle was waged until, as Whyte cites, in 1952 ‘a letter from the [Church] hierarchy formally requested the INTO to desist from its campaign.’ O‘Flingsley’s complaints to the Canon represents a wider struggle by school teachers to gain better conditions. As

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125 Whyte, Church and State 16.
126 Whyte 17.
127 This has resonances with the events of 1965 when John McGahern was dismissed from his teaching post by Archbishop J.C. McQuaid, after his novel The Dark (1965) was banned by the Censorship Board. His dismissal may also have been linked to his relationship with a divorceé.
128 Whyte 20.
129 Whyte 21.
O'Flingsley says to the Canon 'you loathe and detest the whole miserable fabric of things here. You detest that disgraceful apology for a school down there, even more than I do.' Yet the Canon will neither admit this nor take steps to change the situation for the better. Indeed, the sumptuousness of his own home is a striking contrast to the reports of the school’s disrepair, providing a vivid illustration of Carroll’s perception of the hypocrisy of the Church. Carroll’s anti-clerical attack in *Shadow and Substance* reaches its height in the Canon’s treatment of O'Flingsley and Brigid and her subsequent death. The refusal of the Church to effect change for the good in the national school system results in the conflict between the two sides, two sides which should be united for the good of the nation, for, as Brigid says in the first Act, O'Flingsley and the Canon are more alike than they can see.

*Shadow and Substance* received universally good reviews despite Carroll’s bias against the Church. It is interesting, though, to note here the variances in the press reactions. The traditionally conservative *Irish Times* praised Carroll’s ‘preoccupation’ with the notion of clerical predominance in Irish affairs’ and saw it as a rich source for drama. However, the *Irish Independent*, while noting the Canon’s failure in the running of the school, chose to see it as an individual, rather than Church, failing, while the Fianna Fáil paper, the *Irish Press* chose to see the play as principally concerned with – and successful in – uniting the Canon and O'Flingsley.

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130 Carroll 55.
133 *Irish Press* 26 January 1937: 12. When the play toured to Cork in November of 1940 the *Cork Examiner* review reported the ‘enthusiastic oration’ and declared that there was ‘nothing in the play to which one might reasonably take exception from the religious point of view’. *Cork Examiner* 11 November 1940: 4.
In his battles with O'Flingsley the Canon emerges not as the learned man and idealist he would prefer to appear as but as a perpetrator of the same sort of censorship and abuse of power that he objects to in the curates and, by extension, that is operated by the Church. As O'Flingsley says, 'Hurrah for the Catholic ideal! A rebel knocked out; a niece married off; and a school made safe for a stagnant tradition all in the one move! Canon, you deserve a seat in Maynooth.' Yet, despite the conflict between O'Flingsley and the Canon, and O'Flingsley's acerbic parting remarks, it is Brigid (as discussed above) who comes closest to destabilising the Canon's order.

The Modern City

The Canon fears that he may be overwhelmed by modern, non-institutional approaches such as Brigid and O'Flingsley advocate. Equally afraid and threatened by modernity is the young man in Norris Davidson's By Accident who sees the modern city as vertiginous, threatening and overwhelming. The opening scene of the film shows the young man walking up O'Connell Street with a young woman, towards Nelson's Pillar. The street is bustling and the couple must make their way between people, hawkers, cars and carts. Once at the top of the Pillar, the young man is alone and seems afraid, both of the height and the city. The film cuts from close-ups of the young man pressing himself against the wall of the Pillar (away from the edge), and looking up to the statue of Nelson atop the pillar; to his view over O'Connell Street, with the statue of Daniel O'Connell in the distance; to a ground-level shot of the pillar and then, finally, to a close-up of the young man. The young man's fear is provoked both by his vertigo and by his repellent vision of the city, which, from this height, seems to be limitless and therefore threatening.

134 Carroll 55.
The destructive energy of modernity seems an unstoppable force, for, like the sea's tides, it functions irrespective of man's interference. Indeed, the growth of the cities and towns of Ireland, at the expense of the rural areas, perhaps seemed like an inexorable tide in the thirties.

After his fall from a cliff, the first vision that the young man has is of the city. In a series of rapidly edited shots, we see the city as a mélange of images: trams, streets, people walking, horse and carriages, newspapers and road signs, all superimposed over a background shot of a fist hitting an iron door. In one of these shots, men are selling newspapers from a stall that bears the sign 'Victory for the Scabs' and this reference to workers' strikes, combined with the fist hitting the iron door, suggests the increasing mechanisation of the urban working class and their disenfranchisement, and the more general futility of human struggle against the impenetrable structure of modernity. These images, along with the inert body of the young man as he lies at the foot of the cliff, suggest both his inability to cope with the speed of modern urban life, and his aversion to the changes in society, particularly Irish society, that this speed entails.

The urban space as threat results in the pronounced tension in *Blarney* between the city and the countryside. *Blarney* replaces religious and national divides with the traditional divide between the country and the city, and Annie and Billy's desire to settle in the countryside, and in particular Annie's self-consciousness about her urban background, epitomise the film's antipathy to the city. Billy and Annie first form a bond when they discover that they are both from Dublin, Inchicore and Kilmainham.

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135 The fast-paced juxtaposition of shots in this sequence bears the mark of the influence of Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) in which Ruttmann documented Berlin as a visceral experience, albeit a positive one.
respectively, and know each other’s cousins. Billy tells Annie that he’s glad to have met her, as he’s ‘been away so long, I’m glad to meet a friendly face and talk our own language.’ At the end of this conversation, Annie asks Billy if he thinks she has a ‘Dublin accent’. Billy tells her that her accent is no stronger than his, and they both laugh. Their accents and city background mark them out from the other inhabitants of Ballydann and further illustrate that it is regional differences, specifically the difference between urban and rural natives, which constitute the most meaningful divide in the film and which take the place of national divisions and it is this division that Annie and Billy strive to overcome.

The countryside is established as the space of virtue, as represented by Mac, Maura, Billy and Annie’s visit to a dance at the crossroads where there is Irish dancing and where Irish is spoken. The rural space is thus the space of true Irishness, as in The Islandman, and the Northern RUC man’s presence (though he is out of uniform) indicates that this cultural identity is open to all rural dwellers.

In contrast, the city is depicted as a site of danger and corruption. Of Liverpool Billy says that there was ‘nothin’ to look out on but factory chimneys with not a bird to be seen except pigeons.’ And, when Annie asks him what he would do should he win the reward, she supposes that he would go to London to live the high life. Yet Billy replies that he hates London, foreseeing that he could be ‘beaten and kicked and starved’, preferring instead to buy ‘a nice living in the country’. Moreover, after Billy is identified as a witness in the jewel heist, he travels to Dublin to be interviewed by the New York News Agency, and is promised five hundred pounds for his exclusive story. However, when he arrives in Dublin he finds that the journalist is in fact a member of the
gang of thieves who tries to attack him before Billy escapes the trap and flees Dublin. The film thus equates cities with crime, poverty and unemployment and portrays them as unnatural.

The thieves are temporarily able to hide in their country cottage, but are inevitably exposed as urban outsiders. Billy finally realises that the tourist couple, the Tylers, are the jewel thieves when Sadie Tyler offers him a cigarette. Billy realises that this is the same brand – Autocrat – that one of the jewel thieves gave him. When he takes this evidence to Mac, Mac remarks that Autocrat cigarettes are an ‘American brand’ which is ‘not smoked in this part of Ireland and certainly not in this district.’ Mac’s specificity that the brand – which suggests negative images of despotism – is not smoked in that region demonstrates not only that the thieves and the Tylers are one and the same, but confirms them as outsiders. Their association with America and urbanity exclude the thieves from the rural space and Billy’s role in capturing them confirms him as a member of the rural community and further underlines the morality of the countryside versus the immorality of the city.

As he lies at the bottom of the cliff, one of the visions the young man in By Accident has is of a sunny day in the Phoenix Park. While lazing on a grassy knoll alongside Chesterfield Avenue, he sees a horse and carriage in the distance and, farther away, a car. The car overtakes the horse and carriage and then swerves to pull into the side of the road. The driver, a young man disguised as a white-haired and bearded old man, gestures to him to get into the car. He does so and, as they drive off, he tells the driver to ‘Speed on, Big Boy’. They drive for only a short distance before they accidentally knock over a pedestrian. Horrified, the young man gets out of the car only to

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137 Sadie Tyler, played by Julie Suedo.
discover that the pedestrian they have knocked over is, indeed, himself. He looks back at the car and sees that the driver has removed his disguise and is laughing callously at the situation. This scene amply illustrates modernity’s acceleration of time and its bypassing of the old systems. The speed of this progress is too great and thus threatens the future. The young man is horrified not only at his inevitable mortality but the fear of being complicit with the very technology that threatens to destroy him.

By using a surrealist style in the Phoenix Park scene, Davidson uses film form itself to add to the young man’s fear that the speed of modern progress threatens to overwhelm both the individual and society. Surrealism was, like Dadaism before it, a reaction to the war in Europe. While advocating revolution and chaos in art it was, nevertheless, an anti-technology movement. As John Willett argues, ‘whatever else surrealism might be, it was not linked to modern society and modern technology but rather a revolt against it, or at best a corrective.’ Instead, surrealism was attracted to social revolution, along Trotskyist lines, and rejected the alienation that modern society created, by championing the power of the imagination against the tyranny of rationalism. The surrealist style is thus not an escape route for the young man, but one more factor that he must struggle against, trying to assert rational control over his life and the world he sees around him, to no avail.

Suicide

The young man’s abiding fear, as he lies at the bottom of the cliff, however, is that his death will be interpreted as suicide. He has always been an outsider, and this was

brought home to him at a young age, when two women declared him to be ‘A Queer One’, a moment he remembers during a flashback sequence. This awareness of being on the edge of social norms is what leads him to believe that his death will be interpreted as suicide. Suicide, in general, rose in the years between the two world wars and, as Emile Durkheim argues, this rise was a reaction to the loss of the close social integration experienced during wartime. While there are no statistics on suicide in Ireland in this period, in 1911 the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* noted that young men were particularly at risk from suicide. In Ireland, where suicide was a felony, it was seen extremely negatively and this is illustrated in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in which Leopold Bloom’s father’s suicide is spoken of as ‘the greatest disgrace to have in the family.’ The young man’s fervent hope that his death will be seen to be ‘by accident’ illustrates the anxiety surrounding suicide in this period in Ireland, as well as his own anxieties as to how he is perceived by others.

While the young man is anxious that his death be regarded as an accident, the film seems to suggest that his death is linked to modernity. This is implied not only by his vision of being knocked down in the Phoenix Park, but also as modernity and the speed of the modern city threaten to overwhelm him throughout the film. Moreover, should the young man’s death be seen as an accident it would be a symbol of the contingency of life in modern Ireland, just as much as if his death were interpreted as suicide. The young man’s passivity and his inability to cope with modern life or heights, furthermore, seem to imply a weakening of male identity. Thus, perhaps some of the anxiety surrounding

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139 For a discussion of the relation between Emile Durkheim’s work on suicide and the Irish situation, see Fergal Bowers, *Suicide in Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Medical Organisation, 1994).
140 Quoted in Bowers 18.
141 Mr Power and Mr Cunningham discuss his suicide in James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922; London: Penguin, 1986) 79.
gender roles in *The King of Spain's Daughter*, in particular, the invocations to Jim to 'Be a man’ can also be read in the young man’s plight in *By Accident*.

The young man’s lack of control over his own life or his surroundings, and his total lack of it in his present circumstances is epitomised by his sense of social exclusion and insecurity. His intense self-consciousness is typical of urban life yet doesn’t lead to any sense of a whole person. Rather, forced to try to sum up his life, he can see only disjointed images – varying from visions of the city; his childhood; the surreal to romantic memories – which construct him as a character with a fractured identity. In this, the young man is analogous to Ireland, each straining to assert a unified identity in the face of modernity and the legacy of colonialism. Indeed, both the young man and Ireland seem unable to escape images of colonialism.

**Colonialism**

The anxiety that runs through *By Accident* over the threat that modernity and the city pose to the self is added further depth by the film’s other preoccupation: colonialism. Throughout the film images of colonialism recur and the first and most obvious of these is Nelson’s pillar. When the young man is at the top of the pillar, he alternates between looking down at O'Connell Street and looking up at the statue of Nelson. Nelson’s pillar, erected in 1808 and paid for by subscriptions from Dublin merchants, grateful to Nelson for clearing trade routes, is thus a dual symbol of capitalism and colonialism – two of the driving forces behind modernity.

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The colonial motif continues in the young man’s visions of his childhood, which are set in the Martello Tower at Howth. The Martello Towers, built in the early nineteenth century in response to the fear of invasion by Napoleon, may seem to be a protective symbol yet they are, in fact, a symbol of the continuing colonisation of Ireland by the English. Moreover, in the vision set in the Phoenix Park, the car crash occurs on Chesterfield Avenue, and, most likely, just before the gates of what was then the Governor General’s house. The lack of constancy in the young man’s sense of self is thus linked not only to the multiplicitous experience of modernity but also to the failure of the new State to fully dismantle the symbols and structures of colonialism and thus assert a unified identity to compensate for the disruptions of recent Irish history. The young man’s hesitancy is caused not only by the onslaught of modernity, but also by his perception of the absence of security in the Free State.

On the one hand while Nelson’s Pillar and the Governor General’s house represent colonial oppression, on the other, they also seem to represent safety to the young man. According to his vision of visiting the Martello Tower as a boy, an adult held him over the parapet of the Tower, to look at the sea lapping against its walls. This event leads to terror and vertigo, much like that he experiences at the top of Nelson’s Pillar years later when he presses himself against the wall of the Pillar. While he does experience terror on the Pillar, outside the Governor General’s house, and on the walls of the tower, it is the outside world – the modern city, the speed of life and the waves, which implicitly represent the unstructured world of Irish freedom – that threatens to overwhelm him, and of which he is truly terrified. By Accident suggests that Ireland is still caught

143 They also indirectly refer back to Nelson’s Pillar, as it was Nelson who defeated Napoleon and protected Britain and Ireland from the threat of European incursions.
between colonialism and freedom and it is this that causes the young man’s confusion and inability to cope with the world he finds himself in. Moreover, Ireland has allowed its traditional way of life – for example, the horse and cart in the Phoenix Park – to be overtaken and made redundant by modernity, thus further destabilising Irish society and culture.

*By Accident* thus seems to look to the past and to colonialism for security and bemoans the engulfing of Ireland by modernity. The deleterious effects of modernity and the implied moral degeneracy of the city in *By Accident* is made explicit in *The Islandman* in which Neal falls prey to the deleterious effects of the city. However, Neal is redeemed by the restorative effects of the countryside, specifically the Blasket Islands. Though Neal is initially afraid of the stormy seas surrounding the Blaskets, rather than drown, as the young man in *By Accident* does, he learns to master them.

**Urban >> Rural**

Before going to the Blaskets Neal is a drunken wayward student. As the narrator puts it, there ‘were too many nights that were mornings, too little sleep, not enough study’. The film shows Neal walking out of Trinity College one morning with Tomás O’Crohan’s book *The Islandman* under his arm, heading for the Phoenix Park to ‘get a grip on himself’. In the Park Neal sits next to the monument to Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington. Wellington was of course a hugely successful Irishman in England, both militarily and politically. However, as his famous comment implies, that ‘Just because one is born in a stable does not make one a horse’, his Irish heritage was not one he was particularly proud of and, indeed, one from which he distanced himself. Neal, reading
"The Islandman," is thus a striking contrast to this image of the Irish leaving or denying their roots in Ireland. Rather than choose the path that Arthur Wellesley chose and journey eastward to England, traditionally seen as the route to success and escape from a troubled Ireland, Neal walks westward to the Blasket Islands, thereby becoming, as it were, more Irish than before.

Once on the Great Blasket Neal realises that he has an affinity with island life, strengthened by his growing love for Eileen, an island woman. Yet, early in the film Eileen tells Neal that she will only consider marrying an island man as they make life possible for the island women which, as she says, 'is no easy task'. Key to Eileen's later realisation of her love for Neal and her rejection of Liam, her betrothed, is that Neal changes to accommodate himself to island life. Upon his return to the island in the second half of the film, Neal declares to Eileen and Liam that he will not be leaving again and that he intends to become an island man. Neal enlists Liam's help and Liam teaches him to row, fish and farm like an islander. Eileen's transfer of her affections from Liam to Neal is thus in response to Neal's transformation.

By adapting to the traditional island way of life Neal shows Eileen that he is capable of making life possible for her on the island yet, as he says to her, he can bring his medical knowledge to the island as well, adding his own skills to the community. It is not only Neal who is shown to be adaptable; Eileen is also capable of accommodating change. Neal returns to Trinity at the end of his holiday, but is drawn back to the Great Blasket because he has heard Eileen singing on the radio. Upon his return, Eileen tells him that after he had left the island she had gone to the mainland to record a traditional island song. Eileen is thus able to move between the island and mainland while still
being rooted in traditional island life. She has not heard the record herself, however, and it is only Neal who makes this possible by bringing both the record and a gramophone to the island. Neal is once again illustrating that he will adapt to the island but bring the positive aspects of modernity with him.

Throughout the film Liam represents the traditional ways of island life, skilled in currach building, fishing and farming. When Neal first leaves the island Eileen and Liam accompany him to the mainland. Neal persuades Eileen to go to Dingle with him in a hired car, to buy presents for the islanders. However, the car breaks down and Neal and Eileen are late in returning to meet Liam at the shore. When Liam hears of the reason for their delay he laughs, saying ‘A currach never breaks down.’ It seems at least at the beginning that Liam’s traditional perspective has won him both the day and the girl.

Yet, from the beginning of the film Liam is in a weakened position. It is Liam whose hand is injured and Neal whose medical knowledge heals it. When Neal returns and becomes an island man himself, he illustrates both his love for Eileen and his capacity to change and forge a new identity. Liam has no such capacity. In fact, while a currach may never break down when Liam makes this statement the shot shows that the sea, in the background, is rough and stormy and this visually belies the safety and reliability of the currach. Liam’s death in a currach accident acknowledges that the pure and uncompromisingly traditional way of life is dangerous for the islanders. In order to survive it seems that the islanders must learn to accept aspects of modern life into their traditions. Yet, the film further, and perhaps more strongly, suggests that in order for modern Ireland to survive it must reacquaint itself with its traditions. *The Islandman* thus
Fig. 1 Neal in his Trinity rooms, listening to the radio, *The Islandman*
epitomises the anxieties of the new Free State and the tension between tradition and modernity experienced by it, a tension also to the fore in *By Accident* and *The Moon*.

**Culture**

Neal first encounters the idea of going to the Blaskets by reading some of the literature that emerged from the islands in the 1920s and 1930s. When Neal sits reading *The Islandman* the film cuts to a long shot of one of the islands. The book therefore has the power to summon up images of the island that are so powerful they cause Neal to pack up immediately and hike across the country to Kerry. The same phenomenon occurs when, back in Dublin, he hears Eileen singing on the radio. The film dissolves from a shot of Neal sprawled drunkenly in his rooms in Trinity to shots of Eileen, the Great Blasket, and sheep being carried from currachs onto the shore. Following this sequence the film cuts back to the island where Liam is telling Eileen that he hopes Neal will one day return. Overhearing him, Peg shakes her head and tells him that ‘Neal lives in a different world.’

This statement is refuted when, in the next scene, Neal arrives back on the island. In this, his second trip, there is no time lag between him leaving the city and arriving at the Blaskets and we are not shown Neal walking across the country, or indeed even leaving Trinity. This suggests the power of culture generally, and in particular, modern communications such as the radio, to perform a cohesive function. While Neal is first attracted to the idea of the Blasket Islands by literature, it is the power of the radio that drives him to overcome the obstacles between him and Eileen and return to the island. Heale is thus implying that radio creates such a strong imagined community that it collapses spatial boundaries and distances. By extension, film is even more powerful

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144 Peg, played by Delia Murphy.
as it can carry a cinema audience to the Blaskets without their ever leaving the cinema. Modern modes of culture can thus create a space within which the rural-urban divide can be overcome.

The image of unity is one that the film strives to promote and this comes across most obviously when Liam, on his deathbed, joins Neal and Eileen’s hands while the community looks on. The film effectively uses island life to make this point. The islanders of the Great Blasket are not only a close-knit community but inhabit an undivided island, a symbol that, for Ireland in this period, must have been greatly evocative. Moreover, the powerful currents and choppy seas between the island and the mainland ensure that it is a sealed community. As Neal tells Eileen, one of the things he loves most about the island is its ‘isolation from the outside world’. This comment and Neal’s renunciation of mainland life imply that, though the island culture must accept new developments in order to survive, it is too important culturally to give up its separateness.

*The Islandman* was praised by reviewers for advocating the wholesomeness of island life, in comparison with ‘the sordid half-life of the city’.*145* It came under fire, however, for its introduction of the dreaded ‘red triangle’ of Hollywood films to the Blaskets.*146* Yet, though Neal and Eileen’s relationship does lead to a ‘red triangle’, Neal behaves entirely honourably, declaring that he is satisfied just being near Eileen and that he would not hurt Liam as ‘an island man must not gain over another’. While introducing a love story in order to adhere to the classical Hollywood style, the film maintains its integrity and places the ‘triangle’ in the context of the community’s

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*146* MacGabhann 5. *The Dublin Evening Mail* also criticised the sacrifice of pure island life for the story of a ‘tippling Dublin medical student’, 1 April 1939: 4.
customs. It thus endorses the power of the island’s morality to limit the damage caused
by the intrusion of modern decadence, generally identified with the city and America,
into their traditional way of life and to maintain the same codes of behaviour as before.
This is a strong sign that the islands will not fall prey to the perceived evils of modernity,
such as the promiscuity of the dance hall.

Indeed, both temperamentally and morally, the islanders appear to be a ‘race
apart’. Though they welcome Neal and his modern capabilities into their midst, once he
becomes an island man there is no implication that he will maintain contact with his
previous city life. This is the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the film. While
Neal’s move to the island and Liam’s death both seem to imply that the island must move
on from its ultra-traditional past, the island remains essentially unchanged. The ultimate
proof that modernity has not transformed the island is that Neal’s modern medical
knowledge fails to save Liam’s life, as it had done previously. In becoming an island
man, it seems that Neal has jettisoned his previous identity, not forged a new inclusive
one. Moreover, the failure of Neal’s medical knowledge is a bitter pre-echo of the fact
that the last inhabitants of the Blaskets finally left the islands due to the lack of a doctor.

The final image of the film is of Neal and Eileen on the cliffs, facing the stormy
sea. This image echoes the idea of Flaherty’s earlier film, *Man of Aran*, which extolled
the virtues of the island people who face the elements alone, with no help from
technology. The film’s visual echo of *Man of Aran* implies that it too endorses the
version of the islanders as a premodern race. It seems that unity can be brought about by
modernity but only fully achieved by sacrificing it.
This undercurrent points to the real agenda of Heale’s film. The most important transformation is not the modernising of the islands but rather the renaissance of traditional Irish, rural culture and its potentially positive influence on modern Ireland. Neal is in his room in Trinity when he hears Eileen’s ‘The Spinning Song’ announced by the radio presenter as a ‘novelty’. Upon his return to the island Neal realises that none of the islanders have heard the song, not least Eileen herself. The audience for traditional Irish culture is thus not the rural population, but the urban. As Luke Gibbons argues, ‘the idealizations of rural existence, the longing for community and primitive simplicity, are the product of an urban sensibility, and are cultural fictions imposed on the lives of those they purport to represent.’

The film’s most effective demonstration of the renaissance of traditional Irish culture is in its translation of images of colonialism into images of Catholic, Gaelic Ireland. So, Neal the Protestant, Trinity student becomes a Blaskets’ island man. His early comment to fellow students that he may ‘Go Native’, a traditionally colonial remark, indicates the cultural re-appropriation going on in the film. The most striking example of this has already been alluded to. When sitting in the Phoenix Park, Neal is occupying a space conventionally associated with colonialism. Yet, since the 1932 Catholic Eucharistic Congress, held in the Park, it had also become associated with Catholic nationalism, and Neal’s reading of O’Crohan’s book while there, further translates the Park into a symbol of traditional, Gaelic Ireland. Furthermore, by exchanging the urban pastoral space of the Park for the pastoral reality of the Blaskets, the film also advocates a move from the virtual quality of urban experience to the realities of rural life.

As with Blarney, in which the attitude to the Border is positive, yet unrealistic, The Islandman avoids reality in order to achieve its positive vision of life on the Blaskets. The film uses modernity, paradoxically, as a medium through which to return to a less modern world, which in reality modern Ireland – and in particular the urban cinema audience – is fast moving away from. This idea is echoed only four years later in Éamon de Valera’s now famous St. Patrick’s Day radio-broadcast, in which he spoke of an idealised, premodern Ireland. Yet, for de Valera, as for the Blaskets, this ideal was already in the past and, when held up against the harsh economic reality of Irish rural life, the rhetoric of both film and speech comes across as empty.

While the signs of rural life – nationalism, Catholicism and community – may have been on the rise, the reality of rural life in Ireland, particularly in the West, was that it was declining. In real life then Eileen, if she had remained on the island and not migrated to the east as many Irish women did, far from having two eligible suitors, she would more likely have had none.

In fact, rather than halting the decline of the West, Fianna Fáil’s modernising campaigns to make Ireland self-sufficient by increasing both industrial growth and farm sizes, may have hastened the decline. As Tony Varley and Chris Curtain argue, Fianna Fáil’s ‘rhetoric and campaign pledges were not matched by performance... [and] by the closing years of the 1930s’ this ‘had become the source of considerable disappointment in the West of Ireland.’ Though the Blaskets were not directly affected by the lack of policies favouring small farmers and controlling land redistribution they were not helped by them either, and there were no policies aimed at keeping the Blasket Island population

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steady. One letter writer in 1937 hoped ‘that something will be done to help these people; they have given so much to the revival of our language...’. However, as Éamon de Valera put it in Fianna Fáil’s economic policy, the Irish were ‘going to have to give up the luxuries of a certain kind’ in order to maintain independence. He further advised that ‘we should forget as far as we can what are the standards prevalent in countries outside this’. Following this line of logic, sustaining life on the Blaskets was one of the luxuries that had to be sacrificed. By the 1950s the islands were completely depopulated.

Nostalgia?

Rather than resulting in the migration of city-dwellers to the margins of Ireland, books like *The Islandman* by Tomás O’Crohan were assimilated by the mainland culture and read as an elegy for the island way of life. Thus, despite its upbeat tone there are many hints in the film that island life is not as buoyant as it first appears. One version of the film, entitled *Eileen Aroon*, has an extended voice-over prologue. The voice-over informs the viewer that, while the islanders ‘speak of themselves as the next parish to America’ they are so isolated that they represent ‘the last outpost of the Celts and of their unique and ancient culture.’ The elegiac tone continues when the prologue quotes O’Crohan, saying ‘Our counterparts the future cannot hold.’ Indeed, some parts of the film imply that not even the current islanders are O’Crohan’s counterparts. While some

151 There were three versions of the film: *Eileen Aroon, West of Kerry* and *The Islandman*. Of the three, *The Islandman* is the best in quality and most sophisticated in terms of story and editing. It appears that *Eileen Aroon* is edited for a non-Irish audience and its main difference from *The Islandman* is the addition of a prologue about the Blasket Islands. There is no extant print of *West of Kerry*. 

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Irish is spoken in the film the dominant language is English. At his first introduction to island culture, the céilí held in his honour, Neal asks Eileen if all the islanders speak Gaelic. In reply she says ‘Oh yes, but we understand your language too’. She then goes on to sing in Irish but Peg sings in English and the song that Eileen records for the radio is ‘The Spinning Song’ which she sings twice during the film, both times in English. The dominance of English in the film suggests that the island culture represented is not as pure as it wants viewers to believe and that modernity has already affected island life. Indeed, Eileen is played by Eileen Curran, a well-known traditional Irish singer and actress from Cork. When Neal and Eileen face the stormy waves together at the end, it seems as if myth has triumphed and that Neal has been totally assimilated into the island culture, thereby replacing Liam. Neal’s medical knowledge fails to save Liam, indicating the fallibility of modernity and the triumph of the elements. This is underlined by the inexorable quality of the waves crashing against the rocks. Yet, in this scene Eileen is not dressed in traditional island dress and this, combined with the positive effects of modernity throughout most of the film and the dominance of English, undermines the notion of a return to a ‘pure’ Irishness. These elements of the film undermine the usual romanticisation inherent in the journey west and imply that audiences cannot access an undiluted version of rural or western Ireland.

The implicit acknowledgment of the romanticisation of the islands is evident from the beginning of the film and the way Neal’s story is framed. *The Islandman* opens in a cottage, as an islander is telling the story of Neal’s arrival on the Great Blasket to a visitor from Dublin. As the storyteller continues, the film dissolves from the cottage scene to Neal’s rooms in Trinity. By framing the narrative in this way, Neal’s story
becomes mythic; a story told around the fireplace by the seanchai. The narrator, however, is absent from the end of the film. This lack of closure leaves the film’s ending open, just as Neal and Eileen’s future will be, and enables the audience to draw their own conclusions.

The vision that Heale presents in *The Islandman* is thus one which sees the future of Ireland not in regressing to an era of premodernity, nor of uncritically accepting modernity but envisages the solution as fusing the sense of community, traditional skills and values with the advantages that modernity has brought to Ireland. Neal’s transformation refutes the islanders’ early opinion of him as belonging to a ‘different world’. As Neal and Eileen’s relationship shows, bridges can be built between different worlds and a new and better one forged. The film’s strategy is thus to suggest that happy endings are made from the richness of the differences between cultures and, that by recognising this, the Irish can overcome the divisions in their society, most notably the rural–urban divide. Accordingly, the emphasis of the film is on creating a balance and harmony between different ways of life: the cultural riches of the island are balanced by the novelties of modernity such as the radio, while the degeneracy of the city is balanced by the bittersweet nature of Liam’s death.

*The Islandman* is thus a cultural fiction, but a knowing one, aware of the nostalgic impulse unavoidably inherent in such a project. Yet the project is still deemed worthwhile by Heale and O’Cahill. *The Islandman*, despite its acknowledgement that romantic Ireland is, if not dead and gone, then at least illusory, does not invalidate its underlying message. The implication is that it is better for the island to survive as a hybrid, between modernity and tradition, and to sacrifice some aspects of modernity in
order to achieve this, than to become entirely extinct. The film thus seems to suggest
that, while purity is not possible, hybridity presents an attractive alternative. Though
island life and its pristine, traditional culture may never be attainable in reality, Neal’s
journey, Heale and O’Cahill seem to say, is still one that modern Ireland needs to
undertake.

Positive Positions

Unlike The Islandman and Blarney’s generally uncritical acceptance of the countryside as
morally superior to the city, By Accident, despite its fear of the modern city, does not
revert to idealising the rural and chooses instead to see Ireland in terms of continuity. In
fusing together images that are quintessentially urban and rural – the pillar and the cliff-
top – Davidson overcomes the divide between the two spaces, thus representing modern
Ireland as one continuous space. The young man does not find refuge in the countryside.
Rather, just as the speed and chaos of the city threatens to overwhelm him, so does the
natural world he encounters in the countryside. Following the montage sequence of the
city, the film sets up a similar sequence of the countryside, cutting rapidly between
images of the young man, waves lapping against the rocks he lies on and birds circling
overhead, at which point the young man grips onto a small rock lying beside him and
cries out in fear and pain. Even though the sea’s tide is a natural phenomenon, it, like the
city, represents a threat to him, and though the birds wheeling above him are only
seagulls, yet still they appear vulture-like, ready to prey upon him. This sequence
establishes the countryside as equally dangerous to the young man as the city, and he is
equally unable to ground himself or hold onto any secure (physical) reality as he is atop the Pillar.

The tide of modernity, like the tide of the sea, is inexorable. *By Accident* deliberately links the two tides through their effect on the young man, and thus avoids the polarisation of Ireland into two spaces. Overall, *By Accident* strives for a balanced approach to modernity, even at moments of crisis for the young man. As he lies dying he recites lines from Andrew Marvell’s poem ‘To His Coy Mistress’:

\[
\text{But at my back I always hear} \\
\text{Time’s winged-chariot hurrying near} \\
\text{And yonder all before us lie} \\
\text{Deserts of vast eternity}
\]

The insistence on time and the ungracious speed with which death chases us reflects both the young man’s preoccupation with modernity and his recognition of his approaching death. Yet, by using a seventeenth-century poem to express this, the film reveals that neither mortality nor the hurried speed of life are new concepts. Ireland’s urbanisation is thus only the latest stage of modernity and should be understood in the wider context of the modern age.

Like Marvell’s poem, the link between the sea’s tide and the modern tide tempers the latter and puts it into a new perspective. The modern tide must, like the sea, be a force not only of death and erosion, but of renewal, governed by an order and rhythm, albeit imperceptible to the young man. In not turning to an idealised image of the countryside, in *By Accident* Davidson acknowledges that, though it may at first appear destructive, modernity is an ever-present force, which must be faced. This balanced view is the attitude which ultimately emerges from *The Moon* also.
The Moon's plot centres on opposition to the industrial development of Ireland, specifically the building of a hydroelectric power station. This mirrors actual changes taking place in the Free State: in 1924 Thomas McLaughlin put forward the proposal to build a dam on the river Shannon and in June 1925 the Shannon Electricity Act was passed. Within a few months the German firm, Siemens-Schuckert, began construction on a hydroelectric power station.\textsuperscript{152} The station was part of the Free State's Rural Electrification Programme, since known as 'The Quiet Revolution' because of the massive economic and social changes it brought about, and by 1936 was providing 87% of Ireland's electricity needs.\textsuperscript{153}

The play's indirect references to the Shannon scheme, as with Dobelle's home, reveal the extent to which the nation was renegotiating its identity and the landscape was taking on new meanings. The landscape was not only changing because of the removal of the British military presence but was being resculpted by the Free State government. By building a Hydro-Electric Dam and powerhouse on the Shannon the government was trying to modernise the country's industries and supply electricity to rural areas, and, as a byproduct, was also modifying people's attitude to the landscape of the West of Ireland. The western landscape was shifting from being seen as the natural home of the wild, Celtic spirit to being a productive natural resource. Though Johnston creates Blake as a sympathetic character, he also satirises his romantic position when Blake tells Tausch, 'here we believe that the dawn will break in the west. You bring us light from the wrong direction.'\textsuperscript{154} However, this comment functions mostly as part of Blake's baiting of

\textsuperscript{152} Seán Keating was commissioned to paint several pictures of the dam and its construction.
\textsuperscript{153} For the background to this important development, see The Shannon Hydro-electric Plan (Limerick, 1929) and Lyons 606-8.
\textsuperscript{154} Johnston, The Moon 92.
Tausch and Johnston does not fully develop a critique of romanticised versions of the west of Ireland.

Blake, the play’s most passionate character, is diametrically opposed to the powerhouse and, by extension, the industrialisation of Ireland. Blake asserts that he is not a ‘parochial politician’ but that his aim is to liberate the country from the ‘self-inflicted ... shackle’ of ‘ludicrous machinery’, thus viewing industrialisation as a form of neo-colonialism.\(^{155}\) George, the man in charge of the armoury, supports Blake’s stance, saying that:

> when I was in Birmingham I sometimes used to watch all those women and young girls coming in and out of the factories. And, you know I was touched – more touched than I can say. All those women and young girls having to work night and day, with their poor, pale, pasty faces ... They ought to be kept out of doors and have proper homes of their own, you know. No life for young girls.\(^{156}\)

George’s elegy for the English working-class, however, would be a more accurate objection to the type of factory referred to in Deevy’s The King and not the Shannon dam. Audience reactions to Blake’s position might thus have been ambivalent. On the one hand, as John Doyle says in Cathal Black’s Korea (1995), ‘There are some things the electricity can’t change’, and this is the case for many of the rural poor whose poverty worsened despite the Shannon and other modernisation schemes (as discussed above in relation to Heale’s The Islandman). On the other hand, however, Blake doesn’t even appear to consider the possibility that electricity might improve living and working conditions and in this regard, it seems that he is after all the obstinate romantic that Tausch takes him for. However, as Thomas Kilroy argues, while Johnston sees ‘the romantic as an obsolete figure’ he nevertheless concedes ‘a degree of guarded affection

\(^{155}\) Johnston, The Moon 90; 92.

\(^{156}\) Johnston, The Moon 108.
towards the romantic [position]. Blake’s death, then, is Johnston’s acknowledgment of the need for a ‘forward looking consciousness’ but Lanigan’s coldness reveals the extent to which Johnston was ‘deeply cynical about contemporary progress.’ Johninton’s cynicism does not, however, persuade us that progress is a harmful force. The light at the end of the play and Blanaid’s enthusiasm for education and the future seem to confirm that the future cannot be ignored.

In The Moon, The Islandman and Blarney the future is posed as an unknown and possibly threatening prospect. Whether or not these works engage directly with the idea of the future, the future is nevertheless at issue. Though the landscape of By Accident, The Islandman and The Moon are very different, each work attempts to articulate their author or director’s concerns about modern Ireland and pays tribute to the sacrifices – the young man, Liam and Blake – that are the price of progress. Further, though The Moon and Blarney use comedy to express their concerns they are, nevertheless, highlighting problems unique to Ireland in the thirties. It is this attempt, to articulate both national and social problems, that unites these six works, despite the very different issues and responses to those problems that they represent.

In so far as these works express the thoughts and emotions of Ireland, one theme connects them: landscape. The place of the individual within the landscape – be it urban or rural – is crucial and the themes of revolutionary aftermath, gender and modernity are also mediated through the larger theme of landscape. Though Dobelle’s family live in a converted barracks, the military traces come back to haunt them. In The Islandman landscape connotes identity, while in By Accident both the urban and rural landscape

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157 Kilroy 51.
158 Kilroy 51.
threaten to overwhelm the 'soul-tortured youth'. Annie, in *The King*, dreams of escape from her cultural and physical landscape, while Annie in *Blarney* wants to settle down in a landscape devoid of political divisions. It is in *Shadow and Substance*, however, where we see the full power of landscape as it intimidates the Canon and threatens his sense of personal and religious identity. Landscape thus plays a major role in all of these works and, as will be discussed in the following two chapters, the issue of landscape – mental, cultural and actual – is key to understanding the psyche of the culture of the 1930s.
CHAPTER THREE
‘THE WHOLE TRUTH’

Whereas in the last chapter the War of Independence only featured as a background, in two of the most interesting films of the decade, the war is the central issue. In Guests of the Nation (1935) and The Dawn (1936) we see two very different responses to the War of Independence. In Guests of the Nation, Johnston develops his critique of the Irish nation by expanding Frank O’Connor’s original story and adding to its sense of the betrayals made necessary by war. Whereas in The Moon Johnston seems deeply ambivalent about nationalism, in Guests of the Nation he overtly criticises the IRA for their lack of humanity. Yet, crucially, in Tom Cooper’s film, The Dawn, released one year later, the attitude to the War of Independence is very different. Where Johnston sees divisiveness, Cooper sees cohesiveness. These two films thus develop the two types of outlook that are discernible in the previous chapter: whether Ireland is inherently divided or whether we can develop a stronger relationship to community and place, thereby creating a more secure and unified world.

Whereas Johnston’s vision of the fight for independence is coloured by his disillusionment at the perceived intellectual failure of the Free State, for Cooper, once an IRA member and now a Fianna Fáil supporter, the War of Independence was a glorious moment in Irish history and should be remembered for the strong bonds that it forged within Irish communities. By looking at both these films and, in particular,
exploring how their attitudes to landscape expresses their different responses to post-revolutionary Ireland, this chapter will show how simultaneously selective in outlook and how germane were both these films to Ireland in the thirties.

**GUESTS OF THE NATION (1935)**
**DENIS JOHNSON**

‘Guests of the Nation’ is the title story of Frank O’Connor’s first collection of short stories, published in 1931.¹ O’Connor and Johnston – colleagues at the Abbey Theatre later in the decade – shared a similar outlook and despised what they perceived as authoritarianism in the Free State. O’Connor had been involved in the War of Independence and was deeply disillusioned about its effects on the ordinary man and was as opposed as Johnston to the increasingly censorial and isolated climate of the Free State in the thirties.

‘Guests of the Nation’ deals uncompromisingly with the harsh reality of being an IRA volunteer during the war.² In O’Connor’s story two IRA men, Bonaparte and Noble, are assigned to guard two British prisoners, Belcher and Hawkins. Bonaparte and Noble befriend the two Englishmen, but as a reprisal for British executions of Irish men, they are ordered to execute their prisoners. The story focuses on how the guards try to change the course of events and how, eventually, they must face their task. Bonaparte’s closing words on the execution scene are a chilling reminder of the alienating effects of war:

I was somehow very small and very lost and lonely like a child astray in the snow. And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.³

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² Although Frank O’Connor was a volunteer during the War of Independence he never saw direct action and was only seventeen when the truce was announced in June 1921.
Johnston takes O’Connor’s story and amplifies it, so that we question not only the tactics of warfare but also the role of landscape as an image which symbolises and justifies nationalism. The perspective of the film is thus, to an even greater extent than O’Connor’s story, shaped by the disappointment felt at post-revolutionary Ireland in the twenties and thirties.

Johnston adapted O’Connor’s story, with help on the script from Mary Manning, in the early months of 1933, and the film was made over the course of the summers of 1933 and 1934. The production was entirely amateur, using actors Johnston knew from the Gate and the Abbey theatres, as well as friends. Barry Fitzgerald, Denis O’Dea, Shelah Richards, Cyril Cusack and Hilton Edwards all make appearances, as does Frank O’Connor himself, playing a volunteer in one of the early scenes of the film. The film was shot in various outdoor locations around Co. Dublin such as the Scalp and Ticknock, while the cottage interior scenes were filmed on a set built in Johnston’s parents’ backgarden in Lansdowne Road. The scenes set in Kilmainham Gaol were filmed on location at the Gaol and in the Gate Theatre and it was this last location at which the premiere of the film was held, playing to ‘a packed auditorium of gate-crashers’. It was well received by both audience and reviewers, but the film, unfortunately, was made on 16mm film and therefore not suitable for commercial distribution.

The film’s format was just one of the issues Johnston encountered. Amateur film-making is beset with problems and, as Johnston records, ‘All of these difficulties we discovered for ourselves ... In those few months we must have lived through the history of the film industry’. So, for example, the crew returned in 1934 to Ticknock, only to find that in the intervening months a ‘new lane had been driven through a field
and a number of trees had been cut down. This necessitated ‘some very tricky angles’ to ensure a sense of continuity in the film.\(^6\) Lighting proved to be another difficulty.

The set for the cottage interior was roofless so that the crew could film without artificial lighting, resulting in strange shadows on the walls of the cottage caused by the changes in the sunlight. A more dramatic problem occurred in the shortage of film stock, which made it impossible to have long tracking shots and therefore forced the crew to come up with a creative solution. The outcome is one fast-paced editing sequence, which cuts between the country cottage and Bonaparte cycling to Dublin. The rapid editing suits the mood of the film at this point and so what may have begun as a problem for the film-makers, has resulted in an assured feature of the finished film. Whether this is just a happy accident or not is debatable. As *By Accident* illustrates, Irish directors were very aware of film style, and Johnston may even have seen Davidson’s film when it screened in the Peacock. Like Davidson, Johnston and his cameramen Harold Douglas and John Manning, may have been aware of the style of Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein and the rapid editing of this sequence may thus be equally due to Eisenstein’s influence as it was due to shortage of film stock.

Though Johnston writes off much of the making of the film as one great ‘adventure’, on closer investigation there is more design to it. Johnston describes the adaptation of O’Connor’s story in a casual manner, saying that ‘having no producers to tell us how to spoil it, we stuck to the story-line faithfully.’\(^7\) Yet the film is not a straightforward adaptation; the setting is moved from Cork to Dublin, many scenes are added and the execution scene, the climax of the story, is changed in the film. Moreover, in unpublished notes for a lecture on the making of the film, Johnston

\(^5\) Johnston, *Orders* 94.
\(^6\) Johnston, *Orders* 94.
states the importance of planning each shot and using editing as a technique to generate meaning. He makes particular note of the way that editing controls interpretation and that this is always noticed by the viewer, at least subconsciously. Johnston's specific reference to editing techniques and their importance should alert us to the role that editing plays in Guests of the Nation and make us look more closely at the meanings generated by the film.

**Landscape and Nature**

Guests of the Nation is characterised by an overarching emphasis on natural imagery and landscape. As will be discussed later, the IRA are shown comfortably navigating the hills and countryside, whereas the Black and Tans are depicted as dependent on the road. At the beginning of the film, the IRA flying column hold up an RIC barracks and take two soldiers, Belcher and Hawkins, prisoner. The Black and Tans, alerted to the presence of the column, attempt to capture them but the noise from the army trucks warns the IRA of their presence. The IRA scatter to the hills and, from their safety, attack the trucks. The two IRA men who remain in the road to fire on the trucks are the only ones captured and the road is thus coded as British territory while the IRA are linked with the wilderness of the hills as their natural habitat. The road is a symbol of modernity; it is thus the terrain of the British armoured trucks. In contrast the wild landscape symbolises the anti- or pre-modernity of Ireland, and a different kind of freedom, which exists beyond the colonial zones of the city and the road and which is impenetrable to the British. Remaining on the road when the Black and Tan trucks are advancing is thus lethal to the two IRA men who ‘belong’ to the wild landscape.

7 Johnston, Orders 93.
The film does not entirely endorse this romanticised vision of the IRA, as will become clear in the discussion of the portrayal of landscape. However, at the outset, the IRA, and by extension Irish nationalism, are allied with the wilderness as opposed to roads and modernity. This alliance is strengthened throughout the film, in particular when Bonaparte and Noble are summoned to meet their commandant. They are first shown sleeping on a grassy hill, under some trees. The tolling of the church bell, calling the community to Mass, wakes Bonaparte, and though he shakes Noble awake, they both lie back onto the turf, until finally they give in to the bell and get up. The motifs of religion and nature are thus linked. While their initial reluctance to go to church implies an indifference to religion, the following part of the sequence intrinsically links Catholicism to nationalism. It transpires through the film that Bonaparte and Noble can resist neither. After church a woman meets the two men and gives them a message to meet their commandant. This meeting takes place in the hills and, following the meeting when they are assigned to guard Belcher and Hawkins, Bonaparte and Noble go to retrieve their weapons. The weapons are concealed and the shot shows Bonaparte pulling the guns out of a hiding place in the ground. This literalises the link between the volunteers and the landscape and lends to the nationalist fight a sense of an organic relationship with the actual land of Ireland and with nature.

This organicism is extended to the relationship that the four men develop. The prisoners are being held in an isolated cottage owned by an old woman, the archetypal vision of the Irish peasant and perhaps a reference to ‘Mother Ireland’. Initially the four men are differentiated from one another by their appearance. The first shot of the prisoners pans up their bodies from their feet, exhibiting them, in uniform, as different

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8 Denis Johnston, note, Denis Johnston Collection, TCD Ms. 10066/26.
or alien. This shot is from the perspective of Bonaparte and Noble and thus the controlling gaze belongs to the Irish characters. Yet, the film overturns this by using humour to break down the barriers between the four.

While Noble and Hawkins are in the cottage, Noble checks the windows and doors for security. Seeing this Hawkins jokingly looks up the chimney. Noble at first does not respond and begins to clean his gun, countering humour with military discipline. However, a sudden noise startles them both and, looking around, they see Hawkins’ accordion on the floor, being played with by a small kitten. At this image of innocence and naturalness the divide between the men begins to dissolve and both laugh at their previous fright. The men get on over the course of the evening and, in the morning, they behave relatively normally. Noble takes Hawkins to wash his face in a nearby patch of water while Bonaparte and Belcher herd a flock of chickens out of the cottage. When Hawkins falls over into the mud both he and Noble laugh, while simultaneously Belcher and Bonaparte laugh at the chickens. The four men are thus shown as individuals and, through the film’s use of montage, as a group.

The relationships are further naturalised by the following scene in which Johnston alternates between shots of a tree in blossom against a clear sky and men in the distance ploughing. Later in the film we see images of sheep being sheared, cementing the naturalness of the men’s’ friendship and seeing it in the context of eternal, seasonal rhythms. In these shots Johnston literalises O’Connor’s phrase in the original story that ‘you could have planted that pair down anywhere from this to Claregalway and they’d have taken root there like a native weed’.  

Standing in contrast to this vision of pastoral harmony, the IRA prisoners in Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin are held under harsh circumstances. Using location
shooting in Kilmainham Gaol itself, Johnston shows one prisoner gazing out of a barred window in a bare cell. When he is taken to see his captors he is marched along the prison corridor to stand before a panel of judges. The judges sit at a long table, underlit so that their faces appear ghostly and they cast huge ominous shadows on the wall behind. This was one of the few scenes shot in the Gate theatre which Johnston says ‘turned out to be much the least successful part of the picture’ due to the artificial lighting. However, the lighting conveys very effectively a sense of foreboding and authoritarianism and this severity is underlined when the film cuts back to a contrasting outdoor shot of Bonaparte, Noble, Belcher and Hawkins in the countryside watching horses cantering.

The four men are not alone, however, but are watched by an IRA leader, who informs the guards that they may have to carry out the reprisal executions. The IRA leader is depicted as slightly sinister, shot in close-up from a low-angle. He is not associated with the four men nor is he aligned with nature, recalling O’Connor’s depiction of him in the original story watching the prisoners and causing Bonaparte to realise ‘that he had no great love for the two Englishmen’. Though the film cuts between shots of sheep being sheared and the four men enjoying the countryside, the IRA leader is set apart as an outsider. As the film then cuts back to the panel of judges in Kilmainham, Johnston suggests that both the IRA leader and the British judges are external forces affecting the natural group which Bonaparte, Noble, Hawkins and Belcher comprise. This is again reinforced when the four are playing cards in the cottage the following evening. As they are playing a man’s shadow falls across the table; it is the IRA leader. Bonaparte and Noble go out of the cottage to

10 Johnston, Orders 94.
11 These shots are possibly influenced by German Expressionism which is characterised by stark black and white and atmospheric lighting.
12 O’Connor 8.
meet him and he gives them a note from the Adjutant General instructing them to execute Hawkins and Belcher the following day at sunset if the IRA men in Kilmainham are executed the next morning. The courier's shadow falling across the four men signals the group's separateness to the IRA leadership and aligns the IRA leaders with the British authorities through their common threatening appearance.

Bonaparte undertakes a journey to Dublin by bicycle in an attempt to stop the executions, but he is only in time to see the notice being put up on the gates of Kilmainham following the executions. Bonaparte's sorrow at this news, combined with his return to the cottage where he finds Noble watching the two prisoners working in the fields and yard, codifies the city as negative and the rural as positive. Yet, when later that evening the IRA leader arrives to deliver the final note, the film refuses this easy division of urban and rural and the presence of death in the countryside draws on the same strategy as *By Accident* in representing rural and urban Ireland as interconnected spaces. Unlike *By Accident*, however, this connection is not because of similar rhythms, but because of the presence of the IRA.

When Bonaparte and Noble uncharacteristically order the Englishmen to 'Pack up. You're moving out of here', the old woman disapprovingly demands to know 'Where are you taking them?' When neither guard responds, she walks away shaking her head. Initially, the old woman was suspicious of all four men but Belcher won her over by helping her with her household chores; her disapproval at this point signals both her awareness of the executions and her condemnation of them. Later the film cuts between the men walking into the hills and the old woman praying and saying the rosary for them. Her role at this point is to embody the rejection of the IRA edict that 'Fealty to the Republic must come first in all circumstances'.

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13 Dan O'Donovan speaks these lines in *The Dawn* in an early scene when he is training volunteers.
In O’Connor’s short story the climax of the narrative is the execution. Hawkins pleads for his life, to the point of offering to defect to the IRA, arguing that he would not let allegiance to country stand in the way of friendship and the morally right action. In contrast, Belcher stoically receives his fate. In the story the landscape plays a role in the situation when it is only:

the picture of them so still and silent in the bogland [that] brought it home to me that we were in earnest, and banished the last bit of hope I had.\(^\text{14}\)

In the film landscape plays a much larger role, acting as a substitute at the point of the executions for the human drama explored in the story. The actual executions are not explicitly depicted, though it remains quite clear that the prisoners have been shot.

The final scenes of the film show the men trudging through the bogland, and one shot focuses on an image of four pairs of feet walking through the bog, leaving their impressions upon its muddy surface. The following shots show a man digging a grave in the bogland while the men walk towards it. Belcher ties on a blindfold and Hawkins realises what is about to happen. He drops to his knees and pleads with Noble. At this point the film cuts to the old woman in her cottage, blowing out two candles and kneeling down to pray.\(^\text{15}\) There are then shots of a man filling in a grave and Bonaparte and Noble silhouetted against the sky as they walk down the mountain. The film then cuts to two pairs of feet walking through the same piece of muddy bogland that had been focussed on a few shots before. This shot is held for a few seconds emphasising the discrepancy between the two pairs of feet now walking across it and the previous impressions made by the four men. Rather than show the

\(^{14}\) O’Connor 13.

\(^{15}\) There is, in the old woman’s actions, a sense of personal spirituality and by editing the blowing out of the candles into the execution scene Johnston implies that the old woman is uncannily and symbiotically connected to the two prisoners. This stands in contrast to the film’s only other image of spirituality, the early scene where the insistent church bell ensures that Noble and Bonaparte go to Mass.
execution, Johnston uses the extinguishing of the candles and this image of landscape, which represents the greater indentation on the land of their graves, to depict the deaths of the two men. Whereas previously the land had been a symbol of regeneration and life in the film it is now an image of death.

**Interpretation**

The absence of the actual shooting of Belcher and Hawkins has tended to influence how the film is read, with Kevin Rockett referring to it as a ‘playing down of the execution scene.’ In one way then, the film lacks the rawness and shock that O’Connor creates so well in the story. Belcher and Hawkins merely disappear into the landscape, somehow organically swallowed up by the bogland. As Cheryl Herr writes, ‘the body in Irish discourse always seems on the verge of reabsorption into the landscape.’ Just as the landscape earlier provided shelter for the IRA, the bogland now safely houses their dead. Johnston thus ultimately avoids confronting the rights and wrongs of the War of Independence and chooses to focus on nature rather than the implications of human action.

Yet both the friendship between the men and the unsympathetic portrait of the IRA leader would seem to directly critique the consequences of war. Certainly, contemporary commentary did not view the disappearance of the men into the landscape as either a playing down of the executions nor as a flaw. The reviewer for the *Irish Independent* argued that ‘Mr. Johnston has raised it to the heights of tragedy’ and that the execution scenes ‘lose nothing of their intensity because they are

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16 Kevin Rockett, ‘1930s Fictions’ 61.
17 Interestingly, in *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939) W. B. Yeats chose not to show the beheading of Cuchulain, an instance in which the imagination failed to cope with the death of such a mythic figure. 18 Cheryl Herr, quoted in Gerardine Meaney, ‘Landscapes of Desire’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 9.3: 248.
deliberately laconic', while the reviewer for the Irish Press noted the key part that the bogland plays in 'the final tragedy'. Indeed, Frank O'Connor, interviewed by the Irish Press, commented that the film 'tells the story better than literature could ever draw it'. By seeing visual representation as more effective than textual narrative O'Connor himself suggests that the richness of the image of landscape may express more than words ever could.

Another interpretation of the bogland scenes may come closer to the true message of both O'Connor's story and Johnston's film. From the beginning of Guests of the Nation the IRA are indeed associated with the wilderness as their natural territory. When the flying column march away from the burning barracks at the beginning of the film, they march along the road, guns over shoulder with an air of triumph. However, it is their guerrilla tactic of fleeing back to the hill and, indeed, merging with the landscape which enables them to survive. The Black and Tans in contrast are tied to their trucks, the noise of which prevents them from carrying out a successful ambush of the flying column. As we have seen, the IRA are thus strongly associated with the landscape, whereas the British are associated with the city and modern methods of war.

However, the attempt to remain on the road by the two IRA men reveals the recognition that to become a free and modern state (as opposed to remaining in the essentialised idea of nation) the IRA have to appropriate the space of authority, the road, currently held by the British. While from a practical perspective the route taken by the flying column is probably the shortest one to their destination, at a figurative level, their march along the road, following their destruction of the RIC barracks, represents the desire to attain and to reoccupy the space then held by the British.

Fig. 2 Footprints in the bog, *Guests of the Nation*

Fig. 3 Bogland grave, *The Dawn*
coloniser. This, by extension, parallels the adoption, rather than dismantlement, of British forms of government by the Irish Free State once the War of Independence had been won.22

In contrast to the IRA’s attempt to leave the landscape and appropriate the road, stand the four men, who enjoy a strong relationship with the land. Furthermore, it is not just land which the four men are associated with, but a particular vision of land. While the IRA are, in their transition from wilderness to road, still partly associated with the landscape, it is not farmland but the wilderness and the unproductive bogland that they are connected to. Conversely, Bonaparte, Noble, Hawkins and Belcher are part of a natural, seasonal order through their connection to a productive landscape. The absorption of Belcher and Hawkins’ bodies into the bogland may be organic, but their previous harmony with nature implies that their deaths are, in fact, against the natural order.

By using the two shots of footprints in the bog and the grave being dug and filled in to convey the deaths of the prisoners, deaths which the film’s humanist overtone condemns, Johnston problematises the use of landscape in nationalist imagery and suggests an alternative reading of the land. Rather than explaining away or lessening the impact of the execution, the bogland shots serve a dual function. First, they imply the poverty of land as either an explanation or a rationale for murder. Secondly, they suggest that the landscape associated with hard-line nationalism is a barren waste. By substituting images of the bogland for the actual execution,

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22 Joseph Lee discusses the ‘British influence’ over the establishment of the Free State, concluding that it is, at best, a fraught question. Is Ireland influenced by Britain only when it imitates it and to what extent was the logic of establishing new forms of government merely that of a modern society? In large part the civil service and banking systems ‘closely and consciously imitated the English model’ (89) and there was significant British influence also over the Irish Free State constitution (87-94). See J.J. Lee, Ireland 1912-1985, and Nicholas Mansergh, The Irish Free State (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1934).
Johnston suggests that landscape, as a national icon, has reached a crisis of meaning and raises the issue of whether the myth of the sanctity of land should still occupy such a valorised and central position in Irish identity.

Further, as Kevin Rockett points out, the film gives ‘little indication … as to why the people were fighting, merely that they were pawns in a system outside their control.’ Both O’Connor and Johnston’s refusal to give the two guards any motivation beyond ‘duty’ to kill the prisoners reveals the extent to which they believed that, from a post-revolutionary perspective, the nationalist cause may have damaged or ignored the needs of Irish people, in the fight for the larger cause of freedom. Coming a decade after the War of Independence, both film and story do not merely stand as a testament to the actual violence faced by ordinary men and women during the war, but Johnston and O’Connor also question whether the sacrifices made were a price worth paying. The villains of both film and story are not the representatives of Imperial power, indeed the film does little to portray the British as anything more than an inscrutable ‘other’, but the founders and founding principles of the Free State.

*Guests of the Nation* is thus highly critical, on several levels, of IRA procedure during the War of Independence and as such illustrates Johnston’s cynical attitude to nationalism. Indeed, in reviewing Johnston’s earlier work, *The Moon*, Sean O’Meadhra comments that though Johnston is ‘amazingly brilliant’ it is a pity that he has no sense of sympathy with the native Irish and speaks instead from an Ascendancy position, resulting in a ‘distorted sense of values’. Certainly, Johnston’s refusal to admit any benefit to Ireland from nationalism can be viewed as a

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23 Rockett 61.
‘distorted’ representation, nevertheless, his attitude to the IRA is indicative of the changing attitudes towards the IRA in 1930s Ireland. Despite this shift in opinion against the IRA, it is surprising, however, to note that Frank Aiken, the then Minister for Defence, and his Secretary, attended the premiere at the Gate. Aiken had strong ties to the IRA, indeed upon his election his first act as a government Minister was to release twenty IRA prisoners from Mountjoy gaol. He not only attended the premiere of the film, but helped in its making by loaning Johnston all the weapons used for props in the film. As a republican one would expect Aiken to have reacted against a film so openly critical of the IRA. His help and his presence, which was reported in both newspaper reviews, indicate the growing ambivalence of Fianna Fáil towards the IRA.

During the mid to late 1930s Fianna Fáil gradually positioned themselves further and further away from the IRA. Indeed, in 1934, just two years after his triumphant visit to Mountjoy, Aiken had founded the volunteer force which was intended to ‘siphon off some of the old IRA who wanted jobs’ and the young men ‘who might otherwise join Óglaigh na hÉireann’. These ventures, designed to becalm the IRA and aid Óglaigh na hÉireann significantly moved the party away from its militant and radical republican roots. Aiken’s role in the making of *Guests of the Nation* thus illustrates the shifts in

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28 Johnston records in his diary that these weapons were a bone of contention to the local IRA when they were filming in the Wicklow hills: ‘Spectacular day in the Scalp, filming the Ambush sequence, with an Armoured Car and a lorry lent by the Army and which came from the Curragh. I was told afterwards we were nearly raided by the I.R.A. led by the Gilmore brothers while on the job – information on which had been given them before by our helpful Mary Manning – in order to seize some of our rifles. Charles Gilmore told me later that he was around and inspected some of the rifles, but that nothing transpired as he found them useless. I doubt if this is entirely true, as I didn’t see him, and don’t believe that they were in fact useless. Besides there were several soldiers there driving the vehicles.’ Denis Johnston, 4 June 1933, Omnibus notebook, Denis Johnston Collection, TCD MS. 10066/181.
public and State opinion about the War of Independence and the problematic leftover presence of a terrorist army in a time of peace. The idea of the ‘nation’, which had held so many disparate groups together, was now, amid the realities of the State, being reframed. Johnston reflects upon this reframing in *Guests of the Nation* by portraying the IRA in a period of transition from the wilderness to the road, mirroring both Fianna Fáil and the State’s jettisoning of its terrorist roots.

Johnston’s greatest indictment of the War of Independence and modern Ireland’s failure to address the past is the image of the bogland grave. What is buried in this grave is natural compassion and anti-essentialism. For, the most positive aspect to the relationship between the four men is the way in which it collapses boundaries. While the men are first differentiated from one another by their appearance and dress sense, the following comic scenes serve to break these differences down and unite the men in a common bond of camaraderie. Bonaparte and Noble become real characters when their compassion for Belcher and Hawkins leads them to try to break with the IRA order and try to stop the executions in Kilmainham. The insistence of the IRA leadership that the reprisal shootings be carried out must be seen not only as their wish to retaliate over the executions of the IRA prisoners by the British but also as a recognition of the inherent danger of the relationship between the four men. A friendship between prisoners and guards must be broken as it threatens to destabilise the essentialisms or polarities which the war and nationalism itself are founded on.

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28 Bell 8.

28 The resurgence of violence on the part of the IRA was partly because of the Blue Shirt movement, led by General Eoin O’Duffy. Crackdowns on the movements of the IRA by the government were largely attributed to the clashes between the IRA and the Blueshirts. The demise of the Blueshirts in the mid 1930s and internal splits within the IRA as to its leadership and direction aided de Valera’s attempt to exclude the IRA from the future of the Free State. The divisions within the IRA meant that when in June 1936 the organisation was declared unlawful there was no sustained confrontation between the Army and the IRA.
The graves of the Englishmen, figured in the footprints in the mud, are like wounds upon both the landscape and the Irish psyche, an image that is still resonant today.

Thus, rather than being a powerful cultural icon, the bogland is a clandestine cemetery. What Guests of the Nation ultimately suggests is that these wounds still exist, that they have not been resolved. Johnston powerfully questions the legitimacy of the IRA and while this may have been in line with recent changes in official attitudes to the organisation, there is also a suggestion by Johnston that the achievement of freedom by the War of Independence and, by extension, the foundation of the Free State is also questionable. In Guests of the Nation Johnston thus states his loyalty to individualism over the idea of the nation. However, as The Dawn’s popularity illustrates this was not necessarily the mainstream attitude to the war and Cooper’s film heroises the IRA and embraces the shift from violence to legitimate government represented by Fianna Fáil’s formation and election. In contrast to Johnston’s vision of the Irish hills and bogland as a space of recrimination, Cooper envisions the Kerry Hills as a positive space, enabling rather than disabling modern Ireland.

**THE DAWN (1936)**
**TOM COOPER**

Though The Dawn is a fiction film, it does have a connection to actual history, not only to the War of Independence, but also to the first IRA ambush of Black and Tan soldiers, at Kilmichael Cross in Cork, carried out by Commandant Tom Barry’s flying column in August 1920.\(^\text{29}\) Indeed, as Kevin Rockett notes, ‘the War of Independence
had a particular poignancy for some of the actors in that they participated in events similar to those depicted in the film.\textsuperscript{30} Tom Cooper was a Kerry garage and cinema owner and he made the film with a group of friends, notably Donal O’Cahill, who helped write the scenario and who also plays the part of Billy Malone. With a minimal budget they either bought materials in England or improvised them and used Cooper’s cinema to view each day’s film rushes. Remarkably with these resources Cooper managed to produce Ireland’s first indigenous feature-length sound film and \textit{The Dawn} thus stands as a triumph of amateur film-making.

The literal connection between the film and Irish history was seen, upon its release, as a counter to the portrayal of the Irish in such British films as \textit{Ourselves Alone} (dir. Brian Hurst, 1936), which the \textit{Irish Press} declared to be ‘unhistoric history’ and a ‘lie’.\textsuperscript{31} Just a few months later the \textit{Irish Press} wrote of \textit{The Dawn}, ‘The film is natural. It represents life. There is no incident that could not have happened in the Kerry of 1920. The film is true.’\textsuperscript{32} Within the review of the film this paragraph has been emphasised, illustrating the importance of the ‘true’-ness of \textit{The Dawn}. Another reviewer, in the \textit{Dublin Evening Mail}, called the film ‘an important “documentary” picture.’\textsuperscript{33} Even local newspapers reflected this admiration of the accuracy of the film. The \textit{Cork Examiner} praised the film’s ‘naturalness’ and declared that ‘it is real – real in its moments of hate and its moments of quiet’, while the \textit{Limerick Chronicle} declared that Cooper’s acting is ‘natural’ because he ‘filled in real life the part he is now acting [Dan O’Donovan] in the picture’.\textsuperscript{34} Though the film is talked about as ‘true’ and a ““documentary” picture’, it remains a fiction film and

\footnotesize{ambush, RTÉ used footage from \textit{The Dawn} in place of a dramatic reconstruction. The film thus seems to serve as an accepted image of the War of Independence.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{30} Rockett 63.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Irish Press} 14 July 1936: 5.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Irish Press} 25 August 1936: 5.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Dublin Evening Mail} 22 August 1936: 9.}
thus is not ‘real’ in the sense of being accurate or actual, but ‘real’ as in authentic, confirming for reviewers, and the audiences that flocked to see it, their sense of the events of the War of Independence.

*The Dawn* combines a believable imitation of the War of Independence with the story of the Malone family, who have been haunted by the rumour and local belief that their family ancestor was an informer. The film thus foregrounds the need for communities to tell ‘the whole truth’ and to overcome the secrets and treachery of the past so that they may function fully and healthily in the present. In a prologue set in 1866 their ancestor, Brian Malone, is shown rowing on a lake with his friend Maria Cooper, while a local informer betrays the Fenians to the RIC. This informer then protects himself by spreading the rumour that it was Brian Malone who is responsible for the capture of the Fenian men. Over fifty years later in 1919, Malone’s grandson, also called Brian, is ousted from the IRA when rumours about the betrayal resurface. In defiance, he joins the RIC and loses his fiancée because of his perceived faithlessness to the cause. Having moved away, he hears by chance of a planned ambush of his old IRA flying column by the Black and Tans. Out of loyalty to his friends Brian returns to his home to recruit his father and younger brother to help stop the Tans but he meets with opposition from his other brother, Billy, who tries to prevent them from going to stop the ambush.

Billy is portrayed throughout the film as an Anglophile and possible informant himself, his actions in preventing Brian from going to the IRA’s aid are thus in character with his previous foppish and anti-nationalist behaviour. Despite Billy’s efforts, nevertheless, Brian, with his father and younger brother, sets off to try to stop the Black and Tans, not realising that the ambush is, in fact, a set-up by the IRA who

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*Cork Examiner* 1 September 1936: 2.
plan to ambush the Tans themselves. The counter-ambush eventually succeeds, however, as Billy Malone is secretly a double agent for the IRA and manages to tip off Dan O’Donovan, the IRA leader, to the Malones’ presence. In the nick of time the Malones are rescued by the IRA and together they attack the Tans. However, Billy Malone is shot after alerting O’Donovan to his family’s danger and the film ends with a call for the fight to go on from Mr. Malone and the solemn burial of his son.

**The IRA and Modernity**

*The Dawn* foregrounds its loyalties and priorities during Dan O’Donovan’s schooling of the volunteers in the rules of the IRA. He declares that ‘Fealty to the Republic must come first in all circumstances and at all times both night and day.’ In *The Dawn* the most important message that emerges is the idea of the nation as above all other ideas and ‘circumstances’, including love. Though there is a love story, between Brian Malone and Eileen O’Donovan, it is by no means the dominant plot and Cooper thus avoids the Hollywood motif of a central love story. When Brian is forced to leave the IRA and, as a form of reprisal joins the RIC, Eileen completely rejects and erases him from her life. Indeed, even before their split, Eileen puts the nationalist cause first, refusing to marry Brian until Ireland is free, saying that she couldn’t ‘desert’ her brother and father while they are fighting for freedom. What comes first is always the nation and what the community values is national loyalty.

The IRA’s adherence to a strict code of behaviour is communicated in the first of the scenes depicting an IRA meeting – during which Brian Malone is voted out of the IRA. Each member has a vote and the decision must be made democratically. O’Donovan stresses that he does not wish to influence anyone’s vote and that they must decide the vote rationally ‘without prejudice and personal feeling’. The
emphasis on democracy and rationalism depicts the IRA as modern, orderly and respectable, and as in *Guests of the Nation* this illustrates a desire for the IRA to be considered as a comparable authority to the British and not their chaotic, dangerous ‘other’.

Modernity is key to the film though it does not engage with the urbanisation of Ireland or the incursions of industrialism into the countryside discussed in the previous chapter. Instead, it is the representation of the IRA as a modern force which is thematically central to *The Dawn*. O’Donovan’s column are depicted manipulating modernity, in particular, the mass media and the telephone. The successes of the IRA ambushes are conveyed by newspaper headlines being pasted up onto notice boards, illustrating the IRA’s control of both surprise attacks and the mass media to influence public opinion and emotion. This provokes the British authorities to supplement the forces stationed around Kerry with a company of Black and Tans, thus playing into the hands of the IRA who then mount their biggest ambush yet. The telephone is also of vital importance in the film’s dénouement but its most noticeable effect in the film is as a tool with which to taunt the British.

When the Black and Tans arrive in the town they are instantly portrayed as less humane and more violent than the RIC. The Black and Tan officer in command is particularly sadistic, ordering the shooting of two young men who refuse to inform and then setting it up to appear as a failed escape. While announcing this strategy to the room the officer laughs, taking obvious pleasure in their deaths. In a later scene the officer has to terminate a phone call from the barracks as the IRA have cut the telephone lines. He walks away from the telephone in disgust and annoyance at having lost the power of communication. By cutting the phone lines the IRA seems to represent the antithesis of modern forms of communication. This seeming antipathy
to the telephone is immediately undercut, however, when the telephone in the barracks begins ringing as the Black and Tan officer walks away. When he answers the phone the scene cuts to a hillside shot of the IRA linking their field telephone into the main phone wires. The Tan officer demands ‘Is this a joke?’ of the IRA man on the other end of the line to which he replies ‘No, this is the first act of a tragedy we’re preparing for you.’ By goading the Tans with what is supposedly their own tool of communication, the IRA adeptly show their control of technology.

The conjunction of technology with the landscape is important, as it challenges the view of the Irish as premodern and the untamed landscape as maintaining that premodernity. As Luke Gibbons writes, there was the view that ‘political violence and “agrarian outrages” were not a product of colonial misrule, or any social conditions, but emanated instead from the inexorable influence of landscape and climate on the Irish character.’ The Dawn seeks to challenge the notion that the wild Irish landscape determined the character of the Irish. Rather than being barbarians from the wilderness, the IRA’s liminality enables them to inhabit the hills and bogs while simultaneously mastering the technology of the coloniser. Indeed, through this technological mastery The Dawn shows the IRA to be capable not only of self-government but also of surpassing the British authorities in terms of ability and authority. This view of the IRA echoes the perspective of Ireland in the 1930s, a country which had moved relatively recently from being outside political power to being in power, and from representing and taking part in acts of civil disobedience to being in government and enforcing the law.

The Dawn also reflects the early emphasis in Guests of the Nation on the movement of the IRA from the hillsides to the road. As Tom Barry writes in his

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autobiographical work, *Guerrilla Days in Ireland*, the Kilmichael Cross ambush helped the IRA be recognised 'by the enemy as an army in the field, instead of ... a gang of rebel murderers.' It is this desire for recognition which runs through *The Dawn*. O'Donovan's column needs to be seen as a modern, organised force, which could become capable of self-government.

**Landscape**

The emphasis throughout *The Dawn* on modernity and on besting the British at their own game, as in *Guests of the Nation*, represents a dangerous position. When Billy is shot he is running across the horizon, over the hills, in order to convey the message to the IRA of Brian's plan. Billy is spotted by two RIC men from the road who stop and shoot at him, and it is thus Billy's visibility which proves fatal. He changes from being a secret agent, constantly in disguise, to running across the horizon, fully revealing himself and his death implies that the emergence of the IRA from the safety of the landscape is a risky move. Billy's fate represents the sacrifices that the IRA had to make not only to win the war but also to be perceived as modern combatants. While the wilderness of the hills may prove a strategic location for retreat it is only safe once you are hidden in it. As Billy runs across the horizon he sheds both his disguise and the protection of the landscape and is thus prey to the RIC men on the road. *The Dawn*, while signalling the modernisation of the IRA thus also suggests that their strength, at least initially, comes from being hidden within the landscape.

It becomes clear, however, that it is not the wilderness landscape that the Malones and the O'Donovans are interested in. Rather, both families are invested in

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37 Although the RIC is made up of Irish men, in *The Dawn* they are quite clearly complicit with British rule and it is this that Brian realises when he decides to leave the RIC and go to the aid of his old flying column.
the landscape as a sign of wealth and power. Not only are the Malones and the O'Donovans property owners but they display an attitude to land and landscape (which the film endorses) that portrays them as unaware of divisions other than that between coloniser and colonised. When an RIC raid is carried out at the O'Donovans’ house, one IRA man pretends to be working there as a gardener, drawing attention to the immaculate lawns and flowerbeds surrounding the house. The RIC men do not challenge the idea that he might be the gardener as it is unremarkable that the O'Donovans would have had one.

The O'Donovans’ garden also plays a key role in an earlier scene, between Eileen and Brian. As they walk into her garden he compliments her on her ornamental rockery, saying ‘I wish I had one like it.’ Eileen replies ‘You have no rockery’, to which Brian says, ‘I'll build one when you decide to become Mrs. Malone.’ This exchange is important because Eileen then goes on to say that she won’t marry him until Ireland is free. The film thus links the idea of Ireland’s liberation and Eileen and Brian’s marriage with the creation of a garden. The idea of the garden thus signifies for Brian and Eileen both marriage and the overthrow of colonialism. Rather than concentrating on the re-distribution of land to the rural poor, what they prioritise is the moulding of the landscape into something ornamental for their pleasure. This is reminiscent of the colonial vision of Ireland as a wild landscape to be tamed, with walls to keep out the Irish peasantry. Thus, rather than wanting fundamentally to change social inequalities, the Malones and the O'Donovans resent colonialism not for its inherent injustice but because it excludes them from the power and social status which the colonisers enjoy.

See the Hall’s account of their travels in Ireland in which they frequently admire the sublime beauty of the wild Irish landscape from the safety of the walled estate; Mr. & Mrs. S.C. Hall, Hall’s Ireland, ed. Michael Scott (1841; London & Sydney: Sphere Books Ltd., 1984) 2 vols. See also Luke Gibbons ‘Topographies of Terror’ South Atlantic Quarterly (Winter 1996).
The image of the Irish landscape as a garden to be enjoyed is established in the prologue, set in 1866, which concerns the misidentification of the ancestral Brian Malone as an informer. The audience are aware of his innocence because they are shown Brian Malone and Maria Cooper rowing around the Killarney lakes while the treachery was being committed. Malone’s innocence is thus inextricably linked to his gazing at the picturesque landscape. The film elides the presumably financial reason behind the informer’s actions (he is shabbily dressed) and chooses instead to side with the landowner. Like his ancestor, Brian Malone’s idea of the nation emphasises the romanticisation of the landscape and connects that romantic vision to being in a position of political power.

This view of landscape runs throughout the film and even the representation of the hills, which contain the violence that erupts between the IRA and the Black and Tans, is not entirely ‘wild’. As one contemporary reviewer noted in the *Leader*:

> at times it perhaps gives too pleasant a picture of the guerrilla war in Ireland. Off to the hillside we are brought with the Volunteers. They loll in beautiful wooded glades or on rocky crags overlooking a picturesque winding road...  

The use of the word ‘picturesque’ suggests that *The Dawn’s* hillsides are far from being either a realistic or subversive landscape, but instead are framed within a more amenable and pleasant aesthetic. The reviewer in the *Dublin Evening Mail* praised the film for the absence of the “‘mists that do be on the bog’ of the “stage” Irishman’, however, the realism of the film does not stretch to including any kind of labour or hardship in the portrayal of landscape. Instead, the beautifully rendered landscape is used as a counter to the military struggle, with one reviewer noting that even at the moment of Billy’s death, the Killarney ‘scenery affords a most enchanting

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39 *Leader* 6 June 1936: 443.
40 *Dublin Evening Mail* 22 August 1936: 9.
background. Consequently, while the hills serve as a strategic location for retreat and assault they are primarily viewed by the characters in the film as a place for leisure, as highlighted by Brian and Eileen’s vision of independent Ireland as a landscaped garden.

Yet this vision of landscape is not held by all of the characters of The Dawn. While two IRA volunteers are on duty, they overhear Molly, the woman they are both courting, denying any allegiance to either of them. Significantly, they are able to overhear her conversation because they are hiding in a dark hollow in the hillside, an image far from the mastery of the landscape which their leaders enjoy. These men belong to the class who will not materially benefit from Irish independence and their joint romantic failure and humiliation, while it is a moment of light comic relief in the film, also illustrates that, for them, landscape is linked to a lack of mastery and impotence. The Dawn hence imitates the traditional class hierarchies and social conservatism of comedy and by so doing the film bolsters the already implied sense that the newly controlling nationalist families will replicate the middle class status quo of their British counterparts.

As already wealthy families and leaders in the IRA, the Malones and O’Donovans are more interested in consolidating their power than redistributing land. As Rockett writes:

The Dawn, in fact, suppresses any social tensions which might appear between the Irish themselves. The film’s main nationalist catalysts, the Malones and the O’Donovans, clearly belong to a different social stratum than the rest... Indeed, the men under IRA leader Dan O’Donovan’s ... command are most likely property-less workers. The film does not pursue this issue...  

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41 Kerry News 9 September 1936: 1.
42 Indeed, Billy’s anglophilia suggests the link between the Malones, and the IRA in general, and the British.
43 Rockett 64.
Both the Cumann na nGaedheal and the Fianna Fáil governments had, since 1922, abandoned the radical republicanism and any pretence at socialism which had formed the cornerstones of the War of Independence. As R.F. Foster notes:

exalted leaders first fought out a brutal duel over a form of words, and then constructed a new state around preoccupations that resolutely ignored even the vague social and economic desiderata once outlined for Pearse’s Visionary Republic.\textsuperscript{44}

This view of the Irish revolution as a socially conservative one is supported by David Fitzpatrick who argues that ‘Republicanism itself had been tamed by the men of substance almost from the start.’\textsuperscript{45} Accordingly, while The Dawn may advocate freedom, it does not hold any hope of social change or emancipation from poverty.

The social agenda of the film can be seen in its emphasis on self-government and power as the goal of the war. In a scene in the Malones’ house the youngest brother asks what Sinn Féin means. In reply Brian says that it means ‘everything… our own parliament, our own army… we just want to be left on our own to work out our own civilisation and our own future in our own way.’ In this speech, interrupted several times by Billy’s taunts, Brian establishes that it is not the land that he is fighting for but the ability to establish a parliament, to be self-reliant and to be considered civilised. This reveals very clearly both Brian’s perception of nationalism and his class position. Rather than accepting the stereotype of the Irish as premodern and outside civilisation, Brian seems instead to endorse a vision of beating the British in order to usurp their forms of government and ideals by adopting them themselves. This, indeed, parallels the suggestion in Guests of the Nation that the IRA wish to conquer the road, the space of the British.

As audiences in the 1930s were aware, the form of the government adopted by the Irish Free State in the 1920s bore a strong resemblance to previous British government hierarchies. As Billy’s interjection that Sinn Féin wanted to establish their ‘own colonies... their own Empire’ illustrates, there is an underside to the ambition of gaining political power. The egalitarian impulses behind the democratic meetings of the IRA therefore need to be re-examined. In fact, when Brian Malone is voted out of the IRA, Dan O’Donovan brings the decision to a higher council within the IRA. The vote is confirmed, not because of the votes of the local IRA men, but because O’Donovan and the IRA council have other reasons for wishing Brian out of the IRA. With Brian in the IRA it casts suspicion on Billy, their secret agent, and so, instead of respecting the democratic process which he appears to so nobly uphold, O’Donovan uses procedure to disguise the fact that he and the other leaders are the ones with real power.

*The Dawn* does not attempt in any way to destabilise the existing Irish social structure. Instead it advocates through its envisioning of the Malones as honest, past and present, and the O’Donovans as noble and worthy, the establishment of a new ruling elite in Ireland. Indeed the prologue serves not only to inform the viewer of the ancestral Malone’s innocence but also to establish the Malones historically as a landowning family. This gives added weight to their claim to power in an independent Ireland. *The Dawn* thus endorses the extent to which, since the end of the civil war, the ruling British elite had been replaced by a new Catholic, middle class.

**The ‘Whole Truth’**

The past haunts the Malone family. Brian Malone is ostensibly voted out of the IRA because of his familial association with an informant, and the film’s first intertitle
announces that ‘There is one sin which Irishmen will never forgive — Treachery to the Motherland. The stain lingers on through the generations.’ Despite the innocence of Brian’s ancestor, the stain on his family circumscribes what he can do with his life and devalues the Malones’ status in the community. The ‘happy ending’ of the film is not only the successful ambush of the Black and Tan trucks, but also the erasure of the stain of treachery from the Malones.

When Brian Malone deserts the RIC and goes to the aid of the IRA he recruits his father and brother to help him and the three Malone men establish their republican credentials by risking their lives for the sake of the IRA. After the ambush the IRA retreat to their hiding place, a ruin in the hills where, when she hears of his role in the ambush, Eileen forgives Brian for joining the RIC. The couple embrace and, as they pull apart again, Brian’s father’s head appears in the space between them. John Malone’s smile represents approval of their relationship and signals the film’s move from the burdens of the past to the promise of the future, while also indicating by his separation of Brian and Eileen that Ireland is not yet free.

The harmony of this scene is jeopardised, however, when the Malones learn of Billy’s death. Two IRA men come into the hiding place to inform the others that they have found Billy Malone dead in the hills. John Malone accuses the two men of having shot his son until Dan O’Donovan takes him aside and asks him if he wants to know ‘the whole truth’. O’Donovan then proceeds to tell the astonished Malone men about Billy’s role in the IRA, how he was the best secret agent the IRA had ever had and how he died trying to save his family, the IRA and the fight for independence. The Malones accept Billy’s death for the greater good and John Malone declares that ‘I’m glad he died for Ireland’. It would appear that the burden of the past has been
lifted and everything been resolved. However, Billy Malone's death and martyrdom raise serious problems for the film's apparently civilised image of the IRA.

Billy Malone's death illustrates not only the danger of 'the whole truth' emerging from its disguise, but also the resurgence of the Pearsian idealisation of blood sacrifice. Superficially the film implies that it is the IRA's mastery of technology that enables them to save the ambush. Dan O'Donovan is shown using a field telephone and then dispatching a Volunteer to rescue the Malone men from sabotaging the ambush. Yet, it is Billy's physical sacrifice for his family and the sake of the ambush that the film ultimately heroises. Indeed, *The Dawn* signals its allegiance to the idea of martyrdom early on, in a scene in the O'Donovans' house. In the kitchen, instead of the usual religious portraits, hangs a framed poster of the rebels of 1916 who were executed by the British. This picture is shattered by the Black and Tan officer when he fails to find anything incriminating in the house but it is the very idea of sacrifice which defeats the Tan officer as Billy dies to ensure the success of the ambush.

Billy's death and, in particular, his funeral are not straightforward images. On the one hand his death suggests that, while strategically combining the identities and tactics of both a modern army and a guerrilla force – inextricably linked to the landscape – is a powerful position for the Irish Volunteers, there are times when these identities and tactics need to be thrown off. Billy's discarding of his disguise implies that emerging from the landscape is a dangerous action for the Irish. His grave also serves as a permanent scar on the hillside, reminding those who see it of the violence which the Irish landscape played host to and even inspired. John Malone's call for the struggle to continue thus reflects the dormant but ever-present threat of war over land of which the civil war was only too close a reminder. On the other hand, however, the
way Billy’s funeral is represented suggests that the film is also trying unproblematically to bury the past.

Billy can be seen as a symbol of the sacrifices the Irish nation made to win their freedom and which they can now, from the distance of the Free State, relegate to the realm of memory. The film is thus paying lip service to a cause which is assumed to have ended in 1921, and this sense of the War of Independence as a distant memory is reinforced by the Celtic cross which marks Billy’s grave.\textsuperscript{46} In particular, this image lends to the end of the film a nostalgic tone, placing bloodshed and violence firmly in the realm of a heroic, yet also mythic, past. The nostalgia of \textit{The Dawn} and its picturesque representation of landscape, are tailored for a 1930s audience, enabling them to acknowledge the past in as unproblematic a way as possible and thus to move into a peaceable future.

Both of these readings of \textit{The Dawn} can be made and this is symptomatic of the ambivalence of politics in the 1930s. While Fianna Fáil were distancing themselves from the IRA and, indeed, outlawed the organisation in 1936, public perceptions towards the War of Independence must have been shifting also. The ambiguity of the film’s ending plays both to the hard-line republican and the revisionist Free Stater as illustrated by its rapturous reception by both \textit{An Phoblacht}, the IRA’s newspaper, and the \textit{Irish Press}, the pro-Fianna Fáil newspaper. The majority of newspaper reviews, however, did not even pick up on, let alone support John Malone’s final call for the struggle to go on, indicating the dominant mood of a desire for peace in the Free State. As R.F. Foster points out, ‘Irredentism,

\textsuperscript{46}There are also no women at the burial, illustrating the exclusion of part of the community from the ritual. Only one reviewer, Maud Gonne MacBride, commented on the absence of women in the film: ‘Marion O’Connell in the part of Mrs. Malone, makes the most of a small part ... and one would have liked to have seen more of her.’ \textit{An Phoblacht} 6 June 1936, 11.13: 1.
Anglophobia and a determinedly Catholic ethos had paid great political dividends in twenty-six-county terms. The corollary was a blind eye turned to the North.\footnote{Foster, Modern Ireland 554.}

CONCLUSIONS

Richard Kearney, in \textit{Transitions}, writes about \textit{Guests of the Nation} and \textit{The Dawn} that

Each of these films interpreted political violence according to the yardstick of a dominant national ideology ... the common purpose of these films was to propagate a romantic vision of Ireland which would “add to the prestige of the Irish abroad.”\footnote{Richard Kearney, \textit{Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988; Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988) 174.}

Kearney’s comments are an astute recognition of the strategy of glossing over the uglier realities of the War of Independence inherent in \textit{The Dawn}’s portrayal of the Killarney landscape as a romantic backdrop to the war, exemplified by the mythic image of the Celtic cross. Interestingly, at the time of \textit{The Dawn}’s release, tourist films were being made of just such landscapes. The director of one of these, interviewed by \textit{Kerry News}, ‘expressed himself as delighted with Irish scenery.’\footnote{‘Films of Irish Scenery’, \textit{Kerry News} 1 June 1936.}

The same could be said for the public response to the scenery of \textit{The Dawn}.

Yet, as Billy’s death occurs within the landscape it disrupts the prior romanticising of the landscape as a rural idyll, insisting instead on its association with a past of violence and death. As Luke Gibbons writes, ‘landscape, can never be reduced to mere scenery but always bears some traces of meaning...’\footnote{Gibbons, ‘Romanticism’ 208.} In this instance, Billy’s grave and John Malone’s fighting call undermine the film’s attempt to gloss over the violence of the past. But contemporary reviewers did not respond to this and willingly saw the film as an attractive and satisfying representation of ‘one of
the most gallant episodes in our history'. As with Blarney two years later, the attitude to the signs of Ireland's colonial and violent past tended towards denial of the realities of violence in order for the country to move on to a space where everyday life, such as the romances between Billy and Eileen and Maura and Mac, are possible. For a slightly more distanced audience, however, it is the film's picturesque quality and its attempt at a romantic and easy resolution which begs the question as to whether war can be so prettily resolved.

Guests of the Nation answers this question explicitly. Johnston attacks hard-line nationalism, implying that the grossest problems inherent in war are the essentialisms that underpin nationalism and the suspension of individual liberty. Johnston projects these problems onto the landscape thereby further questioning it as an icon of Irish nationalism. The graves of The Dawn and Guests of the Nation are even more problematic when read in the context of the civil war, during which the strategy of counter terrorism was employed to an even greater extent than in the War of Independence, and the memory of the civil war is a phantom presence in both films. Johnston and Cooper deal differently with this presence. For Cooper, the solution is to attempt an easy resolution and to confer closure upon the period of violence and unrest in Ireland. This romanticism stands in contrast to the end of Guests of the Nation. To close the film Johnston de-focuses the camera, suggesting that there is no closure possible for the War of Independence or the violence which was necessitated by it. The lack of focus at the end of Guests of the Nation can also be seen in the same light as the ending of his earlier work, The Moon. Both endings can be read as Johnston's evasion of commitment to one ideology; though Johnston is consistent in his attitude to authority, his politics were perhaps a little less decided.

52 'Irish Film Venture', Munster Express 28 August 1936: 8.
This is not the case for Cooper whose politics are clearly aligned with those of Fianna Fáil and whose vision of the Kerry hills is inviting and comforting, despite the violence bubbling underneath. By the end of the decade, however, one figure was unequivocal in his attitude and disillusionment concerning the Free State. It is in W.B. Yeats’ penultimate work that we find the strongest and bleakest representation of the Irish cultural, intellectual and psychic landscape.
W. B. Yeats wrote *Purgatory*, his penultimate play, in the spring of 1938 and it was premiered at the Abbey Theatre on August 10 of the same year, during the Festival of Irish Theatre. The play was to provide his final controversy and represents his most forceful indictment of modern Ireland. The Irish Free State was for Yeats, as for Johnston and many others, a grave disappointment, and he was disillusioned with what he saw as an era of ‘heterogeneous, levelling modernity’, rather than the era of aristocratic rule he had hoped independence would foster. As for many of the works discussed in Chapter Two, Yeats viewed modernity as a disruptive, chaotic and destructive force and resented its presence in the Ireland he had idealised. As John Kelly argues, Yeats had chosen and invented the Ireland in which he believed:

> To choose is to select and to select is inevitably to falsify, either through the suppression of inconvenient elements or through the over emphasis of more congenial ones.

Kelly points out that for Yeats, Ireland had been symbolic first, real second. In *Purgatory* we see the result of this: the conflict between an imagined and constructed Ireland and the reality of a divided Irish society.

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Donald Torchiana painstakingly argues in *W. B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland* that the dates in the play and the ages of the characters correspond to momentous occasions in Ireland's history. Torchiana notes the correspondence between the age of the Boy, sixteen, and the age of the Free State at the play's first performance, arguing that 'the [Puck] Fair, the beginning of the Free State, and the opening day of the play, August 10th, 1938, all seem tied together.' Further, the riven tree may represent the rejection of Parnell by his party in 1889, an act that split the nation, [while the] destruction of the house by his drunken father ... would have occurred close to the death of Parnell in October 1891. ...Without turning the play into allegory ... one can nevertheless see how the characters are nationally symbolic.

Torchiana goes on to elucidate how the characters are representative of eras of Irish history, although the Old Man is too conflicted to easily represent any one particular era or element of Irish society. Without recourse to allegory, we can see how these coincidences contribute overall to the play as a symbol of tragedy and loss.

**Yeats and a Post-Revolutionary Ireland**

The general inability of the Free State – politically and culturally – to live up to the idealism of the pre-Independence era caused Yeats to, as Nicholas Grene puts it, write *Purgatory* in a 'mood of extreme revulsion from contemporary Irish society'. The rise of the Catholic middle class, the cut in the government subsidy to the Abbey Theatre and, in particular, Yeats’s fears for the Anglo-Irish as a class all contributed to his bleak mood. Since the controversial motion forbidding discussion of divorce by the Dáil

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4 Torchiana 359-60.
(February 1925) Yeats had made it publicly known that he felt that the ‘power and prestige’ of the Anglo-Irish were being overlooked. In a speech at the election of the Free State’s first Seanad, Kevin O’Higgins, a friend of Yeats’s, had referred to the need to reassure Unionists, in particular, but also other non-Catholics, of their continuing place in Irish society.

These people are part and parcel of the nation and ...are regarded, not as alien enemies, not as planters, but ...as part and parcel of this nation, and that we wish them to take their share of its responsibilities.6

As F.S.L. Lyons comments on this speech, the ‘government were as good as their word’ and Yeats was appointed to the Seanad, along with sixteen men who ‘could be said to have been broadly Unionist in their sympathies’ while Yeats, ‘though certainly no Unionist, was very conscious of his Anglo-Irish heritage.’ Yet the divorce issue in 1925 made Yeats feel that the Anglo-Irish were being sidelined. In his speech of June of that year Yeats railed against the government:

We against whom you have done this thing are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created the most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence.

In this much-quoted extract from his defiant speech, Yeats aligns the Anglo-Irish with a noble tradition of writers and political thinkers who confer both significance and legitimacy on the place of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland. As he wrote later, in Wheels and Butterflies, Swift ‘claim[s] me of his kindred, [and]... seems to make me a part of some national mythology...’.8 It is clear from this that by developing this sense of the long tradition of Anglo-Irish presence in the creative and political spheres of Irish life, Yeats

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6 Kevin O’Higgins, quoted in Lyons, Ireland Since the Famine 473.
7 Lyons 473-474.
8 W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies (London: Macmillan, 1934) 8.
found a sense of belonging. Yeats chose to believe in the dual tenets of the Anglo-Irish tradition and Ireland in general ‘because he thought he could escape from the individualism of the modern world into a larger racial identity’. Once that racial identity seemed, to Yeats, to have weakened and been diluted, it no longer provided the social and creative haven he so craved.

Having left his Seanad position in 1928, Yeats may have come to feel that his lack of political influence reflected the wider state of the decline of Anglo-Irish power in Ireland. This ‘great stock’ had, arguably, been in crisis for quite some time, and in the 1920s and 1930s the class began to feel the full effect of the erosion of their power and numbers. As Paul Stanfield argues, the Anglo-Irish were not only overlooked since the election of Éamon de Valera in 1932, but were discriminated against by the State.

Yeats’s response to the decline of the Anglo-Irish can be read, in particular, in the image of the ruined house, burned down by the Old Man’s lowborn father. The burning of the Old Man’s ancestral home is reminiscent of the burning of the Big Houses across Ireland, ‘centres of civilisation and Irish culture’, in the years surrounding and during the civil war. What these burnings meant for the Anglo-Irish can be surmised from the autobiographical writings of the Countess of Fingall:

People whose families had lived in the country for three or four hundred years realised suddenly that they were still strangers ...

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9 Kelly 20.
10 Terence Brown notes in Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985 (London: Fontana Press, 1985) that the 20s saw the publication of many novels exploring the ‘socially disintegrated world of the Protestant ascendancy’ (110) while between 1911-1926 there was ‘a striking decline of about one-third in the Protestant population of the south of Ireland as a whole’ (116).
barriers they had tried to break down standing as strong and
immoveable as those hills, brooding over an age old wrong.\textsuperscript{14}

These lines, written just prior to Yeats's writing of \textit{Purgatory}, illustrate the sense of
injustice felt by the Anglo-Irish landowners, not only at the destruction of their homes,
but because of what it meant: that they did not truly belong. This sense of loss had
personal resonance for Yeats after 1932. On May 22 1932, Lady Gregory died after a
long struggle with cancer. For most of his creative life, Gregory and her estate at Coole
Park had provided support and sanctuary for Yeats and now, both Gregory and Coole
gone, Yeats 'knew that a tradition was dying ... Big Houses like Coole would no longer
be centres of cultural power in a country that was now dominated by the democratic
forces of rejuvenated republican nationalism'.\textsuperscript{15} The thirties were the decade when Yeats
fully realised the marginality of the Ascendancy class in post-revolutionary Ireland and
the redundancy of the Anglo-Irish can be read in \textit{Purgatory}'s sense of placelessness,
while the house's insubstantiality is suggestive of their insecurity. In fact, the Big House
had become, amid the new realities of the Free State, a symbol of a dying rather than
dynamic tradition.

For Yeats, the continual rejection of the Anglo-Irish represented by the burning of
the Big Houses during the civil war, was a slight to his pride in the Anglo-Irish tradition,
and thus his claim that they had created 'the most of the modern literature' and 'the best
of ... political intelligence' can be read as a defence of the Anglo-Irish under siege, so to
speak. In contrast to Yeats's aggressive response, Lennox Robinson's \textit{Killycreggs at
Twilight} (1937) recognised the fading world of the Anglo-Irish, but more temperately

\textsuperscript{14} Elizabeth Plunkett, Countess of Fingall, \textit{Seventy Years Young: Memories of Elizabeth, Countess of

\textsuperscript{15} Brown, \textit{Life of W. B. Yeats} 336. Indeed Coole Park had been sold in 1927 to the Forestry Commission
with permission given to Lady Gregory to live there until her death. The house was demolished in 1941.
advocated the evolution of the tradition and the embracing of the new Ireland, in order to survive. The daughter of the Big House in *Killycreggs* marries a local Catholic businessman and thus ensures the future of her familial line. In *Purgatory* the marriage of the daughter of the house is read differently as her heirs are left homeless and the Old Man’s obsession with the house’s details reveals Yeats’s view of the simultaneous lack of, and need for, a stable location for the Anglo-Irish identity.

The ‘rejuvenated republican nationalism’ which Yeats saw replacing the Anglo-Irish made itself felt in his creative life also. Rigid censorship laws left little room for cultural adventure and, indeed, fostered a degree of self-censorship. Yeats, presiding over the Abbey Theatre in these years, found himself subject to the power of censorship when *The Silver Tassie* had to be withdrawn following complaints while, two years later, the Abbey Board rejected his play *The Herne’s Egg* (1937) because of fears that it might be considered obscene. *Purgatory* can thus be read not only as a rage against the political machine, but also against the machinations of an institution much closer to Yeats.

**The Play**

*Purgatory* is just under 250 lines long yet its precise and evocative use of language gives it the dramatic power of a much larger work and, remarkably for such a short play, necessitates a very strong response. The stage gives the play its gothic quality: ‘*A ruined house and a bare tree in the background*’ and Yeats resisted Hugh Hunt’s desire for a full moon on the backdrop and accompanying music, with the result that the details of the
stage and the drama of the play stand out all the more.\textsuperscript{16} There are two characters – the Old Man and the Boy – father and son, and most of the play is made up of the Old Man’s monologue, a diatribe against the injustice of the death of the Big House and the degradation of the memory of his Anglo-Irish ancestors. The Old Man is the child of a union between his highborn mother and a lowly groom, whose vulgar lifestyle and spendthrift nature caused the loss of the family fortune and the land. The mother’s ghost haunts the once grand house where she died in labour and the Old Man blames his lowly groom father for his mother’s death. The Old Man narrates the story of the house’s past and, as he does so, the ghosts of his parents, locked in Purgatory, re-enact their wedding night. The Old Man seems tortured by the apparitions and in an attempt to rescue his mother’s spirit from her purgatorial suffering he stabs his son – who is sixteen, the age at which he stabbed his father – with the same jack-knife with which he killed his father. He kills his son as a blood sacrifice to his mother, justifying it as an attempt to end the pollution of the Anglo-Irish family line by his father’s blood. Yet this desperate action seems merely to strengthen the ghosts and they return, leaving the Old Man in total despair.

The Old Man’s preoccupation with the ruined house and the play’s bleak tone all attest to Yeats’s disillusionment with the realities of the Free State. There has been debate, however, about which era the play draws on most. Donald Torchiana reads the play as ‘the theory of the symbolic tragedy of the eighteenth-century and its consequence for modern Ireland’.\textsuperscript{17} The ‘symbolic tragedy’ is figured in the ruined house, the emblem for the loss of the civilisation which figures such as Burke and Swift established, and the

\textsuperscript{16} Foster, \textit{W.B. Yeats: A Life} 627.

\textsuperscript{17} Torchiana 351.
consequence for Ireland is evidenced in the Boy’s ignorance of that heritage and his amorality.

W.J. Mc Cormack in *From Burke to Beckett* challenges Torchiana’s reading of *Purgatory*, reading the play’s context as the nineteenth, rather than the eighteenth century. Mc Cormack draws on Yeats’s early and autobiographical writings, which provided a source for his work, arguing that these sources are important because ‘they are located in the years when Irish politics was more evidently and palpably concerned with social issues rather than nationalist principles.’¹⁸ Thus the play is a reflection on ‘Irish social history when Protestant Ireland was beginning to take cognizance of its essential insecurity in the country’ rather than being grounded in the eighteenth-century.¹⁹

Whether *Purgatory* owes more of its background to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries its greatest debt is to the development of politics and culture in the thirties, and Yeats’s reactions to them as he neared the end of his life. The loss of Gregory and Coole, his perception of the continued decline of the Anglo-Irish and the cultural stagnation evident in Ireland because of censorship and the influence of a puritanical church, all contribute to the sense of despair and constriction of the play.

The portraits of the Boy and the Old Man epitomise the gross realities of the new Ireland. The Boy is typical of the ‘world of getting and spending’, ²⁰ what Yeats most detested about modern Ireland, and, whereas the Old Man values memory, narrative,

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symbols and that ‘something that lies outside knowledge’ of the observable, the Boy is only interested in what he can grasp or touch, admiring his grandfather for getting ‘the girl and the money’. The Old Man, in contrast with the Boy, may seem to come closer to the nobility of the Anglo-Irish, but this initial impression is soon dispelled and the Old Man exposed as the degenerate heir to a disabled tradition.

The portraits of the Old Man and the Boy reflect a greater acknowledgment by Yeats of reality in this play than there had perhaps been in previous works. The Old Man and Boy are homeless wanderers and Yeats’s depiction of them is a far cry from the idealised Tramps of Synge that he so admired some decades earlier. In The Playboy of the Western World Christy Mahon sees his exile through aesthetic eyes, while the Tramp in The Shadow of the Glen depicts a life of ‘fine songs you’ll be hearing when the sun goes up’. Though Nora acknowledges that ‘I’m thinking it’s myself will be wheezing that time with lying down under the heavens when the night is cold’ she does not come close to the sense of loneliness that the Boy evokes: ‘Half-door, hall door./Hither and thither day and night,/Hill or hollow’. What is absent from the Boy’s lines is any mention of a hearth or interior; there is no centre or home, only boundaries stopping them from entering.

Marriage

Yeats’s mood of ‘extreme revulsion’ with thirties Ireland led to his preoccupation with mixed marriages, which in part explained for him the loss of cultural and political

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22 Yeats, Collected Plays 683.
25 Yeats, Collected Plays 681.
prestige. As Robert Tracy argues, *Purgatory* centres on that ‘Anglo-Irish obsession: fear of miscegenation, of inter-marriage with the Irish, and the consequent degeneration of blood, loss of racial identity, and loss of power and prestige’. But, as Tracy goes on to point out, *Purgatory* also recognises the other aspect of that obsession, the Anglo-Irish fascination with that forbidden miscegenation’, so noticeable in the Old Man’s portrayal of his mother. R.F. Foster points out that Yeats had earlier forwarded ‘arguments for a composite Irish inheritance’ in ‘Meditations in Time of civil war’ but that this, by the end of the thirties, had been ‘replaced by the implication that a marriage between the Ascendancy and a man of the people meant degeneracy.’

Marriage, intended to be a symbol of unity and the transcendence of boundaries, leads only to further division and a breakdown of order.

As Donald Torchiana argues, the mother’s seduction by the groom resembles the ‘popular seductions of schoolmaster and journalist that Yeats felt had turned “the English mind into a bed-hot harlot.”’ Torchiana reads the parents’ marriage as indicative of all that Yeats thought wrong with modern Ireland: ‘Ireland’s espousing the democratic politics of O’Connell—“the smile through the horse-collar”—seems perfectly symbolised in [the mother’s] choice of a groom.’ Thus the marriage represents the ultimate pollution of the Anglo-Irish tradition by the ‘filthy, modern tide’ (‘The Statues’, 1935), and Yeats’s fear of losing his ‘racial identity’ is expressed in the ‘degeneracy’ of his mother; ‘no better than her man’. Although the mother finds ‘pleasure’ in the sex act,

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27 Tracy 126.
29 Torchiana 360.
31 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 685.
sexuality in *Purgatory* is seen overall as a debasing and animalistic, rather than a transcendental, force. The Old Man’s focus on the ‘exact detail’ of the ‘sexual act’ is grotesque and illustrates the chasm between sublime and transgressive sexual desire and the harmonious image of love that Yeats aspired to. What is most chilling for the Old Man in his mother’s entrapment in Purgatory, is not her spiritual suffering but her corporeality and sexuality: that ‘she must animate that dead night/Not once but many times!’.

For Yeats, the ‘marriage-bed is [the] ... symbol of the attempt at a solved antimony’ yet, horrifyingly, the marriage-bed in *Purgatory* is a site of animalistic, degenerate passion. This is typical of the play’s overwhelming disorder; that which should be a site of order is debased and thus brings about the fall of the house and the order that it represents. The binaries, of class, generation, temperament and politics do not represent a possibility of cohesion or even balance. Instead they are shown to be irretrievably discordant.

**Boundaries & Order**

*Purgatory* is characterised by a compulsive and abiding fascination with order, its breakdown and the need for it to be reinstated, and this can be read nowhere more clearly than in the marriage of the Old Man’s parents. Marriage should be the basis for and embodiment of Yeats’s conception of the Unity of Culture. Jefferson Holdridge, in his

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33 See Jefferson Holdridge for a discussion of the movement in Yeats’s poetry towards this harmony of love, Holdridge 169-187.

34 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 689.

book on Yeats and the sublime and beautiful, writes that ‘Yeats’s nostalgic conception of the beautiful [is] a symbol of the harmonious society’, or what Yeats called ‘the “Unity of Culture”’. This ‘Unity of Culture’ is based on the ideal society’s reflection of divine reason and centres on a shared experience or ‘sensus communis’ and its symbol, within the Anglo-Irish tradition, was the Big House. In *Purgatory* we can see the near-complete breakdown of this *sensus communis* in the ruin of the house and the Old Man and the Boy’s inability to draw any sense of commonality from their shared experiences, and their lack of allegiance to any order, hierarchy or philosophy. Whereas previous generations who occupied the house seem to have enjoyed a natural rhythm and order, the current generations are irretrievably estranged.

The theme of division emerges in the play through its emphasis on boundaries and chaos, established by the Boy’s opening lines: ‘Half-door, hall door/Hither and thither’, and the play’s set also contributes significantly to the overall emphasis on boundaries. The first boundary that the audience notices is the threshold of the ruined house. Rather than presenting an impressive façade, the house’s ‘threshold [has] gone to patch a pig-sty’. The contrast between the noble house and the lowly pig-sty could not be greater. The image of patching up a pig-sty with the house’s threshold evokes the impression that what was once sufficient is now insufficient and that what was once an imposing social boundary is now striving merely to enclose animals.

The doorway stands as the threshold between the ruined present and the haunted ‘theatre’ of the past and, as the point between the two, represents both the past and the

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36 Holdridge 2.
37 Holdridge 2.
38 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 681.
present. The remains of the house are also doubly symbolic signalling both its former grandeur and its ruin. When the Boy goes to look at the house, he ‘stands in the doorway’ thus symbolically filling the threshold and replacing the Old Man as the son of the house.\textsuperscript{40} By standing in the doorway the Boy also highlights his own position on the threshold of manhood, which he will never cross as, unknown to him, he also stands between life and death. The Boy, as a character poised between different stages of life and whose transition to manhood represents the new generation’s threat to the old order, is thus a liminal character.

Victor Turner in \textit{Dramas, Fields and Metaphors} defines liminality as being ‘neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification’\textsuperscript{41} The Boy is a liminal character as he ‘represents the midpoint of transition ... between two positions’.\textsuperscript{42} Edward Said in \textit{Culture and Imperialism} discusses the trope of liminality in literature as a positive force, arguing that a liminal figure is a ‘mediating character’ typically without status or property. This character is thus independent and outside normal social structures, just as the Boy and the Old Man are. Liminality in \textit{Purgatory}, however, takes on more sinister characteristics. The state of being ‘betwixt and between’ is not a positive one but rather a space in which one is trapped; there is nowhere else for the characters to go and no ‘normal social structure’ of which to be a part. Rather than the natural rhythm of the Anglo-Irish eighteenth and nineteenth century tradition, the Old Man and Boy are instead reduced to itinerancy, with no home but a ruin. The Boy’s

\textsuperscript{40} Yeats, \textit{Collected Plays} 682.
\textsuperscript{41} Victor Turner, \textit{Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society} (Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 1974) 232. Indeed, the theatre itself can be viewed as a liminal space, in-between fantasy and reality and outside normal social structures.
\textsuperscript{42} Turner 237.
horrified exclamation on seeing his grandfather’s ghost, ‘A dead, living, murdered man!’ illustrates the abomination that such a liminal world represents.\footnote{Yeats, \textit{Collected Plays} 687.}

The traumatic nature of liminality is embodied in the idea of purgatory. As Dr. Trench says in \textit{Words Upon the Window-Pane}:

Sometimes a spirit re-lives not the pain of death but some passionate or tragic moment of life. ... If I were a Catholic I would say that such spirits were in Purgatory. In vain do we write \textit{requiescat in pace} upon the tomb, for they must suffer, and we in our turn must suffer until God gives peace.\footnote{Yeats, \textit{Collected Plays} 604.}

The souls of the dead cannot cross over into the peace beyond death, nor can they entirely leave life behind, forced to re-enact ‘some passionate or tragic moment of life.’ This is what Yeats, in \textit{A Vision}, called the ‘Dreaming Back’: ‘Damnation, for Yeats, was the inability to escape from the Dreaming Back.’\footnote{F.A.C. Wilson, \textit{W.B. Yeats and Tradition} (London: Methuen, 1968) 142.} Further, those left behind alive, such as the Old Man, are also doomed to liminality, trapped as they are in the past and their attempt to redeem lost souls.

By the end of the play, the Old Man has failed in his attempt to save his mother. His plan comes to ‘nothing’, and in fact the second murder seems to have strengthened the power of Purgatory as the hoof-beats signalling his father’s return beat even more strongly.\footnote{Yeats, \textit{Collected Plays} 689.} This failure leaves the Old Man defeated and, without hope, he appeals to God:

\begin{quote}
O God, \\
Release my mother’s soul from its dream! \\
Mankind can do no more. Appease \\
The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead.\footnote{Yeats, \textit{Collected Plays} 689.}
\end{quote}
As Mc Cormack writes, ‘The appeal to God is neither Yeats’s acceptance of theism nor the character’s surrender to established values. In these last lines *Purgatory* is forced to appeal beyond itself for some order which will bring to an end, to completion, its intolerable self-generation.’

The Old Man achieves a moment of peace near the end of *Purgatory* when he gazes on the tree:

Study that tree.
It stands there like a purified soul,
All cold, sweet, glistening light.

The language the Old Man uses counters his previous description of the tree: ‘Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,’ as the ‘cold, sweet’ adjectives seem to cancel out the glutinous materiality of the previous description. As Helen Vendler argues, ‘Nothing so obsessed Yeats as the idea of purgation leading to a state purified of complexity.’ Yet this simple wish is not so easily granted; though the tree may appear ‘purified’ to the Old Man, it is completely without life and represents a fitting mark of the Old Man’s murder of his son and the future. The Old Man’s hope is vanquished when the hoof-beats return, suggesting, along with the Old Man’s echo of his opening exhortation to ‘Study that tree’, the cyclical and inescapable nature of his purgatorial world.

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48 Mc Cormack 354.
49 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 688.
50 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 682.
Language

The simultaneous lack of and need for order also finds expression in the play’s use of language. The Old Man attempts to fill the felt absence of the onstage space with language:

   The moonlight falls upon the path,
   The shadow of a cloud upon the house,
   And that’s symbolical; study that tree,
   What is it like? 52

These lines establish the Old Man as the narrator, the figure who will facilitate access to lost meaning. In a sense the Old Man’s role as storyteller associates him with Gaelic tradition, the dinnseanchas (knowledge of the lore of places), and he is thus telling the Anglo-Irish story from within and outside the tradition, as befits his mixed blood.53 His first reaction to the house is to try to recall its ‘jokes and stories’ revealing the extent to which the house is constituted by language, especially since it has lost most of its physical presence.54 The Old Man tries to counter this with physical descriptions of the past, with references to the house’s ‘intricate passages’, parkland, ‘Kennel and stable, horse and hound’.55 By adding all these physical details, the Old Man reveals the loss of the Anglo-Irish; where once his mother ‘owned … This scenery and this countryside,’ he now only has access to it through memory.56

In defiance of this degradation and the house’s insubstantiality, the Old Man is keen to rebuild the house through a linguistic picture. This picture, however, has no reality beyond his narrative, as the Boy’s bald statements on the state of the house

52 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 681.
53 See Declan Kiberd’s discussion of Yeats’s association of himself with the dinnseanchas tradition in *Inventing Ireland* 107.
54 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 681.
55 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 683.
56 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 683.
illustrate. Whereas the Old Man describes the house as once living, abundant with ‘Fat, greasy life’, the Boy sees only the ‘floor ... gone, the windows gone,/And where there should be roof there’s sky.’. 57

The Old Man’s appeal to language itself begins to break down under the weight of reality. When the Old Man has killed the Boy he foresees the end of his mother’s and his own suffering. He attempts to sing a lullaby:

‘Hush-a-bye baby, thy father’s a knight,
Thy mother a lady, lovely and bright.’
No, that is something that I read in a book,
And if I sing it must be to my mother,
And I lack rhyme. 58

As Mc Cormack argues, Purgatory is metalinguistic, and its concern with the relationship between language and reality is epitomised by these lines. The failure of language to cope with reality is illustrated when the Old Man breaks off, categorising the lullaby as belonging to the world of books and therefore incapable of expressing what he must communicate to his mother. The lullaby’s incongruity perfectly points up the division between written culture and lived experience. Further, in the line ‘I lack rhyme’ the Old Man admits the total breakdown of linguistic order in the play. The lack of rhyme is crucial as its role as one of the strongest governing rules of poetry further highlights the distance between Purgatory’s reality and the ideal. As the Old Man in The Death of Cuchulain states, ‘antiquated romantic stuff’ is ‘out of fashion’. 59

The failing relationship between language and order can also be seen in the Old Man’s speeches. When the Old Man pronounces judgement on his father, ‘to kill a house/... I here declare a capital offence’, he is aligning himself with the tradition of

57 Yeats, Collected Plays 682.
58 Yeats, Collected Plays 688.
59 Yeats, Collected Plays 693.
magistrates which he has evoked in his preceding speech.\textsuperscript{60} However, his judgement is retrospective and thus, instead of ringing with conviction, it reeks of desperation. In this case language bears a very tenuous link to reality and the Old Man’s aping of legal language illustrates the extent to which language has become corrupted. As with the Old Man’s lack of rhyme, the corruption is due to a lack of proper order.

Language no longer serves as a clear mode of communication – the Old Man and the Boy continually contradict each other, and textual elisions make the audience guess at Yeats’s intended meaning. The insufficiency of language is highlighted in a struggle between the Old Man and the Boy for the moneybag. Refusing to argue with the Boy, the Old Man says ‘Give me that bag and no more words ... I will break your fingers’.\textsuperscript{61} The Old Man’s move from language to violent action is revealing: as he has been the play’s narrator his admission that language has become redundant is a telling sign of the breakdown of linguistic order. The Old Man’s murder of his son is an extension of his aping of legal language. The logic of killing his son at the age he was when he killed his father is based merely on coincidence rather than any system or established order.\textsuperscript{62} Instead of representing justice, the Old Man’s killing of ‘My father and my son on the same jack-knife’ is repulsive and reveals the derangement of the Old Man.

\textbf{Colonialism}

The Old Man’s distorted mentality results from his obsession with his mixed blood. He refers to his schooling in reading and Latin from those who ‘Half-loved me for my half of

\textsuperscript{60} Yeats, \textit{Collected Plays} 683.
\textsuperscript{61} Yeats, \textit{Collected Plays} 687.
\textsuperscript{62} Helen Vendler argues that ‘only self-forgiveness can halt the obsessive rehearsing of guilt. ... In killing his son [the Old Man] is intensifying the consequences of his mother’s action rather than abrogating them’, Vendler 199-200.
her" and he derides the parts of himself which can be linked to his father, ‘A wretched foul old man’. In his derangement, the Old Man attempts to link himself, half through blood and half through admiration, with the Anglo-Irish tradition. By pronouncing judgement on his father for the wastage and burning of the house, he severs his connection to his father and affiliates himself with the ancestral ‘Magistrate’. By linking himself with the Anglo-Irish tradition the Old Man seems to tarnish the memory of the tradition of ‘Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament’ by association with his crime. However, it is not that simple, as the nobility of that tradition is questionable itself.

The hierarchy and calm of the house’s past is the emblem of order which the chaos of the play is ostensibly set against. Like the young man in *By Accident* the Old Man yearns for the security and order of colonialism. The Old Man evokes a sense of true beauty and order in the rhythmic images of the ‘Great people’ who ‘came home to die’ or who ‘came from London every spring/To look at the may blossom in the park’. The rhythm of ‘every spring’ gives us not only a sense of order, but also ties that order into the seasons, thereby naturalising it. In the same speech the Old Man refers to ‘long ago’, lending the house a sense of archaic, natural right.

When the Old Man first talks about the tree he recalls its hey-day:

Before the thunderbolt had riven it,
Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,
Fat, greasy life.

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63 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 684
64 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 688.
65 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 683.
66 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 683.
67 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 682.
The fecundity of the tree and the repugnance of ‘Fat, greasy life’ imply a disgust at materiality and relate it to the Anglo-Irish heritage. This excessive language occurs again in reference to the house when the Old Man bewails the loss of:

... old books and books made fine
By eighteenth-century French binding, books
Modern and ancient, books by the ton.

The lack of distinction made by the Old Man between the books and his quantifying of them as if they were a form of capital, undermines their inherent value as cultural knowledge. They are important to him as ‘fine’ objects, attesting to the superficial refinement of the house’s previous occupants.

These lines reflect the Old Man’s distorted mind and his own debased image of the Anglo-Irish tradition, rather than necessarily reflecting Yeats’s views of the Anglo-Irish as materialistic. Yet, the Old Man’s hyperbole perhaps reflects some ambivalence on Yeats’s part. As he wrote in the commentary on ‘Parnell’s Funeral’ the Anglo-Irish:

loved the soil of Ireland; the returned Colonial Governor crossed the Channel to see the May flowers in his park ... but they could give to a people they thought unfit for self-government, nothing but a condescending affection.

The reference to ‘May flowers in his park’ links this passage with Purgatory’s reference to ‘may-blossom in the park’ and thus also links the play to Yeats’s critique of the Anglo-Irish. Grene writes of this extract that Yeats here displays an ‘unexpected capacity for politically critical distance from both the often idealised Ascendancy and his own

68 John Rees Moore notes, however, that ‘The leaves have become grotesque because they have to take on the burden of meaning a once-rich life in woeful contrast to the lean and shabby existence of the Old Man’, Moore 321.
69 Yeats, Collected Plays 684.
ancestors’. As Yeats wrote elsewhere, qualifying his more prominent lauding of them, ‘Our upper class cares nothing for Ireland except as a place for sport’, and Foster writes that Yeats believed ‘that the Anglo-Irish were – as AE had said to him not long before his death – “the best Irish”; yet they had opted for decline instead of responsibility by not “choosing their nation” aright. These Irish obsessions drive Purgatory’. Indeed, apart from looking ‘at the may-blossom in the park’ the ‘great men’ did nothing of import in the house. The house existed as a refuge from active life, on the margins, as implied by the phrase ‘came home to die’. As the Old Man’s speech makes clear, the centres of power were elsewhere, with the Big House existing as a space apart, a natural refuge from intellect and action. What emerges from this picture of the often-absent Anglo-Irish landlords is the colonial reality of ignoring tenant-rights, land-grabbing, rack-renting and cultural abuse, lying beneath the glittering surface of ‘Magistrates’.

As Mc Cormack tellingly argues, in Yeats’s childhood the term ‘Magistrate’ did not necessarily connote respectability. Mc Cormack goes on to analyse the less than perfect nineteenth century reality of colonels and MPs, arguing that the ‘great men’ of the Old Man’s idealised history were not much more than ‘Latter-day absentees’. Mc Cormack states:

This disrespectful analysis should be kept in perspective. It is not to the point to prove that Yeats’s pantheon consisted simply of well-dressed rogues or impostors. What is significant, however, is that ... [they] are not necessarily ‘great people’ in any open, social sense.

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172 W.B. Yeats, The Variorum Edition 836. This comment comes from a commentary on ‘The Three Songs’ written in December 1934.

629 Foster 629.

353 Mc Cormack 353.

353 Mc Cormack 353.
With this analysis we can see that the 'pantheon' established by the Old Man is an example of those landowners whom Edmund Burke deeply criticised for their 'indifference ... to the plight of the Catholic population in Ireland'. This is not to say that Yeats, through the Old Man, is suggesting in _Purgatory_ that the Anglo-Irish tradition is a corrupt one. However, through the emphasis on tradition in the play, Yeats cannot help but also raise the issues of the past, issues which are not easily resolvable by the Old Man's rhetoric.

Indeed Burke, one of Yeats's 'great stock', held views on tradition that undermine the glittering surface of the Old Man's speech on the Anglo-Irish tradition. Burke, as Luke Gibbons argues, was against the trend for foundational myths, seeing them as responsible for fostering a lack of sensitivity to and sympathy for cultural differences. Secondly, and more tellingly, Burke believed that tradition could not exist in Ireland in the same way as in England. For Burke, the idea of tradition was problematic in Ireland because, as Gibbons puts it, tradition 'is charged with the disruptive force of the sublime, deriving its energies from the fact that the originary violence of conquest has never been put to rest.'

What Gibbons highlights is that tradition is not an ordered, natural force but a created one. Tradition in Ireland is not an image of calm hierarchy but is 'a disruptive force, drawing attention to successive phases of confiscation and bloodshed perpetrated by colonial conquest.' The house itself is strongly associated with death by the phrase 'came home to die'. This association with death is evocative not only of the waning of

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80 Yeats, _Collected Plays_ 683.
the Anglo-Irish tradition, but the extent to which that tradition, even at its high point, was
interwoven with the symbol of death.

Violence

Just as Yeats modifies his earlier ideas about a ‘composite Irish inheritance’ in
Purgatory, he also puts forward an altered view of violence in the play. For Yeats there
is a distinction between what worked on the one hand on an aesthetic level but which,
one it crossed over into the social and political reality, became both repugnant and
threatening. In Wheels and Butterflies Yeats refers to that which lies beyond science, ‘a
subconscious knowledge ... a fabulous, formless darkness.’ Yet, less than a year later,
in ‘The Statues’, Yeats refers to that ‘filthy modern tide,’ which is characterised by a
‘formless spawning fury’. The repetition of the word ‘formless’ is revealing. When
Yeats views ‘formless darkness’ as an intellectual concept, it is a ‘fabulous’ phenomenon,
however, when it attacks the established social order of ‘We Irish, born into that ancient
sect’, formlessness can only wreak havoc, as it stands in opposition to the dual sanctity
and sanctuary of tradition and hierarchy. As Richard Kearney notes, ‘Faced with the
“filthy modern tide”, Yeats acknowledged that the sacramental need for harmony and the
romantic need for adversity could not be reconciled within history.’ Certainly, in
Purgatory harmony has vanished, while the Old Man’s adversity, manifested in his
murder of both father and son, effectively ends history.

81 W.B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies 77-8.
82 This is similar to Burke’s attitude to the French Revolution. For Burke revolutionary energy could
hypothetically be viewed as part of the positive sublime. However in reality revolution was terrible as it
destroys worthy traditions and hierarchies. For a discussion of this see Luke Gibbons, Edmund Burke and
Ireland and Jefferson Holdridge, Those Mingled Seas (2-3).
83 Richard Kearney, Transitions 28.
As Terence Brown writes, for Yeats ‘Conflict, comprehended as the source of creative energy rather than disabling divisiveness, would vitalise the country and save it from the materialism’ and individualism of modernity. As *Purgatory* and Yeats’s attitude to 1930s Ireland illustrate, conflict had in fact descended into ‘disabling divisiveness’ and was not the galvanising force Yeats wished for. In 1927 Yeats’s friend and defender of Unionist and Anglo-Irish rights Kevin O’Higgins was murdered. That one of the suspects was Maud Gonne’s son Seán MacBride must have disturbed Yeats even further. In the face of the destructive power of violence, Yeats needed the constructs of modern society – law, order and justice – and not the sublime and ‘wild, antithetical nature of the Celt’. Responding to what he termed in *The Death of Cuchulain* as ‘this vile age’, Yeats turned for a solution to the Blue Shirt Movement, led by General Eoin O’Duffy. As Brown argues, Yeats ‘had always admired the authoritarian imposition of order on human affairs’ and lent his support to O’Duffy and the Blue Shirt Movement as a response to the threat of ‘Irish disorder’. Yet, however well publicised Yeats’s connection to O’Duffy, his support for this quasi-fascist movement was short-lived. For Yeats, according to Seamus Deane ‘violence is ... the foundational moment—therefore a constructive violence—[however] destructive violence is the terminal moment of modern rationality’s history.’ The murder of Kevin O’Higgins was the latter form of violence and thus illustrated to him the deleterious

86 Yeats, *Collected Plays* 694.
power of conflict. This for Yeats was proof of the way in which modernity spelled, if not the end of rationality, then the end of myth.

Controversy

*Purgatory* premiered at the Abbey Theatre Festival on 10 August 1938. The extreme heterodoxy of the view of purgatory that the play presented provoked serious opposition in some audience members and, as usual, those who had not even seen the play. After the play’s performance Yeats delivered his final proclamation from the Abbey stage, and announced that this play represented his ‘beliefs about this world and the next’. The obscurity, harsh outcome, minimalist stage setting and brevity of the piece, however, startled critics, and reactions tended to be unfavourable. Austin Clarke remarked of the play that it was ‘interesting’ but overall ‘pathetic’, while Joseph Holloway felt that Yeats had ‘fallen into step with the modern worshippers of all that is ugly and foul’. Newspaper reviews were more circumspect with the *Irish Times*, for example, deeming it a ‘hint at departed glory’ — alluding more to the author than the Anglo-Irish world he depicted.

*Purgatory* clearly demanded some explication, but when F. R. Higgins delivered a lecture on ‘Yeats and Poetic Drama’ the following morning, and an American audience member, Father Connolly, asked about the meaning of the play, Higgins declined to comment. Thus the controversy began. Its forum was the ‘Letters to the Editor’ page of the *Irish Times*. One writer, John Lucy, argued that Yeats ‘has taken and twisted some of the meanings of some of the words and symbols of Catholicism to express his particular

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89 Austin Clarke, quoted in Brown, *Life of W.B. Yeats* 372.  
views’. Lucy then went on to call the play ‘a perversion’ and surmised that ‘perhaps Dr. Yeats lives in the past and has not yet seen that a new period of hard-thinking is setting in in Ireland’. Lucy’s objection to the play stems not only from its insult to Catholicism, but also from Yeats’s insistence on writing poetic drama when Ireland should be more concerned with the realities of being a Free State and the ‘hard-thinking’ this involves.

The following day, Frank O’Connor wrote to the paper, defending the play, while three days later a short, anonymous letter appeared in the Irish Times arguing that Lucy’s claims were ‘ridiculous’. In the same issue of the paper, Father Connolly was quoted as saying that he regretted his question as it had given rise to this ‘distasteful controversy’. Finally, one pragmatic correspondent declared that whatever the meaning of Yeats’s play the controversy had successfully ensured that the Abbey would be packed for all future performances of Purgatory and, indeed, the play was revived later the same year. The week-and-a-half-long debate which captured the imaginations and pens of many in Dublin and around the country illustrates the extent to which theatre in the 1930s was very much a burning issue, and that the representation of the Irish onstage was, as it had been since the Playboy and Plough riots, of central importance in Irish life.

In response to the growing debate, Yeats gave an interview, which was printed in both the Irish Times and the Irish Independent. In it, Yeats stated his advocacy of eugenics to protect the bloodlines of the Anglo-Irish and re-iterated his disgust that ‘a new individualistic generation has lost interest in the ancient sanctities’. Far from

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96 Isobel Burnett, letter, Irish Times 20 August 1938: 5.
stopping the argument, then, Yeats fuelled it further, causing one letter writer to fume that he was out of touch with ‘ninety-nine per cent’ of the country. Indeed, this reaction, though it refers to Purgatory, sums up the majority’s reaction to Yeats’s splenetic eugenicist views, published in On the Boiler (1938). For scholars of Yeats’s work this savage and vindictive polemic constitutes the dark side to his creativity. As Terence Brown remarks of On the Boiler, while Yeats chose to ‘represent his own ideas as the ravings of a mad ship’s carpenter’ indicating ‘that he knew he was espousing a vicious elitism in his polemic … [nevertheless] a text on ill-breeding must itself be ill-bred, barbaric.’ In the ‘mad ship’s carpenter’ is a resemblance to the Old Man in Purgatory and the play parallels On the Boiler representing, as R.F. Foster argues, a dramatic version of the ‘thought expressed poetically in ‘The Statues’ and polemically in On the Boiler.’

Yet, while Purgatory is clearly much influenced by eugenics and Yeat’s desire to end the destruction of the Anglo-Irish class, it is equally to do with the nature of post-Independence Ireland and the changing social structure. As noted above, Yeats did entertain certain anxieties as to how the Anglo-Irish were themselves hastening their demise by not ‘choosing their nation’ and these anxieties are exacerbated by the increasing social and cultural constriction and confinement of Irish society since Independence. Along with voices such as Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain, Yeats spoke out for cultural freedom and experiment and, perhaps in this way, we can see Purgatory as distinct from On the Boiler, representing, not merely a eugenicist plea, but also a plea for the halting of certain features of Irish society, such as materialism, and the

99 Brown, Life of W.B. Yeats 366.
100 Foster, W.B. Yeats: A Life 617.
reintroduction of imagination into the nation. As Helen Vendler argues, purgation for Yeats ‘ideally ... leads to rebirth’ and from this we can argue that, had the act of purgation been successful – impossible since the Old Man’s reasoning is so completely flawed – then the noble aspects of the Anglo-Irish tradition could have been reborn. The failure of the Old Man means that no phoenix can rise from the ashes of the house, suggesting Yeats’s total hopelessness for the Anglo-Irish and, by extension, Ireland.

The brief moment of purification implied by the illuminated tree is refused and, in despair, the Old Man appeals to God. As Vendler argues, the end of the play is evidence of ‘Yeats’s own bewilderment’ and inability to resolve this issue.\textsuperscript{101} If we accept that the Boy is representative of modern Ireland, then the inescapable purgatorial suffering of the play extends from the particular case of the Anglo-Irish to the whole of Ireland and, in this, accords with Vendler’s statement that ‘Ireland’s purgation, too, seems destined to go on forever, in a sterile repetition without any new rebirth.’\textsuperscript{102} While bearing in mind Yeats’s own statements about the play, this reading suggests that he was not only concerned with the fate of his own class, but also that of the nation he had been so closely allied with for most of his life.

\textit{Purgatory} compellingly shows the audience a world where order has completely broken down, illustrated by the Boy’s horror at ‘A dead, living, murdered man’ and the Old Man’s desperate killing of his father and son in an attempt to restore order and harmony. In this world, there is no communication and no comprehension and it is the fear of such a world that drives the play. This is Yeats’s greatest indictment of modern Ireland. Coming at the end of the thirties, the lack of recognition of the achievement of

\textsuperscript{101} Vendler 200.
\textsuperscript{102} Vendler 202.
the play, compounded by the earlier rejection of *The Herne’s Egg*, must have convinced Yeats that the transcendence of difference and division which he sought, was not possible and the Unity of Culture, which he had so wished for Ireland, was unattainable.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

INTRODUCTION
The 1930s was a decade of great change for Ireland and the film and drama of the period respond to this mood. Similarly responsive, the film and drama of the nineties reflects the continued concern with the development and consolidation of identity. Though there have been many political and cultural shifts between the thirties and the nineties, not least the technological advances that have brought multimedia to Ireland, however, it is also pertinent to recognise that some elements of Irish culture have not changed and it is the persistence of political and economic realities, as well as cultural themes, from the thirties to the nineties that this chapter will examine.

This persistence manifests itself in two ways. First, there were several revivals and re-workings of key thirties plays, the productions of which brought out or highlighted many of the themes of the first productions. These revivals were of works by some of the authors already considered in this thesis and confirmed them as writers who addressed issues at the heart of the national consciousness. The Abbey theatre revived *Katie Roche* (1936) by Teresa Deevy and *Moses’ Rock* (1938) by Frank O’Connor and Hugh Hunt, while *The Words Upon the Window Pane* (1930) by W.B. Yeats, was adapted to film by
Mary McGuckian (1995). In addition to these revivals, new works by Brian Friel, Marina Carr and Cathal Black chime with the concerns of the thirties and continue the debates over modernity, gender and post-revolutionary Ireland. Furthermore, all three new works address the past as an almost corporeal presence, a presence that must be addressed if the characters are to achieve any form of resolution and in this they both echo the backward look of much of thirties culture, and illustrate how issues from the past have not been resolved, despite seventy years of independence.

**Revivals**

*Katie Roche* continues Deevy’s fascination with the conflict between desire and reality. Katie marries Stanislaus though he was previously her employer and is old enough to be her father. Stan was once in love with Katie’s mother but transfers these affections to Katie, however, it is Michael to whom Katie is attracted. Stan, realising the threat to his marriage, immediately removes Katie from temptation by moving away, thereby keeping her all to himself. Katie, like Annie in *The King*, desires something more but does not have the resolve either to pursue it or achieve it. There is a strong undercurrent of power through the play, manifest in Katie’s desire to rebel, yet this is smothered when Katie obediently follows her husband out the door at the end of the play. In the Peacock production this was also conveyed by Katie’s costumes, which became plainer, even staid, as the play progressed.

*Moses’ Rock* is similarly concerned with the conflict between love, ideals and reality. Set in the time of the Parnellite split, Joan O’Leary, the daughter of a middle-

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1 The play was written and produced in 1930 and published in 1934 with an Introduction by Yeats, *The Words Upon the Window Pane: A Play in One Act* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1934).
class Catholic merchant, must choose between her suitors; one an idealist, one a realist, and one an English soldier who sees beyond politics to the personal. The play strongly conveys O'Connor's views on nationalism and, though looking back at the time of Parnell, can equally be read as a criticism of 1930s politics. As Ruth Sherry argues in her introduction to the play,

O'Connor was able to suggest that earlier nationalists, ignoring the evidence before their eyes, had overestimated Ireland's capacity for becoming a free and glorious nation. The ideal they fought for was something that Irish culture ... would never permit to come into being.²

The play's critique of politicking, its attack on the Catholic Church and the betrayal of ideals by the nouveau riche, were pertinent to what O'Connor and others saw as the failure of Ireland to live up to its pre-Independence ideals of freedom. Further, in their representation of the Parnellite split, Hunt and O'Connor also manage to represent the split sixteen years before the play's first production. When Cady O'Leary says, on realising the divided loyalties arising from the Parnell split, 'Oh, God, our poor country! 'Tis civil war' it is clear that the play is attempting to address both nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland.³ As Patrick Mason comments 'While it purports to be about Parnell, it is actually Frank O'Connor's civil war play ... We are still coping with the fall-out'.⁴ Mason's comment aptly illustrates the continuing relevance of Moses' Rock to Irish culture and politics into the nineties.

In Mary McGuckian's adaptation of W.B. Yeats's play, Words Upon the Window Pane (Words), the characters are literally haunted by the past, throwing up questions

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³ O'Connor and Hunt 80.
about identity and resolution. McGuckian’s film significantly expands Yeats’s play about a séance at which the ghosts of Jonathan Swift, Stella (Esther Johnson) and Vanessa (Esther Vanhomrigh) possess the medium, Mrs. Henderson, and force her to act out passionate moments from their lives. McGuckian’s emphasis on the growing romance of two séance attendees, Cornelius Patterson and Mrs. Mallet, shifts the emphasis of Yeats’s stage-play from the question of what we can know about both the past and the unobservable spirit world towards questions concerning human relationships and love.

McGuckian sets the film entirely in eighteenth century Dublin: Henrietta Street, Trinity College, Dublin Castle and St. Patrick’s Cathedral all feature. The fascination of the eighteenth century is that it epitomises the Anglo-Irish influence in Ireland, a tradition which McGuckian sees as unaccepted by modern Ireland, arguing that ‘we’re missing the influence of a whole period ... [that] we should be able to address ... and celebrate’.\(^5\) McGuckian argues that modern Ireland refuses to accept the legacy of the Protestant influence on Ireland and that this is crucial in order for the country to move on, as illustrated by the conflict in Northern Ireland where, she says, ‘we are about to come to terms with it [the Anglo-Irish presence] and try and integrate it’.\(^6\) This film thus carries on Yeats’s legacy in trying to get Ireland to recognise the achievements of the eighteenth century. The limited number of locations, however, illustrates visually the degree to which Ireland is no longer merely an eighteenth century product, at least not physically.

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Reception

The message of McGuckian's *Words* is that the past can enrich our present lives, most fully illustrated by the bond formed at the séances between Mrs. Mallet and Cornelius Patterson. Critics viewed *Words* as a period piece, highlighted by Michael Dwyer in his very positive review of the film, which called it 'richly atmospheric'. In contrast, the reception of both *Katie Roche* and *Moses' Rock* illustrate the reviewers' desire to link the revivals into the present and to see their value in these terms, rather than as a reflection on the past. *Katie Roche* is a relevant character for a nineties audience because of her desire – and failure – to rebel. As Cathy Leeney points out in an article on the play's revival, in 'the post divorce referendum Republic, Deevy's gloomy picture of failed, or tenuous, or savagely restrictive unions will continue to attract identification.' Reinforcing this point, *Katie Roche* formed the basis of an article in the *Irish Press* which discussed the play as if it were a contemporary musing on modern relationships, in which Katie typifies the modern woman who 'easily gives into her own desires'. Derbhle Crotty, who played Katie in the Peacock production, was interviewed as part of the article and identified the way that Katie 'has to adapt to survive' but how, nonetheless, the 'mundanities of everyday life only bring her down'. There seems, however, to be a conflict in this article. On the one hand the journalist, Mary Rose Doorly, is keen to point out the acting out of desire in the play, while on the other, Crotty focuses on the

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8 Cathy Leeney, 'Deevy's Leap: Teresa Deevy Re-Membered in the 1990s', *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the Nineties*, ed. Eberhard Bort (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1996) 44. Though, of course, Leeney and the audience for *Katie Roche* could not know that the second Divorce Referendum would pass the following year.
9 Doorly 18.
10 Doorly 18.
restrictions which prevent Katie from fulfilling her desires. Using Leeney’s point that the play is relevant to Ireland because of the recent divorce referendum, Doorly and Crotty’s responses call attention to the tension between desire and social control in both Deevy’s time and the nineties.

Fintan O’Toole identifies this tension, arguing that the subtext of the play is ‘the drama of what cannot be articulated.’\(^{11}\) Though O’Toole thought the play ‘a plodding, laughably awkward 1930s Abbey domestic drama’, he does appreciate it for what it gestures towards: the chance to ‘go out of our minds’, that is, to go beyond the narrow roles that are set for us and that we set for ourselves. This need was not, however, picked up on by the \textit{Irish Times} main review of the play by David Nowlan, who instead saw the play as a comfortable piece of Abbey realism.\(^{12}\) As Leeney argues, Nowlan ‘brought with him to the Peacock Theatre an idea of what Irish theatre, at the Abbey, in the 1930s, was like, and that is what he saw on the stage.’\(^{13}\) Indeed, Leeney argues that both Nowlan and O’Toole ‘consign \textit{Katie Roche} to the period in which it was written’.\(^{14}\) Yet, as the \textit{Irish Press} article implies, \textit{Katie Roche} offers a lot more to a nineties audience than a mere look at the past.

Remarkably, in comparing reviews of \textit{Moses' Rock}, there is little alteration in attitudes to its first production in 1938 and its revival in 1994. In 1938 the \textit{Irish Times} review argued that ‘It may be that the authors desire audiences to see in Joan O’Leary the symbol of the younger Ireland declaring with vehemence “a plague on both your

\(^{13}\) Leeney, ‘Deevy’s Leap’ 47.
\(^{14}\) Leeney, ‘Deevy’s Leap’ 48.
houses". Similarly, in April 1994, both the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* reviews read the play in terms of what it signified for modern Ireland. David Nowlan claimed that ‘its revival is most timely, and welcome. It brings effectively into question at least some of our contemporary assumptions’ about social change and its revival allows us to rediscover ‘insights that might have been temporarily set aside’.

These insights presumably include the play’s attack on the Church’s power, which must, in 1994, have seemed germane. In the final act the family physician, Dr Jackson, turns to Ned Hegarty, the play’s idealist, and declares that ‘since the time I was that height, I’m hearing enthusiastic young men declare that the day of the priest in politics is over, and that the people have got some spunk in them at last ... Believe me, the priests always have the last word.’ In the climate of scandals over the behaviour of some priests in the Catholic Church in Ireland and America, this pronouncement can be read in two ways. First, it describes a situation which had been in place since before Independence and second, it might have seemed to nineties Ireland that the tide was changing and that the priests would no longer have the last word. This relevance to contemporary issues was noted by Lorcan Roche who observed that the play brought out ‘certain important resonances in our own society, namely the right to individual privacy, the power of the Church, the fear of breaking from convention’. Neither in 1938 nor 1994 is *Moses’ Rock* really reviewed as merely a play. Instead, it is consistently reviewed in terms of its message to an Irish audience and what this message might reveal about contemporary society. For Nowlan, the play points up the fact that contemporary

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15 *Irish Times* 1 March 1938: 11.
17 O’Connor and Hunt 81.
commentators assume that 'great moral, social and political change has been wrought in our country' over the past few decades, but the revival of a play from the 1930s sets this right; what the drama of the 1930s offers to a nineties audience is a meditation on how we think about both our past and present and, in some respects, how little has changed in Ireland over the past half-century.

**DANCING AT LUGHNASA, BY THE BOG OF CATS... AND KOREA**

The revivals of *Katie Roche* and *Moses' Rock* and the adaptation of *Words* illustrate the continuing relevance of some of the main issues of 1930s Ireland to 1990s Ireland, despite the intervening sixty years. In an equally important way, the persistence of these themes is also effectively illustrated by three original nineties works: *Dancing at Lughnasa*, both the stage-play by Brian Friel (1990) and the film adaptation by Frank McGuinness and Pat O'Connor (1998); Cathal Black's film *Korea* (1995), an adaptation of John McGahern's short-story of the same title from 1970 and, finally, Marina Carr's play *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998).

Each of these three works addresses and develops issues that were central to the plays and films of the thirties, and these echoes indicate a pattern in Irish film and drama: a pattern of recurring themes and a cyclical return to the predominant concerns of Irish society: modernity, gender and the realities of a post-revolutionary national situation. Though huge strides had been made in terms of modernity and technology, the works explored in this chapter demonstrate the same kind of fear and opposition to modernity as that displayed sixty years previously in works like Heale's *The Islandman* and Davidson's *By Accident*. Similarly, though the position of women in Irish society has
significantly changed and improved, the same lack of control over their lives link Hester, the Mundy sisters, Annie Kinsella and Brigid.

Perhaps this sense of arrested development – at least in terms of conceptualising Ireland as a modern state – can be tied into the legacy of the civil war. In Korea, Doyle’s inability to move on or embrace modernity is a result of a deep trauma inflicted upon him while imprisoned during the civil war. Furthermore, Doyle’s paralysis is also indicative of the central concern of all three nineties works: the past. While Korea, Dancing at Lughnasa and By the Bog of Cats... approach the concept of the past differently, they each question whether the past can be resolved and this, combined with their return to the pattern of themes that occur in the thirties, suggests that in Irish culture this pattern is an inexorable cycle.

Dancing at Lughnasa (Lughnasa) is set in Donegal in 1936 and tells the story of the Mundy sisters: Kate, Maggie, Agnes, Rose and Chris, and Chris’s illegitimate child Michael. Both play and film are elegiac in tone, set in the weeks after Father Jack’s homecoming from Ryanga and before the break-up of the family. Kate is dismissed from the local school, Father Jack dies, Rose and Agnes lose their livelihood and emigrate and Chris is forced to work in the factory to support the remaining sisters. The moment of the play is their last glorious summer together, though the signs of change and dissolution are already creeping in. Korea is also an elegy, as Eamon and John Doyle face the last days of fishing on the lake for eels. Originally, Black intended to make Korea as a short film but following Joe O’Byrne’s treatment, decided to turn it into a full-length feature. McGahern’s story is expanded to include a romantic plot and the drama is extended from simply focussing on the father and son fishing together. Yet the film remains true to the
atmosphere and claustrophobia of the story. Indeed, it was this atmosphere that first drew Black to McGahern’s work because, as he says, ‘I thought that there was a dark heart to the country that wasn’t being expressed but McGahern seemed to bring this out.’ In Korea, Black, a film-maker much concerned with the dark heart of Ireland, stays true to this tone of repressed emotion and violence.

The Doyle family struggle against the twin foes of the past and the future as John Doyle is haunted by his involvement in the civil war to such an extent that he tries to destroy Eamon’s future, rather than let him embrace change and move on. For John Doyle, post-revolutionary Ireland is not so much a disappointment as a reproach for the failures of the past. Similarly, in Carr’s play By the Bog of Cats... (Bog of Cats) Hester cannot integrate into the community nor can she forget the past. Bog of Cats dramatises the day of Carthage Kilbride’s marriage. Carthage is Hester’s former lover and father to her daughter Josie, yet he has left her to marry Caroline Cassidy and become a big farmer by inheriting Caroline’s father’s extensive property. Hester does everything she can to thwart the wedding and to remain in her and Carthage’s home by the Bog. The play ends similarly to Purgatory as Hester, in despair, murders her daughter and kills herself. Though Hester is a very different character from the Mundys and the Doyles, certain similarities link the characters and run through all their lives. In particular, the characters seem trapped, in all four works, between tradition and modernity.

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MODERNITY

Despite the resurgence of the Irish economy in the mid-nineties, primarily due to the boom in the technology and pharmaceutical industries and services, modernity in each of these three works is conceived as a threat, rather than a boon. Though Friel’s original stage-play *Lughnasa* dates from before the boom, nevertheless it focuses on the effects of modernity in rural Ireland and heralds a changing world. Indeed, within the play the new Ireland is already evident as a threat in the signs of industrialisation that creep into the village and encroach on the Mundy sisters’ lives. As Brian Friel notes, the ‘transitional generation’ become the victims of an ‘alien future’.20 Not only is there a new Arcade opening in the town, further disrupting the traditional patterns of life in rural Ireland, but Rose and Agnes are made redundant by the new knitting factory. As Terence Brown argues, the Mundy sisters’ ‘lives are misshapen by an Irish society that will, as it changes, destroy the life they have struggled to achieve.’21 Brown’s point highlights the fact that the changes are from within the new Free State and the new society emerging in the thirties.

Like the Mundy sisters, John Doyle faces the prospect of the end of his way of life. Eamon and his father John Doyle, fish the lake for eels and from the beginning of the film Eamon and Doyle’s days on the lake are numbered. Eamon’s opening voice-over tells the audience that ‘We were the last to fish the fresh water for a living’, and his elegiac tone pervades the film. The shots of the lake are predominantly blue-green in composition, lending the lake images a melancholic air, and Black often cuts to long

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shots of the lake with the figures of the two men in the boat barely discernible in the background. One of these long shots, early on in the film, dissolves to a shot of a clock face and the sound of the radio. The image of the clock very clearly signals that time is passing and that the Doyles are in danger of being left behind. Yet, though Doyle is totally opposed to it, or perhaps because he is, modernity and, specifically, the innovative power of electricity attract Eamon.

The first time the installation process is depicted, Eamon and his father are walking back from the lake. They walk past the base of a pole where, just visible at the top of the frame, is a pair of man’s legs. Eamon is fascinated by the setting up of the electric cables and walks slowly past, staring up towards the man at work. Doyle impatiently calls Eamon to ‘come on’, paradoxically calling him forward into the past.\(^{22}\) Even Doyle’s demeanour makes it clear that he resents the intrusion of the electricity poles. That the ESB worker is so far above the two men, visually implies that the developments of modernity are beyond them, and in this early scene the contrast between the traditional way of life on the lake and the faster pace of modernity is plainly set out.

The introduction of electricity to the area coincides with the tightening of regulations concerning the Doyles’ fishing rights. Eamon and Doyle are the last men permitted to fish the lake and even then they are strictly controlled, only being allowed to use one thousand hooks in the lake at any one time. Coincidentally it is Ben Moran, Doyle’s civil war enemy, who oversees these controls. John Doyle has been told that these limits are because eel fishing ‘impoverish[es] the fishing for the tourists.’ Later on in the film, even this limited right is taken away when Doyle receives a letter telling him

\(^{22}\) Sean O’Faolain’s 1951 film *The Promise of Barty O’Brien* in which a son must strive to convince his father, who fought in 1916, to introduce electricity into their home, is somewhat similar to the plot of *Korea.*
that his right has been terminated as the State wants to develop the lake for tourism. Incensed and distraught, Doyle races to Moran’s house to confront him. Though Moran tells him that he tried to save his livelihood and that he can get him alternative work, Doyle does not listen to him. Instead, Doyle’s mind is in the past. He confesses that Eamon’s mother wanted to emigrate to America but Doyle wouldn’t hear of it, saying ‘I told her I’ll never leave it, I told her that.’ Doyle obviously cannot face the self-recrimination over his past actions and so continues to blame Moran.

Where Doyle represents the past, Eamon represents the future, as the radio commentator puts it, he is one of ‘the first generation to be born in freedom...’. In the same year as Eamon’s birth, 1934, Eamon de Valera’s government started to take measures to weaken the IRA, and thus for his father, Eamon’s birth signalled the beginning of a new life and an end to an old one. Measures such as these, to both pacify and weaken the IRA, were signs of the changes to come: the outlawing of the organisation only two years later. Just as with the fishing license, John Doyle’s past and identity were expunged and prohibited by the very authority he fought to put in power. In this, Doyle is marginalized because of the State’s changing attitude to landscape. When Doyle receives the letter informing him that he is no longer permitted to fish the lake, he tells the postman that ‘There was a time when all I wanted was to see a harp on an envelope, instead of a crown.’ The heavy irony here is compounded when we see that the letter is signed in Irish.

For Hester in *Bog of Cats* and John Doyle in *Korea* modernity literally threatens their way of life. Hester is particularly at risk as she does not seem to understand the

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23 The Pension Act was passed to benefit those who had fought in the War of Independence in the same year and John Doyle is in receipt of this pension.
nature of the new Ireland. The shift from tradition to new values can be read in the value of money and official forms to the towns-people, and the concordant disrespect for older traditions. Though land is still the most important sign of success, it is valued more by people like Mrs. Kilbride for the social status it confers rather than being inherently valuable. In other ways, too, *Bog of Cats* conveys the sense of the devaluing of tradition and older ways of life by the townsfolk. Thus, for example, Hester’s knowledge of the geography and the history of the Bog is unimportant to Carthage who wants to become a big farmer. Likewise, Catwoman’s warnings to Monica about her son are disregarded and Father Willow implies that even the Church has no real authority and that his parishioners have ‘never listened’ to him. Money is the real authority, as illustrated by the many attempts to buy Hester off. She naively assumes that the contracts she signed mean nothing compared with her presence, saying ‘Bits of paper, writin’, means nothin’, can as aisy be unsigned. Nevertheless, Hester divines the power of money, accusing Carthage of giving her up for ‘scourin’ acres and bank balances. Though this tension between modern and traditional Ireland is by no means novel, Carthage’s marriage to Caroline Cassidy and Hester’s eviction from the Bog of Cats, represents a moment of crisis when these two worlds come into direct conflict.

*Bog of Cats* strives to counter-weight the power of money and the burgeoning new and modern Irish society with a strong sense of myth and magic, most forcefully and passionately embodied by Hester. Through myth and magic the play establishes an alternative to the capitalist concerns of many of the characters of the play and their

25 Carr 283.
26 Carr 334.
shallowness is compared to Hester’s visceral nature, which is an example of a brutish, but perhaps what Carr perceives as a more authentic, version of Irish self- hood.

Yet, despite the threat that it represents, modernity is not entirely negative. In Korea Eamon’s life is full of possibilities because of the positive aspects of modernity, aspects that ameliorate the loss of traditional ways of life, such as fishing. Lughnasa also refuses to be merely a depressing remembrance of the oppression of women and rural life in the 1930s. While the factory and the Arcade impinge on traditional rural life, the radio is a positive feature of the new Ireland, a translation of old cultural forms into new. This is illustrated in the play by the choice of names for the radio – Marconi is chosen over Lugh – the god of science and technology replacing the god of the harvest. While the factory is a divisive element, splitting up the family, the radio is an empowering influence and the music from the radio enables the sisters to overcome their shyness with each other. Their obsession with the radio is a positive ‘image of a rural society giving way to the stirrings of an urban one’ and the songs that play are a mix of traditional airs and modern songs, such as ‘Anything Goes’, which both Gerry and Maggie sing along to.

The music from Marconi/Lugh gives the sisters license to transcend the monotony and conservatism they encounter in their daily lives. Implicitly, the music also connects the Mundys to the outside world, creating an imagined community, much as it does in both Korea and The Islandman. It is through aspects of modernity, such as the radio playing traditional Irish music, that elements of traditional Ireland will survive and that communities in rural Ireland – broken up by modern influences – will transform and

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27 This is altered in the screenplay where the radio is called Lugh. In the play Kate will not call the radio Lugh as it has resonances of paganism and the film thus connects the sisters to the harvest fires of Lughnasa and paganism to a greater degree than the play does.

continue. Yet, as in Korea, the radio in Lughnasa is unreliable and keeps breaking down. This illustrates the tenuous nature of modern Ireland’s connection to the past, as well as implying that the imagined community it creates is fragile and provisional. In Korea, however, Eamon has the strength to build on this tentative link to modern Ireland, campaigning for electricity to be installed at home to replace the fading battery in a bid to integrate the Doyles further into the modern community and thus ensure their future.

Doyle recognises that Eamon should have a different, a better, life than his. He opposes the idea of emigration to America because of his patriotism and his deep connection to place, a connection forged by fighting for Irish independence and the perceived security of fishing the lake. He sends Eamon to school, to get ‘the education’, to ensure that Eamon will have the opportunity to stay in Ireland. Doyle’s determination to believe in the future in and of Ireland becomes clear when father and son take their eel catch to the train station to be exported. On the back of the truck, Doyle comments to another passenger ‘Oh it’s a great country right enough’ to which the man nods agreement. The camera pulls back and, while the truck drives out of shot, Black sustains a long shot of the wide, open countryside. This shot visually contradicts the image of America as the only open space available to Eamon and confirms Doyle’s judgment that it is ‘a great country’. The film cuts to the noisy, bustling train station where the man taking delivery of the eels is pronouncing America to be ‘the land of opportunity... a big expanding country’. He contrasts it with Ireland, ‘this poky place. All there’s room for here is fillin’ holes and pints of porter.’ To this diatribe Doyle replies:

I wanted him to get the education. It’ll stand to him for the rest of his life. There’s no use scrapin’ for the education then letting the yanks get the benefit. As long as there’s the fishing there’s
something. Not many can say that. There’s far too much talk about America, America.

Despite the fact that emigration figures were rising in this period – and one newspaper shown in the film carries this headline – Doyle is determined that his son remain in Ireland. Ben Moran, in contrast, allowed his son, Luke, to emigrate to America, where he was drafted to fight for the American army in Korea. Luke is killed in an ambush in Korea and the Morans receive $10,000 in compensation. At Luke Moran’s funeral Doyle tells a neighbour, ‘We didn’t fight for our country to send our sons to Korea to die’, demonstrating not only his bitterness towards the Morans but also his desire for Eamon to live in and for Ireland.

Yet, despite his support for educational progress, Doyle is fearful of it too. It is not just their last summer on the lake because of stricter regulations, but also because Eamon’s education gives him access to a world beyond fishing or manual labour. In an early scene Doyle uses Eamon’s education as a weapon against Moran. When Moran comes to check that they are only using the regulation one thousand hooks, Doyle’s riposte is that Eamon is educated and therefore ‘well able to count to a thousand.’ Yet later in the film Doyle also sees Eamon’s education as an invasive weapon against his memories. When Eamon questions his father about his role in the War of Independence and the civil war – ‘You did terrible things then didn’t you, to make this a free country’ – Doyle tells him that his ‘schooling’s over now.’ Further, when Doyle does tell Eamon about his memories of the civil war, in particular, the execution of the young soldier, he rejects Eamon’s view on the matter. Eamon asks his father if he thinks that the young soldier ‘stood to attention because he thought he might still get off if he obeyed the rules?’ Doyle replies, ‘Sounds a bit high falutin’ to me. Comes from going to school too
long. Though Doyle champions Eamon’s education, when it intrudes on his own version of the past, he shies away from it. Indeed, his reaction here can be read as a desire not to think about the parallels between the young soldier’s execution and his own situation; abiding by the regulations on the fishing industry has not saved his livelihood.

Residual Energies

Doyle’s equivocal attitude to education and modernity illustrates that though it brings benefits to rural Ireland, modernity inevitably means change, not all of it positive. This is felt within the Mundy household as, though the radio brings them together, ultimately their dance is a last moment of resistance rather than a triumph. In both play and film of Lughnasa there are these brief moments of resistance. These ‘residual energies’ represent the sisters’ ability and, indeed, the ability of Irish culture, to resist the rapid social change of the period.29 The strongest moment of resistance is when the sisters give themselves up to the music from the radio and dance without caring about others’ perceptions of them. Their dancing is completely different from the modern, rule-bound ballroom dancing that Gerry teaches. Instead, it is a wild and primitive experience.

In the play, Maggie is the first to dance and for her it is an act of ‘defiance’.30 To add to this, she ‘patterns her face with an instant mask’ of flour, ‘opens her mouth and emits a wild, raucous “Yaaaah!” — and immediately begins to dance’.31 Maggie emulates the music, which is also ‘raucous’, connecting with it and enabling her sisters to do the same. Each sister follows Maggie’s lead: Rose ‘leaps to her feet’, Chris imitates Maggie’s defiance by donning Jack’s surplice, and Kate strikingly pushes to one side her

29 Brown, “‘Have we a context?’” 198.
31 Friel, Lughnasa 21.
disciplined persona to express ‘some deep and true emotion.’ Their unorthodox and spontaneous dance – complete with mask and surplice – turns them, in Michael’s phrase, into ‘shrieking strangers’. As Richard Pine argues, ‘we should not allow ourselves to be seduced ... into the notion that music can be nothing but beautiful and healing ... The sisters’ dance in Lughnasa should disabuse us of that.’ From Michael’s childlike perspective their strangeness is negative as it turns his mother and aunts into something feral, but for the sisters this moment of subverting the usual order and constraint of the household is refreshingly positive because of the freedom it gives them. As with Brigid in Shadow and Substance the moment of transcendence renders the women unrecognisable and also gives to them a freedom and supernatural power not present in their everyday lives. Dancing gives the sisters great individual freedom, as well as representing a moment of cohesion for them as a family, what Antony Roche calls the ‘unity-in-difference of the women’. The cohesion is not only between the women, however, but within themselves. The dance enables them to connect with their own ‘otherness’, much as the dance of the lepers that Jack relates makes them, figuratively at least, whole.

These energies and freedoms, however, are not controllable. Thus, in one respect the child Michael is right in fearing his aunts as ‘strangers’ while they dance. The momentary subversion of order and celebration of the body disrupts the usual order and control of the household. This disruption does not allow them to seamlessly revert to

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32 Friel, Lughnasa 21-22.
33 Friel, Lughnasa 2.
36 Friel, Lughnasa 48.
their previous order and they seem fractious and disturbed in themselves, as if they each sense the potential power of such freedom, yet also realise the impossibility of maintaining it. In representing a breakdown in familial order the dance thus prefigures the breakdown of the family. As Kate says to Maggie, ‘You try to keep the home together... And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can’t be held together much longer.’ While there are outside forces at work, such as the knitting factory, undermining the order of the family, it is the loss of Kate’s job, brought about by Jack’s subversion of Catholic order, that represents the greatest trouble for the family. So it is that, read in this way, the family is torn apart not only by the pressures of modernity, but also by the subversive energies within the family and the outside world’s inability, or refusal, to accept them. Where normally the sisters struggle to maintain a facade that accords with the social norms and expectations of 1930s Ireland, they jettison that facade while dancing and, in so doing, unknowingly express a pre-knowledge of the family’s breaking apart.

This is reinforced by the play’s representation of Rose’s trip to the back hills. Rose is the only sister who goes to the back hills and the Lughnasa fires and instead of savagery she finds a ‘peaceful place up there’ with only a few of the fires left burning. Indeed, Michael Sweeney, who was burnt by the fires and hence is an example of the ills that can befall one from going up the back hills, will ‘be all right.’ Danny is the perfect gentleman, calls her his rosebud and walks her home. Despite this courteousness, Rose’s

37 Friel, Lughnasa 35. Kate: ‘You try to keep the home together. Then you suddenly realize cracks are appearing everywhere. I’m going to lose my job’, Frank McGuinness, Brian Friel’s Dancing at Lughnasa: Screenplay (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) 56.
38 Friel, Lughnasa 59. The character of Michael Sweeney is absent from the screenplay.
transgression seems to lead to further break down. Immediately following Rose’s account of her evening with Danny, Michael tells of how the next evening she and Agnes learn of their unemployment and leave the house forever. Thus, once more, it is the sisters’ sexual energies which seem to lead to the dissolution of the family, as much as the external pressures from the industrialisation of Ireland. Though the film is different, with Rose’s transgression leading to the sisters’ dance, the dance and Rose’s trip also contribute to the fragmentation of the family.

Landscape

Landscape in these works also provides a space of resistance to modernity and change, yet it is just as uncontrollable as the energies of the sisters’ dance. In Friel’s Lughnasa the back hills represent a space of freedom and imagination. For Rose, the back hills are the mysterious destination that Danny Bradley will take her to, a space for passion and freedom from the social rules that prevent their relationship. For Kate, however, the back hills represent only evil:

I know those people from the back hills! I’ve taught them! Savages – that’s what they are! And what pagan practices they have are no concern of ours – none whatever! It’s a sorry day to hear talk like that in a Christian home, a Catholic home.39

Kate’s insistence on the savagery of the denizens of the back hills and their pagan qualities is important. On the one hand she reveals her fear of that side, the darker side, of life. On the other it is necessary for her to totally condemn ‘those people from the back hills’ in order to define herself and her family first as ‘Christian’ and then as ‘Catholic’. Kate’s comment must be read in the light of her desire to be socially

39 Friel, Lughnasa 17. This attitude from Kate is absent from the screenplay, as is this scene.
respected, despite her family’s transgressions. Father Jack has obviously lapsed from the Catholic Church and adopted many aspects of the Ryangan pagan religion and Michael is an illegitimate child, both facts placing the Mundys outside the social norms that Kate is so desperate to be within. Thus, by railing against the savagery of ‘those people’ Kate redefines the boundaries and figuratively moves the Mundy family from the margins to the centre, by creating a new, more transgressive ‘other’.

The back hills, the fires of Lughnasa and, by extension, the town’s harvest dance and the sisters’ dance, reveal the necessity of expressing the darker, wilder side of the self and society. As Friel argues, ‘there’s a need for the pagan in life... If too much obeisance is offered to manners, then in some way we lose or suppress the grumbling and dangerous beast that’s underneath the ground. This denial is what causes the conflict.’

While Kate describes the anticipation of the harvest period in terms of physical illness, her terms: ‘Ballybeg’s off its head’ and ‘like a fever in the place’, demonstrate that unless these energies are expressed, the community will explode with suppressed intensity.

Kate tries to combat the ferment at home by treating Jack with quinine for his ‘fever’ but, as illustrated by her dancing, it is the fervour within herself that she cannot quash completely. Her extreme reaction to the suggestion of the back hills illustrates her fear of them and of that side of herself and implies her attraction to both, much as miscegenation, though represented as destructive, is grotesquely fascinating in Purgatory.

Whereas in the play, the back hills are a shadowy presence, free from the surveillant aspects of the community, the film chooses to show the fires of Lughnasa,


41 Friel, Lughnasa 10: 11.
thereby removing them from the space of imagination. Rose’s experience with Danny is nightmarish, as he first bullies her into accompanying him to the fires and then, as is suggested by the film, he rapes her. The fires, in the film, are the opposite of the ‘peaceful’ space that Rose finds in the play. Rather than representing the ‘residual energies’ of Ireland’s pagan past, energies that have been able to resist both colonisation and Catholicism, the fires are drunken orgies, an image of chaos and horror. From the house Father Jack sees the fires burning and wanders off towards them. The film cuts between Jack making his way to the hills and a fox killing Rose’s pet rooster. The rooster, with its red and white feathers, resembles Jack, as well as representing Rose’s childlike quality and her naïve sexuality. The fox, implicitly representing Danny Bradley, kills Rose’s rooster and suggests that Danny takes advantage of her sexually. This scene also predicts Jack’s death and, with him, the beneficent face of pagan-ness.

When Rose returns to the house her innocence is gone and she stands up to Kate. Whereas in the play it is her genial and satisfying experience with Danny that gives her the strength to face Kate, in the film it is her realisation of Danny’s violent nature. She tells Kate that ‘I said goodbye to Danny Bradley’, echoing her earlier firmness with Danny, telling him, ‘You’re already married’. This phrase represents Rose’s reversal from her prior wilful assertion that Danny was a single man, to her recognition of the reality of the situation. The positive role of the back hills in the play is thus transformed in the film into a violent and predatory space, which only further oppresses Rose.

In transforming the play from a stage-bound medium to a filmic spectacle, O’Connor litters his version of Lughnasa with images of a stable landscape. When the sisters walk into Ballybeg to meet Jack from the bus – the image that was used for the
publicity for the film (see Fig. 5) – they walk along a straight road that cuts through the Donegal bog. The camera pulls back so that the sisters are tiny in comparison to the landscape and, indeed, both the sisters and the road appear like insignificant intruders on the natural landscape. This image illustrates the necessity for the sisters, who live outside the town, to constantly assert themselves against the vastness of the landscape they live in, and the tension between modernity and Ireland’s sublime landscape.

Yet the landscape is comforting also and this is representative of both the play’s and, in particular, the film’s overall nostalgic tone. The glorious, sweeping landscapes which O’Connor portrays are a strong presence in the film and create a romanticised image of rural Ireland. After Kate is warned that she might be dismissed from her teaching job, she cycles home desolately. Along the way she spots several men cutting turf and she stops to watch them. There is a prolonged shot of the turf followed by a long shot of Kate looking at the turf and then cycling away. McGuinness’s screenplay indicates that Kate ‘feels a moment of peace’ when she looks at the turf-cutters and this implies that, through a momentary commune with nature and tradition, Kate is reassured about her future.

As O’Connor’s film is eager to convey, there is a strong link between self and landscape, place and personality. This is equally true of Black’s Korea as for John Doyle the lake and its surrounding landscape are of fundamental importance. After Doyle has received the letter officially informing him of the loss of his license, he goes out eel fishing alone. In the boat, he looks out fondly on the lake, towards a growth of rushes, seeing a sepia-toned vision of other men in their boats, a community of fishermen. When

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In the play’s first production, Joe Vanek created a beautiful stage design which could be read as a visual starting point for the representation of landscape in the film. McGuinness 44.
he looks back at the lake, the image of the past is gone and the lake returns to its slate-blue colour. The film then cuts to a shot of one eel twisting on a line. The link between the eel and Doyle implies that the future holds the same for both of them: they are both trapped.

In both Korea and Bog of Cats the lake and the bogland are permanent fixtures, while the people that live by them are fleeting impressions on the landscape. Nevertheless, for Doyle and Hester their connection to their landscapes is both inescapable and defining. The bogland is not just a space that represents Hester’s personal history but one that contains many secret histories; its sedimented layers are made of the landscapes of previous centuries. For Hester the Bog of Cats is a source of identity. Catwoman tries to warn Hester of the impending doom and advises her to leave the Bog. In reply Hester tells her that, ‘Ah, how can I lave the Bog of Cats, everythin’ I’m connected to is here. I’d rather die.’ Hester’s fatal attraction to the Bog is more than a personal knowledge of it; she seems to be part of it. She cannot settle in the house Carthage has built for her and is compelled to roam the Bog almost every night. As she says to him, ‘I’ve as much right to this place as any of yees, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held yees.’ For Hester, the Bog is a living, maternal organism, capable of exerting power over her.

Hester is identified as part of the landscape by the community also. Xavier threatens her that he will get his way ‘if I have to plough through you’. Before this, when Carthage is trying to get Hester to agree to his terms she tells him she won’t let him

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44 Carr 273.
45 Carr 289.
46 Carr 295.
‘walk over me like that’\textsuperscript{47} and later, when Hester is at the wedding, Mrs. Kilbride declares that Hester shouldn’t be allowed to ‘walk all over us’.\textsuperscript{48} This comment, echoing Hester’s earlier words, confirms Hester’s link to the land and Mrs. Kilbride’s attempt to distance herself from it.

Living by the Bog, plagued by memories of her mother, Hester becomes an unstable personality. When Hester first meets the Ghost Fancier, she tells him that she aims to stay alive and that ‘I can’t die – I have a daughter’, yet only sixteen lines later she tells Monica that she wishes that the ice age would return and ‘do away with us all like the dinosaurs’.\textsuperscript{49} Hester’s contradictory nature reflects the fact that things are not as they should be. Indeed, like Black Wing, Hester is ‘shaky and off kilter’\textsuperscript{50} and, as she says herself, ‘her life doesn’t hang together’\textsuperscript{51} Throughout the play, Hester tries either to get back together with Carthage or to hurt him, just as she tries to protect Josie and yet ends up murdering her. This last seems to make sense to Hester as an act of pity for Josie and an attempt to stop the past repeating itself. Yet it remains paradoxical to save your child by killing her and it is this paradoxical quality that runs through both Hester and the play. As Mrs. Kilbride angrily tells Josie, Hester is ‘wrong headed and backwards’.\textsuperscript{52}

The ‘off kilter’ effect of the bog on Hester is felt by many of the play’s characters. Indeed, from the outset the play’s characters seem not to know which boundaries to respect, resulting in one instance in a surfeit of brides at the wedding scene. The Ghost Fancier also seems confused, arriving at dawn instead of dusk and promising Hester that

\textsuperscript{47} Carr 288.
\textsuperscript{48} Carr 312.
\textsuperscript{49} Carr 267.
\textsuperscript{50} Carr 272.
\textsuperscript{51} Carr 269.
\textsuperscript{52} Carr 277.
he will return later to take her. This confusion of boundaries, reminiscent of *Purgatory*’s ‘dead, living, murdered man’, seems to push the play beyond being merely a liminal space into being a lost space where boundaries have ceased to mean anything and thus to function. Thus Hester, in death, may be closer to Carthage than in life, as she will always be with him, softly breathing next to his ear or rustling behind him.\(^53\)

However, though Hester may rely on the Bog as an ally, it is ultimately an unstable space. Indeed, Hester’s opposition to all change and her identification with the Bog of Cats implicitly lead to her death. She is unwilling to leave as she perversely expects her mother to return to ‘me across the Bog of Cats’.\(^54\) In part, then, Hester associates the Bog with her mother and her determination to believe that her mother will return rests on her being near it. As she tells Monica, ‘All them years I was in the Industrial School I swore to meself that wan day I’m comin’ back to the Bog of Cats to wait for her there and I’m never lavin’ again.’\(^55\) This proves to be a fatal decision, yet at the same time the Bog does provide Hester with a strength and certain resolve. When Hester begs Carthage to let her remain in the house by the Bog of Cats she describes her relationship to it, as if by referring to the Bog she gains an ally. The bogland is thus, for Hester, a space of resistance to Carthage’s wishes. When Xavier tries to evict Hester from her land he reminds her that ‘A deal’s a deal.’\(^56\) In response Hester argues that ‘I wasn’t thinkin’ right then, was bein’ coerced and bullied from all sides, but I have

\(^{53}\) Carr 340  
\(^{54}\) Carr 336.  
\(^{55}\) Carr 324.  
\(^{56}\) Carr 293.
regained me pride and it tells me I’m stayin’. That Hester refers to her ‘pride’ as an external voice suggests that it might be connected to the Bog.

**Outsiders**

The obvious liminal quality of *Bog of Cats* indicates the extent to which Hester is an outsider. Equally outsiders to convention are the Mundy sisters and Chris Mundy, like Hester, is both an unwed mother and is in an unstable relationship with her child’s father. Apart from both Josie and Michael’s illegitimacy, however, the greatest sign of Hester and the Mundy sisters’ difference is that they literally live outside town. The tensions between modernity and tradition, convention and individualism in these two plays thus translate into the tension between town and country, civilisation and wilderness.

The Mundy sisters do not live in the town itself but at a remove and the gap between them and the townsfolk is increasing, as Kate says, ‘That road from the town gets longer every day’, depicted visually in the film by the striking image of the five women and Michael walking across the Donegal bog down a long, straight road. Despite having a schoolteacher and a priest in the family, the Mundys are still ‘other’ rather than being part of the status quo. This is pointed up most noticeably by Kate’s dismissal from the school, ostensibly due to falling numbers, but in fact due to Father Jack’s lapse from orthodox Catholicism. The parish priest’s dismissal of Kate in *Lughnasa* is thus another example of the central issue of *Shadow and Substance*: the control of education by the Catholic Church. Most importantly for the Mundy sisters,

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57 Carr 293.
58 Friel, *Lughnasa* 10. This scene is absent from the screenplay.
59 In the screenplay, McGuinness describes this as a ‘country lane’ (9) but O’Connor’s film is a much more striking representation of the sisters’ distance from Ballybeg town.
this control is not so much hegemonic as economic, depriving them of a much-needed income.

In contrast to Kate’s desire to shorten the distance between the Mundy home and the town, Hester refuses to be moved into the town, though a house has been ‘bought and furnished’ for her. This refusal is due not only to her attachment to the Bog, but also to her commitment to being an outsider. Her attachment to the caravan is emotional and physical and she no longer needs the literal chain that her mother used to tie her to it, but is mentally chained to both the place and the caravan. She will never be part of the status quo, choosing instead to hover on the outskirts of the townland. Hester is both less and more powerful this way. Her estrangement from the norms of the town makes her incapable of assimilating into their world but it also gives her perspective on it. It is this perspective, as Catwoman points out, her ability to see ‘things as they are, not as they should be but as they are’, that enables her to see through Xavier Cassidy. Xavier is the character most hostile and threatening to Hester and he is also the character with the most to hide. According to Hester, Xavier had poisoned his son’s dog so that his son would be poisoned by contact with his pet. Hester found James Cassidy ‘howlin’ ‘long the bog and his dog in his arms’ and so knows that Xavier must have murdered his son, a dark secret he sought to hide in the bog. Hester refuses to acknowledge the accepted version – how things should be – and this is another sign of her outsider status.

When she is rejected by Carthage, Hester turns her back once and for all on any attempt to become part of the status quo. Though she had given up drinking in order to win Carthage back and made some attempt to live in the Big House, she starts drinking

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60 Carr 314.  
61 Carr 274.  
62 Carr 329.
again once she gives up the thought that Carthage might take her back. In addition to drinking again and making a mockery of Caroline and Carthage’s wedding reception, Hester thwarts Carthage’s desire to advance himself by destroying his house and cattle. In burning down the house, Hester removes the proof of her desire to lead a conventional life, and wipes out the material possessions that would enable Carthage to move up the social hierarchy from small to big farmer.63

Hester’s outsider status is linked to her identification with the bog. Her impromptu speech at the wedding illuminates the issues behind the threat of landscape to the community. When Hester begs to be let stay ‘in me own house’ by the Bog she also refers to the connection between the towns-people and the Bog:

I was born on the Bog of Cats, same as all of yees, though ya’d never think it the way yees shun me. I know every barrow and rivulet and bog hole of its nine square mile. I know where the best bog rosemary grows and the sweetest wild bog rue. I could lead yees around the Bog of Cats in me sleep.64

Hester’s claim that the towns-people were born, just like her, on the Bog of Cats suggests one reason why they are so distrustful of the Bog and of her connection to it. The town shuns Hester because they are also shunning their connection to the Bog, just as Kate shuns the idea of the back hills in order to strengthen her own Catholicism. Hester’s demonstration of her topographical knowledge of the Bog alludes to an earlier life in which connection to the landscape was not just about being a big farmer like Xavier and Carthage, but about loving the land and all that goes with it. Carthage’s move away from Hester, towards Caroline, represents a leap up the social hierarchy and simultaneously a geographical move away from the Bog.

63 It is also a symbolic destruction of Carthage, as earlier in the play Hester compares him to a ‘bull’.
64 Carr 314.
The Bog, like the Mourne Mountains in *Shadow and Substance*, reminds the community not only of their attempt to control nature but also of their attempt to socially advance themselves. When Mrs. Kilbride attacks Hester as a tinker, and calls her a ‘piebald knacker’, Monica reminds her that her own grandfather was a tinker. Mrs. Kilbride has rejected all aspects of that life and boasts of her ability to save money, seeing it as her claim to social authority and standing. Her hostility to Hester is heightened by Hester’s inability to save – she has ‘a great big goose egg’ rather than a nest egg. Hester and the landscape thus serve not only as a space outside the town’s control but also as a space that reminds the community of the fragility of their social structure.

The antipathy towards Hester is a shift from a time when Josie Swane was seen as an important part of community life. In the past Josie Swane had been a valuable member of the community, ‘the greatest song-stitcher ever to have passed through this place.’ As Monica tells Hester ‘There was a time round here when no celebration was complete without Josie Swane.’ Josie’s unpopularity is put down to her bitter personality and her mistreatment of Hester. Yet there is a real sense that the failing tradition of the seanchaí at important occasions, and of the oral culture in general, is another reason why Josie Swane no longer has a place in the community. Once respected for their connection to the land and the tradition of song and storytelling, the travellers are not welcome anymore. Furthermore, through the link between Hester and the Bog of Cats, Carr suggests that the new Ireland is not just a threat to Hester but also to the Bog.

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65 Carr 314.
66 Carr 280.
67 Carr 280. A further point of difference is that Hester is offered money to leave her house but rejects it.
68 Carr 275.
69 Carr 323.
The patterns of urbanisation and big farms mean not only the ostracism of travellers by settled communities but also the conversion of the Irish bogland into townhouses and peat briquettes for house fires. As Hester says to Monica of the burning house, ‘it should never have been built in the first place. Let the bog have it back.’

GENDER

It is not just their link to the landscape which makes both Hester and the Mundy sisters unconventional, their bodies and voices also threaten the status quo and the patriarchal control of power. As discussed above, the Mundy women’s energies are equally as subversive as those of the Lughnasa fires. Though the majority of the Mundy sisters spend their lives in the home, the women are not angels in the house. O’Connor’s film stresses this by showing the women scything grass, feeding chickens and working about the house and land. There are also internal gender politics within the family that complicate the usual image of women as docile or compliant. In both play and film when Kate criticises Agnes for spending her money on pleasure rather than the household Agnes retorts that she and Rose are ‘two unpaid servants.’ This traditionally male-female dynamic is highlighted in the film by Kate’s dress which is much more severe than that of the other sisters. Furthermore, both play and film are set on the eve of the new Irish Constitution, which enshrined women as home-makers. This political background provides an ironic comment on Kate’s enforced internment in the home after losing her teaching job, and a contrast to Chris’s miserable working life in the factory.

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70 Carr 322.
71 Friel, Lughnasa 24; McGuinness 55.
The achievement of Friel’s play – as for Johnston, Carroll and Deevy in the thirties – is to illustrate the individuality of the women, including their weaknesses, and to show them unequivocally as sexual beings. The dance comes in the play’s first act and sets the sisters up as characters capable of liberating energy, energy which is stifled for the rest of the play. In large part this energy is sexual, a part of the sisters that must usually be repressed. Kate’s emphasis on respectability and her strict Catholicism prevents her sisters and herself from achieving their personal desires as they try to suppress the reality of their bodies. For Kate the harvest dance and dancing in general reflects a malady of the mind and body; she describes the anticipation of the dance in Ballybeg as a ‘fever’ that makes the village go ‘off its head’. But Agnes says, ‘I’m only thirty-five. I want to dance.’ For Agnes dancing is an assertion of her youth and her sexuality, reinforced when she dances with Gerry. In turn, Maggie yearns for sexual fulfilment and dreams of Brian McGuinness who emigrated to Australia when she was a girl. Austin Morgan’s engagement leaves Kate disappointed and, though Michael testifies to Chris’ sexual experience, she too is left unfulfilled, ‘sobbing and lamenting in the middle of the night’. The house is thus a space of unexpressed, unfulfilled sexual energy and the dance acknowledges and celebrates the bodily existence of the sisters.

Yet, the dance is altered in translation from stage to screen. In the play, the sisters’ subversion of propriety is the source of the energy for the dance, emphasised by the stage directions: ‘there is a sense of order being consciously subverted ... indeed of

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72 Friel, *Lughnasa* 11. This scene is not in the film and the suggestion of going to the harvest dance does not occur until after Gerry’s arrival.
74 Friel, *Lughnasa* 35. Christina will ‘sob and lament in the middle of the night’, McGuinness 56.
near-hysteria being induced. This hysteria is entirely absent from the film. Where the play places the dance in the first act, as an introduction to the characters, the film builds towards the dance as a climax. While the dance is still celebratory and starts just as spontaneously as in the play, in the film there are striking differences. Maggie starts the dance, letting out ‘a wild roar’ but does not flour her face, nor does Chris don Jack’s surplice. Moreover, the women dance together, holding hands and imitating traditional céilí dances, circles and reels. Kate leads the sisters outside, so that they are no longer subverting the order of the home, fusing domestic and other. Moreover, the subversion of the stereotype of the angel in the house is further curtailed as there is no sense of the explosive power of sexual frustration within the film’s version of the dance. Finally, whereas in the play only the audience watches the dancers, in the film Father Jack, Michael – ‘half terrified’ – and Gerry also see the dance. The men, though they look surprised at the eruption of music and movement, also enjoy watching and thus the sisters are not only dancing for their own pleasure but have become a pleasurable spectacle for the male characters. Finally, the camera further frames the women as it captures them in an overhead shot.

The film’s dance is thus much less subversive than the play’s dance and is less controversial for the absence of the subversion of identity and religion. It also comes immediately before Rose and Agnes’ departure and seems to imply even more strongly the link between the sisters’ explosive energies and the break up of the family. Yet in the film the sisters are not ‘shrieking strangers’, rather they are a harmonious spectacle,

75 Friel, Lughnasa 22.
76 Though it is indicated in the screen directions: ‘There is a mood of near hysteria’, McGuinness 93.
77 McGuinness 92.
78 McGuinness 93.
79 McGuinness 93.
dancing together. There is nothing aggressive or frantic about the dance here, as there is intended to be in the play. The dance thus serves in the film more as an elegiac moment than a moment of defiance.

Both McGuinness’s screenplay and O’Connor’s film choose to illustrate the sisters’ transgression and sexual energies in a different way, highlighting those of Chris and Agnes. When Gerry comes to stay, despite Kate insisting he sleep in the barn, Chris spends the night with him. Agnes jealously watches Chris making her way to the barn where Gerry is sleeping and her sexual frustration is brought into focus by Chris’s night of sexual fulfilment, and ‘she starts to weep, silently, fiercely.’ The film chooses to directly express the sexual desires of the sisters’ lives, thus moving away from the play’s deep yet unspoken sense of sexual frustration. Yet despite this greater insistence on the women’s sexuality, the film still shies away from the potential wildness of the women. Furthermore, what the film omits is that Gerry had a second family – one he was officially committed to – in Wales. This second family would distort too much the film’s cheery representation of Chris and Gerry’s ad hoc relationship. O’Connor chooses to underplay the most troubling aspects of the sisters’ lives and, to a greater extent than the play, to objectify the women, as in the final shots of the film which include an overhead shot of the sisters dancing, thus reducing them in both size and importance.

**Female Community**

Nevertheless, together the Mundy women present a formidable front and it is ultimately their sense of community throughout most of the play that gives them their strength.

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80 McGuinness 61.
81 McGuinness 61.
Similarly, though Hester may appear isolated, she too is part of a female community. Initially, Hester appears to hate Caroline Cassidy and is scornful of Caroline’s attempts to speak to her or threaten her. Yet their relationship is more complex than that as the social make-up of small-town Ireland is such that Hester and Caroline have an interwoven history. Hester recalls with near tenderness the nights when she looked after Caroline and, when Caroline’s mother had died, how she came to Hester’s caravan for comfort. In the end this is what the two women find in common – the formative loss of their mother. They share this loss, Hester telling Caroline that she’s ‘been a long time wishin’ over me mother too’. Caroline and Hester’s bonding enables each woman to share and thus express her loss, with Caroline telling Hester that her mother would ‘describe for me me weddin’ day’. In response to this bond, Caroline admits to Hester that she realises that ‘it should’ve been you’ marrying Carthage and that she will ‘stand up for’ Hester’s rights to Josie. In addition to Caroline, both Monica and Catwoman also align themselves with Hester.

This community extends beyond the boundaries of the play, as Hester is part of a wider pantheon of theatrical women. The connection between the myth of Medea and Bog of Cats lends a grander scale to Hester’s personal tragedy and places Hester within a community of women betrayed by greedy men. Yet, in linking Hester to Medea, Carr makes Hester into both a loving mother and a murderess and, though the audience may be sympathetic to her state of mind, she is also to them a monster. Reviews of the first production thus range from overwhelmingly positive to entirely negative. Emily

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82 Carr 284.
83 Carr 284.
84 Carr 336.
85 Carr 284.
O'Reilly, reviewing the play for the *Sunday Business Post* left the theatre before the end of the performance in disgust at its ‘gruesome parody’ while Emer O'Kelly in the *Sunday Independent* declared the play one of ‘amazing power’. Notwithstanding these discordant views of the play, one thing is clear: it had remarkable emotional impact as most reviewers reported audience members sobbing at the end of the play.

The Medea story, told most famously by Euripides, casts Medea as a transgressive, challenging, and emotional woman. When Jason leaves her Medea is doubly disadvantaged as a woman and as an outsider. Hester, too, is an outsider and like Medea has betrayed her family – killing her own brother – in part to further her lover’s career. Carthage, whose name provides another link to a mythic, betrayed woman – Dido – leaves Hester for the sake of a larger farm, a move he would not have been able to make without Hester’s initial economic and emotional support. Carthage’s abandonment of Hester mirrors her mother’s desertion and leaves Hester powerless once more. The dreadful irony for both Hester and Medea is that they unwittingly enable their men’s eventual abandonment of them and it is the act that the women have performed – familial betrayal – which the men mimic in leaving them. As Hester says to Caroline:

> Let’s get wan thing straight, it was me built Carthage Kilbride up from nothin’, him a labourer’s son you wouldn’t give the time of day to... It was me who told him he could do better. It was my money that bought his first fine acres. It was in my bed he slowly turned from a slavish pup to a man....

Hester here has a joint role as mother and lover to Carthage but her nurture of Carthage is not as wholesome as she leads Caroline to believe. In Act Three it becomes clear that the money with which Hester buys land for Carthage is blood money, stolen from her

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88 Carr 284.
brother, Joseph Swane. Hester kills Joseph, not for her share of the inheritance, however, but primarily because he received more attention from their mother than she. Her actions merely increase her loneliness, leading to her final and total withdrawal from society, when she finds that Josie Swane had told her father and brother that she died at birth. Whereas Medea turns to a political allegiance with another country, as befits and is possible for a Queen, Hester has no such resources and instead turns inward, fatalistically clinging to her relationship with the Bog.

In addition to drawing on Greek drama, *Bog of Cats* also carries reminders of Irish drama. The closest precursor is Máiréad Ní Ghráda’s 1964 play *An Triail* in which a mother, driven by despair at the harshness of Irish rural society, kills herself and her illegitimate child. Further, Anthony Roche has written on the connections between Carr’s *The Mai*, J.M. Synge’s *The Shadow of the Glen* and Teresa Deevy’s *Katie Roche*. In all three plays women stand on the threshold of a more fulfilling life, and in each play men prevent the women from stepping over that threshold. In addition to this short list, two other plays, Deevy’s *The King* and Carroll’s *Shadow and Substance*, bear comparison with Carr’s *Bog of Cats*.

Though Hester asserts that she is in charge of her life, like Annie and Brigid she is trapped, and it is easy to see that she cannot control the situation she finds herself in. Hester declares to Monica that she’s ‘the one who chooses and discards’ not Carthage, yet his antipathy towards her throughout the play convincingly disproves this. Like the Mundy sisters, as powerless figures in a male dominated world, Hester, Brigid and Annie

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91 Carr 269.
all stand in opposition to the norms of society. Hester and Annie are both equally appalled by the idea of relinquishing control over their lives at the behest of the men around them, and are terrified of becoming part of the conventional world that they so despise: Annie is repulsed by marriage and motherhood and Hester rejects moving into town. The two women are paradoxically alike in their attitude to place also as both women recognise that remaining in the place they currently are will lead to their death, a dreamt-of death for Annie and a literal death for Hester.

Most significantly, however, all three women undermine the official version of events or ‘truth’. Annie’s powerful imagination enables her to undermine the dominant, male narrative, while Brigid challenges the Canon by turning from his orthodox Catholicism to a more organic, female-centred religion. Likewise, Hester is constantly challenging the accepted truths of the community, for example, exposing the lies behind Xavier Cassidy’s version of the death of his son. This disrupts the community; as Carthage declares, echoing Jim Harris in *The King*, everything would be fine if Hester would ‘just do what she’s supposed to do.’

While there are similarities between the three women they are opposites also. It is important, therefore, to recognise that despite their similarities – often due to their similar position in the social hierarchy rather than like personalities – these female characters are no more identical than the male characters of the same works. Whereas Annie is entirely dependent upon the male community that surrounds her and has no ally to support her point of view, Hester has both the means and the allies to support her in leaving the Bog of Cats and averting her death. Yet Hester decides that, though it will be fatal to her, and unbeknownst to her, to Josie also, her need to remain by the Bog is so great that she will

\[92\] Carr 302.
sacrifice herself. In this, Hester resembles Brigid, but, while Brigid sacrifices herself for what she perceives as the greater good – saving O'Flingsley – Hester sacrifices herself out of a lack of belief, or despair, thus finally and violently alienating her from the community and violating her identity as mother.

Brigid’s visions and her acute ability to foresee events mirrors Hester’s ‘gift of seein’ things as they are, not as they should be...’ 93 Through this gift both women realise that something terrible will happen but both are unclear as to exactly what will occur. While in Euripides’ play Medea survives her transgressive exploits, neither Brigid nor Hester manage to. For both Brigid and Hester their source of power and inspiration comes from the landscape around them which, for each, represents an eternal power that is associated with the feminine – St. Brigid and Josie Swane. Though, for Hester, the landscape and her mother represent a much darker source of power, both women find the feminine landscape comforting and seek to develop an intimate relationship with it. When Brigid advises the Canon to yield to this power and make contact with the land he deems her ‘very ill’. 94 Likewise the community, and in particular, Carthage, view Hester as perverse for not wanting to leave her caravan by the Bog. Despite both women’s protestations, the men in their lives refuse to accept their dual connection to the landscape and the women they so strongly associate with the land.

As the links between Hester and Brigid and the landscape demonstrate it is not merely men who are connected to the landscape or who view land as a crucial source of identity and status. Though both Hester and Brigid fight to sustain their connection to the landscape, however, it is a spiritual relationship rather than a proprietorial role that they

93 Carr 274.
94 Carroll 65.
hold. What Hester and Brigid illustrate is a different way of viewing the landscape. Yet, though in some ways this perspective on landscape is determined by gender, it would be reductive to suggest that it is a purely feminine attitude to landscape. However, despite this qualification, gender remains a determining factor in attitudes to landscape in these works and, as shall be discussed below, in relation to war and violence also.

POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRELAND

As Kate’s involvement in the War of Independence illustrates – though seemingly out of character with the woman we are presented with for most of the play – women are also implicated in war. Gerry’s attitude, however, reveals the extent to which he associates war with masculinity, as he is anxious to fight in Spain purely to give him an objective, or purpose, something he feels is specifically a male need:

it’s somewhere to go – isn’t it? Maybe that’s the important thing for a man: a named destination – democracy, Ballybeg, heaven. Women’s illusions aren’t so easily satisfied – they make better drifters. 95

Similarly, in Korea, John Doyle’s attempt to break up Eamon’s relationship with Una Moran by sending him to America, potentially to fight in Korea, represents a reversion to a more traditional type of masculinity. Read in this light, Doyle’s sudden aversion to Eamon’s education and his implicit desire for Eamon to be a soldier, thereby re-enacting his own past, illustrates the tension between two types of masculinity: traditional versus modern, the soldier versus the sissy.

Doyle’s primary reason, however, for pushing Eamon to emigrate is his hatred of Ben Moran, his civil war enemy. While Doyle faces the end of his livelihood, Moran prospers. Doyle’s hatred of Moran and his fear of Eamon’s relationship with Una Moran

95 Friel, Lughnasa 51.
reveals the extent of the divisions caused by the civil war. Doyle’s ‘civil war gun had hung on the wall for years, a reminder, he said, of a country he had fought for but was stolen from him.’ Like Blake in *The Moon*, Doyle is still emotionally invested in the War of Independence, seeing it as an unfinished cause and this is made even more poignant as the Doyles live in a border town in Cavan. As Denis Sampson argues in regard to McGahern’s original story, Doyle is similar to the guards in O’Connor’s ‘Guests of the Nation’ as they are all ‘irreparably marked’ by their participation in and witnessing of executions during the War of Independence and the civil war.\(^{96}\)

Both memory and the past cripple John Doyle and it is predominantly memories of the civil war that most disturb him. As Eamon sees it, Doyle does not want to move on, refusing to forgive Ben Moran for being a Free Stater. Even the link of fatherhood at the death of Luke Moran is not enough to bridge the divide between them. Doyle and Moran occupy different ends of the social hierarchy. Moran, the Free Stater, has benefited from his role in the civil war and is a prominent member of the community. His role is now as the bringer of the ‘electric revolution’, whereas Doyle’s revolution is still that of thirty years previously. Doyle cannot see the social change that electricity can bring, refusing Eamon’s request that they have it installed in their cottage, and derisively telling Eamon of the official ESB launch: ‘They lit the streetlamp, as if that will change anything.’ Doyle’s emphasis on ‘change’ or the lack of it is a quiet but constant indictment of the failure of the revolution.

Doyle’s distrust of authority and by implication the government, also emerges when he talks to Eamon about his prospects. Eamon tells him that if his results are not good he will have to take what he can get. In response, Doyle mutters, ‘what you’re *let

\(^{96}\) Sampson 95.
get'. His feeling of oppression is clear in this instance. Revisiting an earlier comment of his it is easy to trace this feeling of oppression throughout the film. When Eamon asks his father of the ‘terrible things’ he did ‘to make this a free country’ one presumes that Doyle’s refusal to answer him is a reaction to Eamon’s curiosity about the ‘terrible things’. However, it is also possible that his refusal to speak is a reaction to Eamon’s comment that it is a ‘free country’. Doyle’s feelings about freedom are made clear when Eamon remarks that he saw Una Moran walking, to which Doyle sarcastically replies, ‘It’s a free country, I suppose.’ Doyle’s sarcasm implies that for Una Moran it may be a ‘free country’ but that the phrase means little to him.

Doyle is haunted by the past; it will not leave him alone. He dreams of his honeymoon, on Howth head, but this dream is shattered by the memory of his internment during the civil war. While in Mountjoy Gaol Doyle witnessed the execution of two men, one just a young soldier. The past refuses to be glossed over and breaks in on the present, rupturing it. Doyle has this dream more than once, on one occasion while he is waiting for Eamon to return with the boat. He falls asleep on the jetty and the film cuts to a sequence of images of the eels in their underwater box and the young soldier being shot and falling to the ground. The film then cuts to a shot of Doyle waking up on the jetty, in the same position as the boy lay in on the ground in his dream. This visual match has a double implication. First, Doyle thinks that it should have been him and not the young boy who was executed, a sentiment which is made explicit in McGahern’s short story. Second, though Doyle was not shot that day, the link between him and the boy means that he cannot fully live his life, one part of him is dead.
The trauma of Doyle’s memories is conveyed through the disturbing image of the eels. When Eamon asks his father if he did ‘terrible things’ in the War, the film cuts to a shot of the eels. Likewise when, early on in the film, Doyle is drunk and thumps the table, saying of the executed boy, ‘he died for this!’, the film again cuts to the eels. The eels are thus associated with both Doyle’s and Ireland’s violent past and, by extension, represent the disturbance of war generally. The connection between the eels and Korea is made early in the film, when Black cuts to a shot of the eels after the radio announcement of Luke Moran’s death. Similarly, when Eamon is distraught at the thought of being sent to America and, inevitably, being drafted to fight in Korea, he goes to the jetty at the lake. The film cuts from an image of Eamon standing on the jetty in the pouring rain, looking up at the inscrutable night sky, to a shot of the eels twisting in their underwater box.

The eels, then, represent the traumatic effects of war and, by connecting the Irish War of Independence, the civil war and the war in Korea, suggest the cyclical nature of violence. On the surface Ireland has moved on from violence and is more interested in the ‘electric revolution’ than in violent uprising. The transformation of the landscape thus seems complete: from the anarchic space as it was viewed under colonialism, to its role as a space of resistance during the guerrilla war, as seen in the The Dawn and Guests of the Nation, to the marketing of it as a space of leisure for tourists. Yet the presence of the eels – twisting in their underwater box – suggests that there is still a dark underside to the attractive facade of the Irish landscape that continually erupts, like Doyle’s nightmares, into the film. The banning of eel fishing, in this reading, appears to be not

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only an economic initiative but simultaneously an attempt to erase this dark underside and indeed the memory of the past that the landscape holds.

**THE PAST**

John Doyle lives half of his life in the past and this paralysis also threatens Eamon. Doyle risks everything to separate Eamon and Una, by planning to send Eamon to America. This is in direct contrast to everything that he has previously said about wanting Eamon to get an education and stay in Ireland, to justify his part in the war. Distraught at the idea of being sent away, Eamon catches a fever from standing in the rain, and while sick he hallucinates about images of Luke Moran in Korea. These hallucinations continue the theme of the destructive nature of war and show that, like his father, Eamon is plagued by images of war, though he has not even emigrated, let alone been drafted. Linking Korea and the Irish civil war is not only the death of two young men, but also the fact that both were captured in an ambush. These connections, though on separate continents and thirty years apart, create the sense that there is only one war, ever-present and continuing. The implication is that if Eamon does emigrate, the cycle will be repeated, and he will become either embittered like his father, or a sacrificial figure like Luke Moran or the young soldier.

The cyclical imagery of Korea is also central to *Bog of Cats* as Hester is unable to free herself or Josie from the destructive cycle of pain and abuse begun by her mother. The inevitability of this cycle is brought home when Catwoman tells Hester that she has seen her death ‘writ in the bog hole.’\(^{97}\) The past exerts such a pull that it prevents the future and, in particular, it is the burden of her past that prevents Hester from moving on.

\(^{97}\) Carr 277.
like the rest of the community. She does profess the desire to move on – to marry Carthage, to live in the house – yet she realises that she never will. When talking to Caroline, she tells her that she wanted most of all to show her mother her ability to move on:

... I’ve imagined her comin’ towards me across the Bog of Cats and she would find me here standin’ strong. She would see me life was complete, that I had Carthage and Josie and me own house. I so much wanted her to see that I had flourished without her and maybe then I could forgive her – Caroline, he’s takin’ Josie from me.  

Hester fantasises that she could show her mother that she had ‘flourished’ and acquired the trappings of normal life – husband, child, home – and, by so doing, heal the past. Yet, her fantasy is broken in on by reality, in particular, by the threat that Josie will be taken from her by Carthage and the authority of the State – the same authority that backs up the contracts she signed. Her recognition that she is powerless, that her fantasy is incomplete, leads her to reject her former attempts to move on and to fulfil the townsfolk’s negative expectations of her.

Despite these actions, Hester recognises that Josie deserves a better and different life to her own. When Josie happens on Hester trying to take her own life, Hester tries to set her free. Unlike her own mother, Hester tells Josie that she won’t be coming back and that she can ‘be with [her] Daddy and grow up big and lovely and full of advantages I have not the power to give ya’. Like John Doyle’s wish for Eamon, Hester wants Josie to have what she did not have. Yet, as with Doyle Hester fails to overcome the past and believes that ending Josie’s future is the only solution. Josie is too like her mother and tells her ‘Mam, I’d be watchin’ for ya all the time ‘long the Bog of Cats. I’d be hopin’

98 Carr 336.
99 Carr 338.
and waitin' and prayin' for ya to return.' Hester convinces herself that Josie's future, rather than being different, would, in fact, be a repetition of her own haunted life. In the play's first act, Hester calls her daughter by her mother's name, Josie Swane. Correcting herself too late she says Josie Kilbride. Josie replies 'Ya didn't [say that], ya said Josie Swane. I'm not a Swane. I'm a Kilbride.' Hester accuses her of being 'ashamed of me too' but her slip reveals not only her jealousy of Josie's loyalty to her father but also illustrates that Hester already thinks of Josie as following in the Swane family line, a line that will inevitably lead her to tragedy.

By killing her child, Hester murders the future. Yet, unlike Medea's act, it is only secondarily an act of revenge. Her act has greater resemblance to that of the traveller Old Man in W.B. Yeats's *Purgatory*, the futile attempt to stop the haunting of the present by the past. Yet like Yeats, Carr implies that Ireland is facing a new future and, in order to move into that future, it must understand the past.

**Memory**

Memory, like the past and the bogland, is a site of uncertainty. Anthony Roche, writing of the power of memory in *Lughnasa*, remarks on 'the extent to which these memories elude their narrator, the extent to which they possess a range and meaning beyond ... conscious control.' Indeed, Michael's memories, which form the basis of his narration contain many scenes that it is questionable whether he witnessed or not and his first lines, repeated in his closing narration, suggest that memory is independent of him: 'When I

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100 Carr 338.  
101 Carr 292.  
102 Carr 292.  
103 Roche 285.
cast my mind back to that summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me.\textsuperscript{104} Yet this line also highlights the role that Michael must play in selecting which of the ‘different kinds of memories’ he offers to the audience.

Different kinds of memories also offer themselves to Hester, who is lost in the labyrinth of competing versions of her mother. As Clare Wallace argues in relation to \textit{Bog of Cats}, ‘it is evident that origins are supposed to determine destiny and yet … the problematic nature of origins is stressed.’\textsuperscript{105} Hester seems to avoid the truth of the past, seeking for a version of it that will soften the present. She disputes what Xavier Cassidy tells her about her mother, crying ‘Lies! All lies!’\textsuperscript{106} and, as Wallace points out, tries to ‘tailor’ the other characters’ ‘unsatisfactory versions [of her mother] to her own needs.’\textsuperscript{107} As Wallace goes on to say, Hester is, however, ‘unable to smooth over the contradictions and create a story of her mother which is positive and comforting.’\textsuperscript{108} Similarly, Hester misremembers Carthage’s role in her brother Joseph’s death but Carthage refutes her version of their past. Yet, though Hester does persist in believing these versions, she is also aware of the gaps in the story.

Though Hester rejects both Catwoman and Xavier’s stories of her mother, she also tells Xavier that if he’s:

\begin{quote}
tryin’ to destroy some high idea I have of her you’re wastin’ your time. I’ve spent long hours of all the long years thinkin’ about her. I’ve lived through every mood there is to live concernin’ her. Sure there was a time I hated her and wished the worst for her, but I’ve taught meself to rise above all that is cruel and unworthy in me thinkin’ about her. So don’t you think your five shillin’ hoor
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{104} Friel, \textit{Lugnasa} 1; 71.\textsuperscript{105} Clare Wallace, ‘Authentic Reproductions’ 63.\textsuperscript{106} Carr 295.\textsuperscript{107} Clare Wallace, ‘Tragic Destiny and Abjection in Marina Carr’s \textit{The Mai, Portia Coughlan} and \textit{By the Bog of Cats…”}, \textit{Irish University Review} Autumn/Winter 2001 (31,2): 444.\textsuperscript{108} Carr 295.
stories will ever change my opinion of her. I have memories your cheap talk can never alter. Hester is here obviously capable of acknowledging the reality of her mother’s cruelty to her and expresses her hatred of her. She also recognises that, despite this treatment, she is still deeply attached to her mother and that this is due to her own memories of her. Memories are not to be relied on, however, and Hester understands this deeply. In the first act she asks Catwoman to ‘tell me about me mother, for what I remember doesn’t add up.’ Then, in the final act, Hester asks Joseph what Josie Swane was like, ‘Every day I forget more and more till I’m startin’ to think I made her up out of the air. If it wasn’t for this auld caravan I’d swear I only dreamt her.’ Hester’s wish to believe in memories other than Xavier’s ‘five shillin’ hoor stories’ of her mother is not a sign of her blindness to reality but a sign of her depression in the face of things being as they are and not as they should be.

In Korea Doyle is haunted by his memories of the past, but his memory and the past do not always exactly match. When Doyle narrates the story of the young boy being executed in Mountjoy, the film cuts to scenes of the execution. Yet, the boy does not fall in the way that Doyle narrates and, indeed, the scene is not shot from Doyle’s perspective but from the yard itself. Doyle is watching from a cell – his hands are shown gripping the bars across his window as he watches the two men die. This slight discrepancy points up the fallibility of memory and is further evidence of the necessity for figures such as Doyle to make peace with the past and to live for the future, rather than in memory.

109 Carr 329-330.
110 Carr 274.
111 Carr 320.
Similarly, in *Lughnasa* the negotiation of memory is also at issue yet in both film and play Michael does not experience the difficulties of Hester and Doyle in separating himself from the past. Michael’s role as narrator ensures that though the boundaries of the past and present are fluid – illustrated by his onstage presence – these boundaries are ultimately reinforced by his control of memory. Michael’s narration frees the sisters from the past – his words literally set them in motion and bring the stage to life. In turn, his closing monologue, which acknowledges that it ‘owes nothing to fact’, returns the sisters to the past. Though the audience has been told of the dire circumstances of Rose and Agnes in London and of Chris’s life-long hatred of the factory, the final images of the play are nostalgic, bathed in ‘soft, golden light’. In this monologue Michael speaks of his abiding memory of childhood, shaped by the sisters’ dance, ‘Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement’. Michael’s re-imagining of the past as a ‘languorous’, ‘hypnotic’ dance allows him, and the audience, to leave the reality of the past behind and enter an ‘illusory’ world. As Brown writes, Michael ‘has composed the past into a personal myth of individual fulfilment and content.’

In *Lughnasa* looking back also involves recognising the less than perfect realities of the past. Yet these realities are, in the main, contained as Michael’s narration decides what we know about the past and how it is framed. Thus we hear about Rose and Agnes’ sorry lives on the streets of London but we see the sisters as they were before the rift in the family. The image of the sisters dancing eclipses the realities of poverty and social ostracism and this, while positive in terms of highlighting the sisters’ energy and power

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112 Friel, *Lughnasa* 71.
113 Friel, *Lughnasa* 70.
115 Friel, *Lughnasa* 71.
116 Brown, “‘Have we a context?’” 199.
as characters, is also negative in terms of its evasion of the whole truth. Michael thus successfully invents and contains the past in order to be able to ‘escape’ it and its power over him.\(^{117}\) In some ways it would seem that Michael is the successful realisation of the Old Man’s desires in *Purgatory*. While his aunts still animate his memories, he is capable of silencing them and thus containing them.

As discussed above, the film strives, like Michael’s narration, to contain the women’s subversive energies. From the final shots of the women dancing, the film dissolves to a shot of Michael’s kite flying, then cuts to a helicopter shot of Michael running after the kite. The camera pulls away until only the landscape is visible and the characters have disappeared. That Michael’s kite flies – it is also the opening image of the film – suggests a difference in tone between film and play, echoing the shift in the portrayal of the dance. In the play Michael’s kite never takes off though it is held aloft in the final tableau. In the film, the dominance of the image of the flying kite, suggests, as does the harmony of the dance, that the Mundys’ have a freedom not evident in the play and the film thus undercuts the severity of the restrictions on the women’s lives.\(^{118}\) In the film the camera thus also removes agency from the sisters, adding to the already controlling presences of language and memory.

Though Michael’s words control the action of the play, the sisters’ dance makes words ‘no longer necessary’.\(^{119}\) This happens at other moments in the play also, as when Jack tells Maggie that he can use signs instead of language and she adds ‘or dance.’\(^{120}\) Yet to assert as Michael does that language would ever *surrender* itself to movement is

\(^{117}\) Friel, *Lughnasa* 71.

\(^{118}\) McGuinness 5; 10.

\(^{119}\) Friel, *Lughnasa* 71. Though of course the irony is that Michael is speaking when he says that dance makes language unnecessary.

\(^{120}\) Friel, *Lughnasa* 40.
misleading. Overall in the play it is language that is uppermost and dance that is repressed. Dance is only allowed to escape fully once in the play and, when it does, it is indeed beyond; beyond language, beyond rules, beyond self. Michael’s response to this is to be horrified, referring to Marconi’s music as ‘voodoo’ and his aunts as ‘shrieking strangers’. The rest of his narration is designed to contain his aunts’ energy and he exerts the ultimate control of deciding when the narrative is over. In the final tableau the characters move so slightly that ‘we cannot be quite certain if it is happening or if we imagine it’, and the women are practically back where they started: ‘in positions similar to the positions at the beginning of the play’. Language and the nostalgic power of memory have re-frozen them, just in case their troubling energy and subversiveness might bubble over into the present. The control that Kate bemoans the loss of is reasserted by Michael.

Agency, or the lack of it, is also at issue in Bog of Cats as Carr turns to fatalistic beliefs in dark powers and the role of Fate in determining the future. Hester’s suicide and her fatalism seem to represent her defeat in the face of the growing opposition to her in the community. Rather than take a rational stance, Hester takes refuge in passion and emotional excess. Carr chooses to let her character remain mythic rather than deconstructing essentialised notions of women in Irish society. Hester’s allusions to dark forces which ‘run through my veins... that I’ve fought so hard to keep wraps on’, make the deaths at the end of the play the fault of an external, eternal, sublime power. Rather than clearly locating the reasons for Hester’s death firmly at the door of the

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121 Friel, Lughnasa 2.  
122 Friel, Lughnasa 71.  
123 Friel, Lughnasa 70.  
124 Carr 325.
increasing marginalisation of certain sections of Irish society, the urbanisation of the country or the patriarchal system which excludes voices such as Hester’s, Carr chooses to turn Hester’s death into another violent tableau. By using the Bog, and Hester’s connection to it, to express Hester’s marginalisation and anger at the community, Carr turns to nature rather than culture.

As Vic Merriman argues, to emphasise emotional excess rather than use Hester’s situation to analyse contemporary Irish society, is to fail to interrogate both the images of ‘new Irishness’ and ‘the conditions in which such images are produced and have their points of reference.’ Indeed, with Hester’s suicide, and the deaths of Carr’s other female protagonists – Portia Coughlan, the Mai, Frances in *Ariel* – Carr seems to prefer defeated heroines rather than women who change the system. In this, *Bog of Cats*, through its very inability to move on to more analytic approaches to society, suggests Irish culture’s lack of progression. Hester cannot free herself from her past, cannot face the changes in the present and therefore feels forced to murder both herself and the future – Josie – because it will be a repetition of the past. The deaths at the end of Carr’s play thus represent Carr’s recognition of the repetitious elements of Irish culture, which she confronts in the only way she sees open to her: murder and suicide.

Yet, though Hester dies, she does not disappear and Carr’s heroine is thus not totally defeated. Hester will remain to plague the new Ireland with ‘a purlin’ wind’. Indeed, Hester’s ghost and the Bog will continue to be disturbing presences on the edge of the town, as well as on the periphery of the town’s consciousness.

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126 Carr 340.
RESOLUTION?
The three main texts considered in this chapter are all obsessed with the past. While in *Lughnasa* Michael attempts to revisit the past and resolve it into a comfortable memory, as Hester's trauma testifies, there is nothing comfortable about memory. Carr's anti-heroine is unable to leave the Bog of Cats and thus unable to free herself from the burden of the past and Hester's world consequently implodes from the strain of memory and myth. In contrast, Friel's narrator manages to contain these strains within the all-encompassing wall of nostalgia, thereby making it into an agreeable fiction and framing it safely. Yet, when the audience is able to feel the explosive and subversive power of the sisters' dance, it remains possible that the most powerful image of Friel's play remains, not the final arrested tableau, but their energy and vitality.

As the subversive energy of the sisters' dance in *Lughnasa* and the eruption of violence in *Bog of Cats* illustrate, the repression of the dark or disruptive side of the self is ultimately futile and, moreover, destructive. It is only in Black's film of *Korea* that the power of the energy of the past is not only recognised - as it also is by Hester - but is fully dealt with. Eamon confronts the past and endeavours to reconcile it to the present, and in doing so he is able to end the obsession with the past. Crucially, Eamon does this in order to remain in his home and not, as Michael must, to escape it.

The constant eruption of the eels into the world of *Korea* at moments of trauma for the characters is a visual metaphor for the past, and the disturbing quality of these images reveals the need to resolve the past. This is a very real need for Eamon as his father, refusing to forgive the role that Moran played in his past, seems willing to send his son to America to begin the cycle of violence again. What *Korea* achieves is to show
how that cycle can be broken, the pattern changed. When Eamon and Doyle go out on
the lake for the last time, Eamon brings Doyle’s gun with him. In the boat he tells Doyle
that he wants to marry Una Moran and that he’s not going to America. He takes the gun
from his pocket and points it at his father. Eamon does not intend, however, to shoot
Doyle; he gives the gun to him and tells him that using it is the only way he will make
Eamon emigrate. He gives Doyle an ultimatum: to use the gun against his son or to
throw it into the lake. Doyle’s first reaction is that the gun should be on the wall at home
hanging next to the picture of him in his uniform. By taking the gun from the wall,
Eamon illustrates that he will un-frame the past and change the pattern.

By arguing that the gun should be thrown into the lake, Eamon forces Doyle to
confront both the past and the future and shows him that he must move on; the gun
belongs with the eels in the past. Furthermore, Eamon recognises the need to put the gun
where it belongs: together with the darker elements of the Irish past and landscape, and
not where it had been, intruding into the home. Eamon stands up in the boat, towering
over his father but also over the lake, and by extension, the landscape and nature. By
standing in the boat, Eamon visually illustrates that he is imposing his will over the
landscape and on his and his father’s fate and, by so doing, changing the pattern. What
Hester cannot do, Eamon achieves.

There is, however, a qualification to Eamon’s success in ridding his family of the
gun. Though Doyle throws the gun into the lake it is not destroyed but merely hidden,
lying under the surface. The film’s visual emphasis on the disturbing presence of the eels
under the water strongly suggests that, though these troubling images can be covered up,
they do not disappear entirely. The presence of the gun under the water is a chilling
reminder that violence has not left Ireland entirely and this implication is the film’s only indirect reference to Northern Ireland. The presence of the gun below the water’s surface is also suggestive of Black’s reconfiguring of Irish identity. Rather than land – the traditional symbol of Irish identity and security – *Korea* focuses on water, a more unstable and dynamic, shifting site of identity. The eels, moving and twisting underwater, further undermine the sense of a secure foundation for self. Black thus acknowledges both the threatening power of the past and the instability of self and thus, necessarily, also the future.

Eamon is not capable of this force without help. While he challenges his father in the boat, Una Moran is standing on the jetty, watching them and providing an anchor for Eamon on the shore. Una represents, at this moment, more than just Eamon’s present and future. In this moment of crisis and resolution, Una stands in the role of Eamon’s mother. Earlier in the film Eamon tells Una that if his mother were alive, he would be able to stand up against his father. When Eamon is sick, Una violates Doyle’s rules and visits him. As she bends over to tend to him, the film cuts to a shot of a photograph of Eamon’s mother on his bedside table, and then cuts back to Una. The link between Una and Eamon’s mother strengthens Una as an ally and also reveals that war is not the only issue from the past that needs resolving.

Doyle is distraught at losing his license to fish as he told his wife that he would never leave the lake and thereby hastened her death from consumption. Before they go out on the lake for the last time, Doyle refers to this, saying to Eamon that ‘I did all I could for her, spent all the time I could with her.’ As in *The Moon in the Yellow River* in which the figure of the mother and motherhood in general brings about resolution, in
Korea, the link between Eamon’s mother and Una enables him to confront his father.\(^{127}\) When they bring the boat to the shore, Doyle allows Una to hand him out of the boat. Standing over Doyle, Una not only represents a link to Eamon’s mother but also occupies the same space as her father had done early in the film. With Moran, Doyle had chosen to reject any attempts at conciliation but by taking Una’s hand he shows his willingness to forgive the past. Before he leaves, Doyle asks Una if she heard the kingfisher singing, the same question that Eamon had asked her on their first date. Doyle is thus following the path his son has chosen.

Throughout most of the film Doyle consistently argues for the future of Ireland as positive, dismissing the need to emigrate and insisting that he fought so that Eamon could remain in Ireland. His misery and resentment of Moran blinds him to this but, by the end of the film, Doyle realises that the past should not define him. Indeed, the film taken as a whole approves of modernising Ireland and facing the future pragmatically. Perhaps this reflects its moment of production, the mid-nineties, when IRA ceasefires made it possible for films like Korea and Neil Jordan’s Michael Collins (1996) to be made. The civil war could only be addressed once Ireland had started to acknowledge and move on from its violent past. Korea, made in 1995, looks back at the 1950s, which in turn is obsessed with the 1920s. The film is thus the ultimate backward look, yet for once it looks back in order to move on.

**Marriage and Unity**

For W.B. Yeats, marriage represented a symbol of unity and the transcendance of boundaries. However, as Purgatory so chillingly illustrates, marriage can also represent

\(^{127}\) Though Una, like Agnes in The Moon, has no dialogue.
disorder and chaos. That the future is only possible in *Korea* and not in *Bog of Cats* or *Lughnasa* is indicated by their different attitudes to marriage. In *Bog of Cats* marriage is reduced to a ‘sham’, with Caroline miserable on her wedding day as she admits to Hester that it should have been she that married Carthage. The validity of Caroline and Carthage’s marriage is further undermined by the wedding reception at which four women are dressed like brides. Similarly, in *Lughnasa* though Chris and Gerry embark on a symbolic wedding dance, which allows Chris to acknowledge Gerry’s departure without despair, it is a private rather than public form of ritual and is therefore not recognised by the wider community.

In *Korea* the representation of marriage is also negative as Doyle neglected his wife to the extent that he contributed to her death. Furthermore, their honeymoon was ruined by his civil war memories. These memories are laid to rest, however, when Doyle makes peace with the past, and by the prospect of Eamon and Una’s marriage. *Korea’s* attitude to marriage illustrates its more general attitude to the past and the future: in order to build a future two people have to come together to overcome the past and start their own cycle. It is in Eamon and Una that we see the energy of the sisters’ dance positively emerge. In acknowledging the past and forcing his father to come to terms with the future, Eamon reconciles self and other and implicitly, though not unconditionally, creates a whole, rather than fractured, identity.
Fig. 4 Standing up to his father, *Korea*
Fig. 5 Poster for *Dancing at Lughnasa* dir. Pat O'Connor (1998)
6 Hester and Josie in *By the Bog of Cats...* Marina Carr
CONCLUSION
Only those societies offer hope for the future who settle their debt to the past.
Luke Gibbons¹

The possibility of freedom and the limits and repression of that freedom is a constant background to the dramas of the thirties, and these dramas highlight the conflict between ideals on the one hand – ideals developed during colonial oppression and the struggle for independence – and socially contradictory realities, a conflict which became all too apparent in the years following Independence. To fully understand these developments, we need to have a full comprehension of the culture of this important period. The film and drama of the 1930s offer us a varied perspective on the processes of change and consolidation underwent in Ireland during this decade. As we have seen, these films and plays address both the legacy of the past and the future for modern Ireland.

The detailed readings of film and drama produced in the thirties undertaken in this thesis should inform our reading of that decade as a whole. Furthermore, in recognising the continuing dynamism of the Irish theatrical tradition and the development of the Irish film industry, we can rescue the thirties from the conception of it as a decade when nothing of cultural importance occurred. In contrast to the view of thirties culture as impotent or divorced from the political changes of the decade, these films and plays are intimately connected to issues of Irish identity and government and are characterised by both subtlety and complexity.

¹ Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland* 17
This thesis has explored the way in which film and drama produced in the thirties respond to three main themes: gender, modernity and post-revolutionary Ireland. Many playwrights and film-makers were critical of the Free State and perceived lack of change for Irish citizens. Playwrights such as Denis Johnston, Teresa Deevy and Paul Vincent Carroll imply that free Ireland, rather than instituting a truly equal society, has perpetuated the inequalities of colonised Ireland. The power imbalance between men and women is one particular instance of the Free State's failure. While Johnston, Deevy, Carroll, Norris Davidson, W.B. Yeats and Patrick Keenan Heale are broadly critical of the new state, in contrast Jimmy O'Dea, Harry O'Donovan and Tom Cooper are more celebratory in tone. However, while the film and drama of the decade can be separated into these two broad categories of response, it would be reductive to read the decade's culture in simple binary terms. Though Carroll's work is deeply critical of the Catholic Church hierarchy and the national school system, in Brigid the audience glimpses both nobility and true spirituality. Likewise, Heale refuses to fully endorse either modern or pre-modern Ireland and censures both for their inability to accommodate the other. These equivocal positions demonstrate the extent to which Irish filmic and dramatic culture in this period is deeply ambivalent, thereby representing and reflecting the larger processes of change ongoing in the state.

As I have argued, this filmic and dramatic culture does not represent a monolithic perspective but, rather, is diverse in its outlook. These playwrights and film-makers share an often painful history, within which is a range of different experiences and positions, resulting in a range of different responses, genres and political messages. The range of different responses and, indeed, different registers within the film and drama of
the decade negate any attempt that might be made to turn a study of the period into a simple or uncomplicated narrative. As Roy Foster argues, ‘One of the marks of maturity in Irish historical studies has been a growing interest in pinpointing discontinuities rather than ironing out elisions.’ The film and drama of the thirties is a case in point, highlighting the necessity to look in-depth at Irish culture and history.

Opening up the study of Irish culture will not only result in the greater understanding of different periods in Irish history and the expansion of the canon, but will also enable us to make imaginative connections. This thesis has forged connections, not only between film and drama but also between different periods. By making imaginative connections such as these we can further expand our understanding both of separate forms or cultural modes – film and drama – and of separate periods. As we have seen, there are many continuities, as well as discontinuities, between the thirties and the nineties, not least of which is the persistence of the three themes at the heart of this thesis. This is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the comparison of the film and drama of two, apparently disparate, decades: the way in which this enables us to chart the development of issues of gender, modernity and the legacy of revolution in Ireland. A similar complexity to that of the thirties can be read also in the four works produced in the nineties and this confirms the range of response and diversity possible within Irish culture.

The nineties illustrate not only the persistence of central themes in Irish culture, but also the persistence of the backward look. A major characteristic of film and drama produced in the nineties is its nostalgia. Fintan O’Toole remarks that ‘theatre in Ireland in the 1990s [has] more similarities with the theatre of Synge than ... even a decade

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earlier', while Bruce Arnold argues that 'theatre itself has undermined its own relevance,
hanging on to the burden of its past and relying on that past to give it relevance and
attract audiences.' What these writers are identifying is a cultural silence, the inability
of Irish theatre, specifically, to talk to contemporary Irish society. Theatre is not,
however, alone in this; Irish film has played to this tune also. However, it is my
contention that perhaps by recognising the similarities and thematic echoes between the
culture of the thirties and that of the nineties, Irish culture can move on, just as in Korea
Black looks backwards in order to move on. The study of culture from our past may
enable us to, in Luke Gibbons' words, settle our debt to the past in order to offer hope to
the future.

Finally, then, it is the position of this thesis that Irish studies needs to have a fuller
understanding of the film and drama of the 1930s and a revised appreciation of the
decade as a whole, thereby bringing to light the importance and dynamism of its culture.
The work begun in this thesis in terms of close readings of a range of works that respond
to contemporary issues in the thirties, as well as the thematic connections made between
these works and those produced in the nineties, needs to be taken further. The voice of
Teresa Deevy and the vision of Norris Davidson, to name but two, should not be
relegated or forgotten but, rather, their works should be re-examined not only for what
they illuminate in terms of past culture, but also in terms of what they offer us for the
future.

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3 Fintan O'Toole, 'Irish Theatre: The State of the Art', *Theatre Stuff* 47.
4 Bruce Arnold, 'The State of Irish Theatre', *Theatre Stuff* 60.
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