

Loneliness, Storytelling and Community in  
Performance: The Climate of the House Un-  
American Activities Committee's America in  
Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill, J.P.  
Donleavy and Frank D. Gilroy

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For Steve Maguire,  
of course.

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Declaration

**This is a declaration to state that this thesis is the candidate's own work and has not previously been published or submitted in support of any other degree or diploma.**

Signed:

Date:

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the selected dramatic works of three second-generation American-Irish playwrights in the twentieth century: Eugene O’Neill, J.P. Donleavy, and Frank D. Gilroy. Key texts of O’Neill’s late period, including *The Iceman Cometh* (1940) and *Hughie* (1959), are assessed in Chapter 1; Chapter 2 evaluates Donleavy’s plays *The Ginger Man* (1959) and *Fairy Tales of New York* (1960); Chapter 3 concludes the analysis by examining plays including Gilroy’s *The Subject Was Roses* (1964) and *Any Given Day* (1993).

The form and content of these playwrights’ work are shown increasingly to revolve around notions of loneliness, storytelling and community, and these aspects of the plays are found to be shaped by the ideological influence of the work of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) which, I argue, was itself a highly theatrical and performative operation. The tenure of HUAC spanned 1938-1968; its effects lingered longer.

The plays are not political interventions or critiques in any straightforward way, though; indeed, the thematic content of these writers’ work appears to become increasingly small, personal and autobiographical as their careers develop. However, my contention is that the plays operate as “indirect allegories” – subtle, often unconscious responses to the ideological climate of the time. My analysis of the plays applies the works of critics as diverse as Louis Althusser and Erving Goffman to show that themes such as loneliness reappear as manifestations of HUAC’s increasingly negative impact on community formation and cohesion. Likewise, recurrent formal devices such as storytelling function to dramatise the paradoxes surrounding such self-performance in the era of HUAC – narrating the self is both a nourishing, self-defining act, and also, in this context, potentially incriminating.

In this way, the thesis starts to plot a developmental trajectory of second-generation American-Irish playwriting and its indirect allegorisation of the HUAC era.

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**Introduction**

This thesis examines the dramatic form and thematic content of second-generation American-Irish theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. The purpose of the investigation is to start to plot a developmental trajectory from the late plays of Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), through the dramatic works of J.P. Donleavy (1926 - ), and to the plays of the most contemporary playwright under consideration, Frank D. Gilroy (1925 - ).

One of the objects of this investigation is to look for traces and echoes of the work of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the plays under scrutiny. HUAC was founded as the Dies Committee in 1938 and the earliest of O'Neill's late plays, *The Iceman Cometh*, was first released in 1940, which is why my investigation starts here. The broadly chronological approach I take towards examining the texts is illuminative of the preoccupations of this thesis; my argument is that HUAC's thirty-year search for subversive "un-Americans" disproportionately adversely affected theatrical output. This is partly due to the spectacular and performative elements of the HUAC trials themselves, meaning therefore that the climate engendered by the investigations of the committee was cumulatively influential on the form and content of plays produced during its tenure. Moreover, these effects were, I argue below, increasingly pervasive although the playwrights whose work constitutes my case-study may not themselves have been aware of the traces of the shadow cast over their plays by HUAC.

Therefore, this investigation is about the drama under scrutiny, and its relationship to the ideological climate of the HUAC period. I am interested in the ways in which the three playwrights handle the depiction of the socially, financially and ethnically Other in order to stage the ideological atmosphere of mid- to late-twentieth century America, and by such depictions, the ways in which they might critique this atmosphere. Specifically, I explore the representation of loneliness as a philosophical notion – see the section below on Hannah Arendt’s theories – in order to argue that loneliness is what resulted in some cases from the ostracisation and exclusion of the so-called “un-Americans” who were prosecuted by HUAC. The loneliness, non-belonging, and increasingly futile search for an understanding community as an audience for one’s stories in the plays under scrutiny is thematic evidence of what I will call “indirect allegory.” This is to say that these plays are not bluntly didactic in form and content – often, and increasingly, I will show that they are resolutely the opposite on the surface: small, personal, and concerned with the difficulties of individual characters. Rather, it is to argue that the political climate in which they were produced and staged, particularly as it was preoccupied with the public performance of amorphous concepts such as loyalty and “Americanness” under the tenets of HUAC, interacts with the theatre produced during that climate, which was part of the lived social experience of the playwrights that produced it.

### **The Social Role of Drama**

The premise of this thesis is that the function of the theatrical documents under examination within it is to scrutinise, and to problematise, the dominant social and political mores of the society in which they were produced. It may not be that this critique was always intended; nonetheless, the thesis demonstrates that through indirect allegory, it can still be read into the texts. Arthur Miller, one notable adherent to an



ideological belief in the social role of theatre, explicitly situates the artist in a role apart from, and slightly above, his fellow citizens. He believes that their whole *raison d'être* is to ask difficult questions and to challenge the status quo. By natural extension, the art they produce should function in this way too. He said during his own HUAC hearing in 1956,

The artist is inclined to use certain rights more than other people because of the nature of his work. Most of us may have an opinion. We may have a view of life which on a rare occasion we have time to speak of. That is the artist's line of work. That is what he does all day long and, consequently, he is particularly sensitive to its limitations.<sup>1</sup>

I intend to engage critically with the implications of this claim, which are useful to reflect upon early in this thesis. Miller hints not just at the various kinds of relationships between the artist and his society, but also at the more particular, and sometimes antagonistic, relationship between artists of the second half of the twentieth century in America and the various HUAC panels.

However, before undertaking this reflection, it is worth pausing to note the context in which Miller made these remarks. Miller was classed as an “unfriendly” subpoenaed witness to HUAC; that is, he refused under oath to name others whom he had known in his younger days to be communists, and was therefore convicted of contempt of Congress. In his long life, Miller wrote a great deal on the subject of HUAC, and the related issues of conflicting loyalties, suspicion, community formation and fragmentation which he saw as the spiralling social effects of the panel's prosecutions, and this quotation sums up his objection to the work of HUAC succinctly. It must be borne in mind, however, that the playwright was speaking in the context of a

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Miller' in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-1968*, ed. by Eric Bentley (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/ Nation Press, 2002), pp. 791-825, (p. 809.)

public trial in which he performed as a self-elected spokesman and defender of the artist's right to autonomy, creativity and critical engagement. This is the reason for his hierarchical positioning of the artist in society, and whilst I am broadly in agreement that one engaging creatively with their society must strive for critical distance, there are problems with this desire too, which I will examine next. It is important to clarify my own critical position as part of the conceptual framework which this Introduction is concerned to establish, as part of my argument about the three playwrights with whose work I will engage in this thesis hinges on the difficulties of separating their plays from the social and political context in which they were written and produced.

In the quotation above, Miller implies that the reason the stage and its practitioners are vulnerable to censure and social exclusion is that in order to produce his work, the artist must exist on the periphery of mainstream society, striving to remain critically engaged and alive to the contentious issues of his day. His self-imposed exclusion is in itself a performative construct: that is to say that it is an adopted and socially-constructed persona which Miller is performing here, rather than a natural or innate mindset prone to individualistic, artistic outsiderism. Miller is deliberately trying to establish himself in opposition to the socially and politically homogenising tendencies of HUAC by setting himself up outside their remit, constructing and performing his stance – publicly, as his hearing was aired on national television – in order to oppose the panel's work.

### **Louis Althusser**

However, to problematise this assertion of distance, Miller's position is difficult to support, in that it is not actually the case that anyone, artist or otherwise, can exist outside the dominant ideologies of their day, according to Marxist theory. In fact, for a

thinker such as Louis Althusser, it is rather that Miller succeeds in contradicting himself by asserting this critical distance, and a correlating separateness from his surrounding ideology. This is to say that for Althusser, the point at which the artist considers himself to be outside and / or above his ideological context is also always the moment at which he is actually deepest within it. As he says in ‘A Letter on Art,’ ‘ideology slides into all human activity,’ and this slippage certainly manifests in Miller’s determination to demonstrate that he remained uncontaminated by the ideological context of the HUAC-era America that he so abhorred.<sup>2</sup> The impossibility of avoiding such contamination in practice is explored in more depth in the discussion of notions of “Americanness” and “Irishness” that follows in the thesis proper. Grasping the implications of it is important to understanding what was at stake in the conflict staged by my three chosen playwrights between American individualism, and what they portray as the social and cultural desire for belonging on the basis of community, class and nationality; to stem loneliness, that is, by being heard and understood by the others surrounding one.

The reason Althusser’s theories as they are laid out in ‘A Letter on Art’ are pertinent to my own investigation of HUAC-era theatre is that, for Althusser, ideology is not simply “false consciousness,” which is to say the illusion engendered by the direct addresses of the operating machinery of a state – the media, education, and so on. It is the very condition of subjectivation and, thus, of personal identity. In so functioning, ideology can and does seep into art produced in a particular climate, in a particular place and time; the purpose of art, therefore, in Althusser’s words, is that it ‘makes us *see*,’ and therefore stages ‘the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*.’<sup>3</sup> Therefore, however determined any

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘A Letter on Art,’ in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 221-227 (p. 223.).

<sup>3</sup> Althusser, ‘A Letter on Art,’ p. 222.

playwright might be to purge their work of direct and indirect allusion to the surrounding ideological context – to distance themselves and their plays, that is to say, in both form and content from the world in which they were produced and staged – their plays, as I argue throughout the thesis in deference to Althusser, still bear the traces of that context. The point is that the playwrights under examination herein make consistent and self-conscious efforts to render their work small, personal, and non-referential of the wider world. Using the theories of Althusser in this way facilitates reading the plays against the grain of these personalising and apoliticising narratives, in order to show that such ideological traces do in actual fact contribute towards both their thematic content and their dramatic form.

### **Althusser and Erving Goffman**

Of particular importance to testing this argument is the connection I can see between Althusser's insistence that ideology is necessarily performative, and the argument about the "presentation of self" as it is put forward by Erving Goffman. For Goffman, absolutely everything is performative, and it need not be a *conscious* performance in which one is engaged for it to count as one, which chimes with Althusser's position that ideology will always already have subjectivated the individual – so the individual performs him- or herself, and the performance signifies a misplaced belief in the individualism being performed.

The urge to be heard and understood, as it manifests in the plays under scrutiny, clashes rather with the anti-humanist position of a theorist such as Althusser, meaning that in terms of the playwrights' purported ideological position it becomes possible to read their plays against the seeming grain of their surface narratives. This against-the-grain reading goes to the heart of what an "indirect allegory" is: I will read these texts as

*unintended* allegories of the HUAC era. The paradox of individualism and the humanistic search for understanding and accepting fellows, as it is staged in the plays of this thesis, is particularly relevant in the context of HUAC's America. The argument is that this was a climate in which increasingly, one's stories and allegiances – what one said about oneself and others; with whom one associated, and the ways in which one demonstrated or performed loyalty – had the potential to undermine one's position in society, and potentially to threaten one's inclusion in the dominant narrative of "Americanness." This negative function of storytelling is significant in that it seems to contradict the established notion of identities and nationalities being constructed and shored up by way of stories and narratives. Here, such narratives have the potential to threaten, destabilise and undermine these constructions, and drawing attention to this negative aspect of storytelling is part of the intervention into the critical field that my thesis makes.

### **The Critical Field**

This thesis contributes to the existent literary-critical analyses of twentieth-century American-Irish playwriting. In recent work in this field, it is more common for scholars to focus on the "Irish" aspects of what they tend to call "Irish-American" literature; Stephanie Rains' *The Irish-American in Popular Culture 1945-2000* (2007) is a case in point. This thesis stresses the symbolic importance of "Irishness" in the works of O'Neill, Donleavy and Gilroy. However, I read it as a critical deployment of "typing" as part of a wider quest to assert a material identity in a climate – the House Un-American Activities Committee's America – in which that identity appeared to be under threat of molestation by the State. HUAC was obsessed with "Americanness," spurred on by its investigations of those it dubbed "un-American." As a result, I argue, unconscious assertions of belonging, individualism, hope for self-betterment and a

belief in the power of “tomorrow” in plays produced during the Committee’s tenure make it apposite to favour “American-Irish” to describe these playwrights.

Twentieth century Irish drama studies tends to be indelibly marked by questions of politics – particularly national politics in the light of Irish relations with the British – and concomitant secondary questions about “Irish” identity, “The Troubles,” Irish Independence, and the dramatic representation of silenced voices and oppressed minorities (or, in the case of Catholic Irish people, majorities). Christopher Murray’s *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (2000) is both the best single-volume example of this trend, and bears a title that succinctly expresses the dominant trend of Irish theatrical criticism.

Twentieth century American drama studies also tends to concern itself with questions of identity although these pertain, in general, more to issues surrounding the need to assert a discrete “American” identity as extrapolated partly from, and yet distinct to, the many ebbing and flowing tides of America’s immigration history.

American drama in the twentieth century, starting with Eugene O’Neill, strives to assert itself as the viable successor to established schools of European theatre, including naturalism, expressionism and Epic Theatre. As such its scholars, broadly speaking, tend to undertake detailed literary analyses of form and content in twentieth century American drama in order to show that this work is the valid – indeed, the inevitable – successor to its predecessors. Collections of critical essays dealing with David Mamet, Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Tennessee Williams, and the Federal Theater Project’s plays, to name but a few, testify to the prevalence of this style of critical approach.

The three playwrights upon whose work this thesis focuses have been, to date, unevenly represented in theoretical literary scholarship of the American twentieth century. The history of the academic literature that analyses O'Neill's dramatic output is chronicled in Michael Manheim's article in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* (1998), 'O'Neill Criticism.' Manheim identifies all the key moments in the development of O'Neill Studies since the early 1920s. Of the academic trends in thinking about O'Neill's plays, he identifies the release of the late plays as the signal trigger-point development in the field.

Earlier scholars, although largely united in praise, tended to read O'Neill's pre-*The Iceman Cometh* works as rather laying the foundations for serious American drama to ensue in the future, than representing exemplars of that drama in and of themselves. Since the late plays, Manheim says, and particularly since *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which most critics hold to be the end-point of O'Neill's developing maturity across his whole playwriting career, O'Neill scholarship can be thematically grouped thus:

[...] discussions that focus on the influence on his plays of his psychological trauma, his philosophical/religious views, his theatrical techniques, his sensitivity to the impact of black and immigrant minorities in American life, and (most recently) the treatment of women in his plays and his desire to win favor with the influential forces of his time.<sup>4</sup>

My thesis builds on studies of O'Neill's late plays by critics including Egil Törnqvist, Travis Bogard, Jean Chothia, Margaret Lofthaus Ranald and Normand Berlin. It contributes to the field summarised by Manheim in this quotation by reading questions of O'Neill's depiction of 'immigrant minorities,' 'psychological trauma' and

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Manheim, 'O'Neill Criticism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, ed. by Michael Manheim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 236-243, p. 237.

community formation in the light of the work of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Törnqvist is a kind of literary forensic pathologist; he combs O'Neill's plays for allusions to the major philosophical and literary trends of O'Neill's professional context. Bogard is the scholar who has contributed more to modern O'Neill studies than any other; he takes a meticulous approach to reading all O'Neill's plays on a continuum, showing that his themes are consistent and coherent across his whole playwriting career. Chothia and Lofthaus Randal have contributed detailed studies of the use and function of non-standard language in O'Neill's plays – the former focuses primarily on the late plays; the latter evaluates O'Neill's earlier stage texts. Berlin offers a number of illuminative readings of the late plays in particular; he tends towards autobiographical interpretations of them, which he has in common with many scholars of this part of O'Neill's output. However, he does venture that some of O'Neill's wider socio-political context, including the rise of Nazism and the post-War re-evaluation of what it means to be human that followed it, unconsciously contributes to, and structures, the late plays. He prefers to read such events as those in Europe, like World War II, as more significant to this unconscious structuring than events closer to home, such as the investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee. As such his approach is useful because it presents the platform, or the premise, on which I can build my own evaluation of the external, shaping forces acting upon these plays.

It is not common to read O'Neill's late plays as straightforwardly reflective of his socio-cultural moment and away somewhat from the family politics and European philosophy for which he is famous, and indeed I am cautious not to do so either. However, I do assert in Chapter 1 of this thesis that the climate engendered by HUAC can be detected in subtle traces in the late plays, and argue for their place on a



continuum of second-generation American-Irish drama which has been indirectly, and probably inadvertently, touched by the climate surrounding it. My argument is that there is a certain distortion in evidence in situating O'Neill's work in a largely external position to the surrounding climate of its time. Although all the themes identified by Manheim above are political and, to an extent, historical ones, they are often not historically specific enough. This means that there is a tendency in the scholarship to read O'Neill's plays as invested with a sort of quasi-metaphysical grandeur and formal aloofness, meaning that his plays are treated as stories of abstract heroism, with characters situated on a similarly abstract plane. In dialogue with this tradition, I argue that of equal importance to understanding O'Neill's late plays, and the issue that indirectly informs O'Neill's presentation of 'immigrant minorities' and 'psychological trauma' in particular, is the ideological impact of the investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee on community formation and cohesion.

The nuanced and below-the-surface impact of HUAC's work for which I argue is also in evidence in the plays of J.P. Donleavy. Although two academics – Thomas LeClair (1971, 1972) and William David Sherman (1968) – have offered a small number of journal-length essays focusing on J.P. Donleavy's novels to the critical field, no-one has yet undertaken a detailed evaluation of the writer's theatrical output. It is my assertion that he has been largely overlooked because he does not fit neatly into the extant critical fields of Irish Drama or American Drama. His work occupies a place somewhat between the two schools, subtly influenced as it is by the surrounding social contexts of both America and Ireland in the twentieth century, and overtly resistant to both as it also is. Chapter 2 of this thesis undertakes to show that Donleavy's plays are worthy of scrutiny as separate documents to his more critically acclaimed novels, because of their differing form. Unlike his novels, Donleavy's plays can be plotted on a

continuum of second-generation American-Irish drama, the starting-point of which is O'Neill. As texts for the theatre, their literary form offers another, and different, insight to the themes he portrays than the form of his novels, although it frames the same stories.

In thematic terms, the two articles by LeClair and the single piece by Sherman are useful to this thesis although they examine the novels rather than the plays of Donleavy, albeit that their discussion of literary form in the chosen texts is not relevant. Both scholars hold that the prevailing atmosphere of Donleavy's fiction is indirectly coloured not by the wider surrounding climate of the time at which he was writing, but by a deeper and more metaphysical existential angst about death. Both note that funerals, mausoleums, funeral parlours and graveyards are recurrent symbols in the fiction of Donleavy; both observe the constant presence of narratives of death and insanity across the author's canon. Neither, however, acknowledges even in passing the possibility that specific effects of the specific socio-political climate of HUAC's America might also unconsciously structure the work. Therefore, the scholarship of Sherman and LeClair is a useful foundation on which I build my own thesis; Chapter 2 details the ways in which I take a cue from their interpretations of Donleavy's novels.

On Frank D. Gilroy, there is currently no close, sustained literary analysis of his key theatrical texts in existence within the critical field, outside the close examination to which certain of his key plays are subjected in Chapter 3 of this thesis. The only reference I have found to Gilroy exists in a footnote contained within a text offering a patchy close reading of O'Neill's body of work, *Eugene O'Neill: Irish and American* by Harry Cronin (1976). As the section of Chapter 1 entitled 'Loneliness and "Irishness"' explains below, the foundations on which Cronin builds his study of O'Neill are shaky, because he uncritically absorbs certain national myths about the Irish which are better to

be handled with care. Cronin aside, Chapter 3 shows that Gilroy's deployment of disability as an ominous metaphor about the dangers of connection with others contains the subtle echo of the effects of HUAC's investigations on communities. The Disability Studies works of Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell (2000, 2004) are illuminative as to why: they note that the depiction of disability as a shorthand for deviance and non-belonging has an enduring presence in literature. However, their thesis tends to hold that in the main, such negative stereotyping is unconsciously deployed, and disabled characters in literature need to be radically reinterpreted in future; their case study of Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a case in point. My analysis of disability in Gilroy builds on this work by asserting that the playwright, whether or not he is aware of it, deploys disability as a symbol critically; that as a symbol, disability has stemmed, for the characters in his plays, from attempts to connect with others. The argument is not that this is what Gilroy believes, or even what his plays enforce, in terms of their moral import. It is rather that *for his characters*, this negative interpretation of disability is part of the cultural value-system that knits together their community. The literary analysis of Gilroy's full-length plays that comprises Chapter 3 demonstrates, it is hoped, that this playwright has hereto been overlooked wrongly in studies of this type.

The HUAC era has many contributory scholars, which fall roughly into three camps. Cultural historians such as David Cauter (*The Great Fear*, 1978), Victor Navasky (*Naming Names*, 1981), Robert Griffith (*The Politics of Fear*, 1970) and Joel Kovel (*Red Hunting in the Promised Land*, 1997) take a wide-ranging social-account approach to the HUAC era. They reflect on key moments including the establishment of the Committee under the chairmanship of Martin Dies; the rise to prominence of Joseph McCarthy, the most infamous "Red-Baiter" of the HUAC years, in the mid-1940s; and the widely-publicised and much-debated prosecutions of Alger Hiss and Ethel and

Julius Rosenberg. They also distil the effects of the high-profile HUAC moments down in order to scrutinise more closely the further-reaching effects of the HUAC operation on the experiences of American citizens, both pro- and anti-HUAC, in the twentieth century.

The second strain of HUAC scholarship concerns itself more specifically with the highest-profile contributors to the HUAC enterprise. This thesis concurs with these scholars that HUAC was disproportionately preoccupied with investigating representatives of the entertainment industries, for two reasons. First, the panel craved self-publicity, and was preoccupied with the formal concerns of staging their hearings to maximise their dramatic impact. Second, HUAC believed that celebrities of the arts, who exist to an extent in the public eye, held sway over the “courts of public opinion” which the panel desired to control. Academics of this stripe include Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund (*Inquisition in Hollywood*, 1983), Brenda Murphy (*Congressional Theatre*, 1999) and, most recently, Brian Neve (*Film and Politics in America*, 2000).

The conclusions of these scholars, who have read the HUAC transcripts and / or interviewed at length many of HUAC’s most prominent witnesses, tend towards characterising the effects of the era on the arts negatively. This negative appraisal is rooted in a perceived evacuation of social and political critique in the American arts in the wake of HUAC’s searches for “un-Americans.” It is also preoccupied with the fissures in the artistic community, insofar as such a community ever actually existed, which were created by prominent testimonies to, or stances of noncooperation with, HUAC investigators.

Last, but far from least, all HUAC scholarship post-1971 has been enriched by the work of the undisputed chief critic of HUAC, and well-respected scholar of the

theatre, Eric Bentley. Because he is a liberal, Bentley has a tendency to read the whole HUAC era as a crime scene: for Bentley, no-one – on either side of the debate – has emerged unscathed from the HUAC era. Everyone is equally a victim and everyone is equally guilty. This is not a perspective which I share: it is my contention that the work of HUAC had a particularly strong resonating effect on theatrical artistic output and, specifically, the underlying atmosphere of the texts. This means in turn that not all “heroes” and “villains” in this particular theatrical transaction can be equally judged and forgiven. However, it is important not to take away from Bentley’s signal contribution to the academic resources available to students of this discipline when critiquing his work in this way. His substantial edited collection of HUAC transcripts, *Thirty Years of Treason* (2002), is still the definitive single-volume testimonial account of the years 1938-1968 and without it, undertaking this study would have been a great deal more difficult.

On the vexed question of what, precisely, “Americanness” meant to an enterprise such as HUAC in its search for “un-Americans,” recent short works by Jim Cullen (*The American Dream*, 2003 and *The Art of Democracy*, 1996), and the more sweeping *Longman History of the United States of America* by Hugh Brogan (1999), discuss the terms of broader, better-defined, and more well-informed definitions of “Americanness” than HUAC’s. This thesis builds on S.E. Wilmer’s book *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities* (2002), mooted the existence of a specifically *American-Irish* strand of staged American literary identity. Works on American-Irish national identity formation that are not specific to theatrical representations of such tropes, including the well-established William V. Shannon (1966) and the more recent, and equally informative, Kevin Kenny (2000), help to

define the social terms of the sub-genre of American-Irish playwriting which this thesis ventures.

Of the artists subpoenaed to HUAC, and their detractors and supporters, the third and final category of HUAC-era scholarship is provided by the memoirists and biographers of many of the more famous – and sometimes, now, infamous – witnesses and prosecutors. These personal accounts from both sides of the divide include Elia Kazan (1988), Whittaker Chambers (1952), Roy M. Brewer (in Bentley, 2002), and Martin Dies himself (1963) on the one side; and Arthur Miller (1999), Walter Bernstein (2000), and the unrepentant members of the Hollywood Ten on the other.

Such accounts are useful because they offer anecdotal accounts of the temperature of the climate in its lived experience. My own thesis evaluates the representation of themes of loyalty, community, loneliness and storytelling – to an audience which storytelling presupposes, and to serve the purpose of sketching in the protagonist's sense of self – on the American-Irish stage. The argument, following Louis Althusser's theories about the connections between art and ideology, draws on the notion that the climate of HUAC's America has stolen into the themes and dramatic form of the plays under scrutiny. Therefore, the personal accounts of the artists who lived through the era are instructive of the effects of this climate on their mindset and, therefore, their artistic output.

In a more general sense, memoirs and biographies are useful to the scholar of HUAC because the panel's representatives – more, its whole *modus operandi* – intended to give credence to hearsay, rumours, smears, gossip, guilt-by-association, and downright lies. Autobiography is a contested form in terms of veracity, and the danger of the predominance of vested interests. However, whether accurate or otherwise,

memoirs can offer something of value to the twenty-first century scholar of HUAC, in terms of an insight to the climate on a personal, microcosmic level.

Furthermore, of course, subjective feelings about the blacklist and HUAC's work in general are as various as the individuals that lived through the era. Reading memoirs about or by some of these individuals, even if they do not directly address the effects of the investigations of HUAC, is therefore greatly revealing of the ways in which a climate can ghost into literature, both fictional and non-fictional. As with these plays, the climate of HUAC influences the memoirist or the biographer unconsciously and thereby contributes to their stories' structure and content.

In this thesis, I am interested in the socio-political conditions that shape people's identities and behaviour, as mediated specifically through drama. Drama is not life, but the staged representation of it, so one does not approach the characters as a psychiatrist or a sociologist would approach real people. It is, however, a performative art that represents characters and stages their actions. For this reason it is appropriate to apply the theories of Erving Goffman, particularly his seminal 1959 study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, to exact a literary assessment of the plays in hand. I argue that storytelling in all the plays under scrutiny in this thesis is a performance art, presupposing both a teller and a hearer. Characters' failures to connect, and the outcome of these failures – namely, loneliness – is an indirect thematic echo of the investigations of HUAC on community formation and the self-projection of individuality. Richard Kearney's *On Stories* (2002) offers a foundation for reflecting on the formal function of storytelling; steeped in the theories of Paul Ricoeur, Kearney offers his own theoretical development in this field by asserting, after Aristotle, that storytelling is what defines being human. Therefore, it is a central component of the creation and maintenance of communities, and this thesis examines its theatrical depiction and thematic function in

plays by O'Neill, Donleavy and Gilroy. In addition, Althusser's work on the unavoidable seeping-in of one's surrounding ideological context, particularly as described in his essay 'A Letter on Art' (1971), is coupled in this thesis with the work of Goffman, in order to evaluate the presence and depiction of this indirect critique on the American-Irish stage.

### **The Position of the Playwright**

My contention is that the self-imposed outsider-status of the artist is performative, by which I mean that it is artificially constructed and then projected outwards; it is not innate or natural, but is more like a role which a character – the artist – plays. This is perhaps particularly relevant to understanding how theatre practitioners perform their social role, to themselves and to the society surrounding them. In this light, the artistic impetus of playwrights is driven by the desire to engage critically with the world around them, as Richard Schechner has noted: 'The ambition to make theater into ritual is nothing other than a wish to make performance efficacious, to use events to change people.'<sup>5</sup> Both the page and the stage of twentieth-century American plays are populated physically and thematically by representatives of social situations; some of these representations can be read as a subtle allegorical critique of the climate in America under HUAC. In all the plays that this thesis examines, characters are shown in their social context. This could be within the family, as in, for instance, O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) which is discussed in Chapter 1; or it could be within the wider community, as can be seen in Donleavy's *Fairy Tales of New York* (1960), which a section of Chapter 2 analyses.<sup>6</sup> All the plays under examination are structured

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2003 [1988, 1977]), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> A précis of the exact structure of the thesis, including a full list of the texts under consideration, concludes this Introduction.



by the ritualistic elements of social and political behaviour that Schechner notes. The intention of such plays is not merely ‘to hold the mirror up to nature, to show [...] the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.’<sup>7</sup> Whilst social drama, as Schechner views it, can undoubtedly do this, its effects can also, in the case of the plays herein examined, offer more than merely a representation of its age. Arguably, it also has the potential to stimulate a radical questioning of the validity of the representations shown on the stage, in the auditorium, and in the world. The intention, according to Schechner, Miller, and others, is perhaps to instigate change in the last of these places.

### **Erving Goffman and the Presentation of Self**

Schechner was heavily influenced by the social theorist Erving Goffman; more heavily, in fact, than he admits when confessing in his prefatory comments to *Performance Theory* to ‘taking a cue’ from him.<sup>8</sup> In this thesis I trace Schechner’s theories to source, drawing extensively upon Goffman’s groundbreaking book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) to frame the analysis across the three chapters that comprise it. It is important largely to bypass Schechner in order to deal directly with Goffman because I intend to use Goffman’s theories to produce a close critical and literary analysis of the plays I have selected – as literary documents, that is, as well as texts for performance. Schechner, by contrast, used *The Presentation of Self* as a manual to help him create and stage devised, non-naturalistic theatre as a director and actor, which sets his aims somewhat asunder from my own.

Furthermore, Schechner aside, the strong argument in favour of using Goffman’s theories to analyse the effects of HUAC’s investigations on the staging of community

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<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by T.J.B. Spencer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996 [1980]), III.ii, p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Schechner, *Performance Theory*, p. ix.

formation and cohesion is that *The Presentation of Self* was published in the immediate aftermath of the great pinnacle of HUAC's famous demagogue, Joseph R. McCarthy, upon whom more below. This means that according to the twin inner logics of chronology and context which underpin the structure of the analysis within this thesis, Goffman is peculiarly well-placed to reflect upon the climate of his particular time. To follow my own line of argument about indirect allegory, even if Goffman's primary intention was not to reflect or to critique this climate, it is inevitable that his work bears the unconscious traces of his ideological context.

Goffman's central contention is that absolutely everything is performative, from the deepest recesses of our private thoughts, to the most superficial and fleeting interaction with any other person. By "performative," as a social theorist he means that our identities, preferences, loyalties and other character traits are constructed and moulded by our various interactions with others, and by reflections upon our own behaviour. Moreover, according to Goffman, the performances which make up the stuff of all our interactions with our peers – be it in terms of community formation, one-to-one interactions of all kinds, official encounters in professional or bureaucratic contexts, or any other kind of coming-together – are not always conscious or intended. One can raise a performance in response to the performance of another without realising one is so doing. This means that one can and does, consciously or unconsciously, offer a "performance" of sorts to any and every scenario – think of the way in which one arranges one's face before looking in a mirror, even when alone – and that one's own performance is conditional upon, coloured and affected by the performances of others around one. If one considers these fellow-performers as an "audience," the justification for employing Goffman's theories in a theatre-theory context within this thesis becomes immediately apparent. Furthermore, this demonstrates that together, Althusser's theories

about the impossibility of avoiding being touched by ideology, when dovetailed with Goffman's ideas about conscious and unconscious performances in everyday life, produce a robust critical framework within which to approach searching the selected plays of the thesis proper for the indirect allegorical traces of the climate of HUAC's America.

Goffman believes that all the performances which comprise ourselves and those around us serve to construct, rather than to reflect, wider social connections and communities. He argues, 'The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he *gives*, and the expression that he *gives off*.'<sup>9</sup> According to Goffman, any human connection, howsoever unsuccessful and unsatisfactory, be it politically, socially, sexually or otherwise motivated, contains elements of performance. Such elements need not even be fully conscious in order to be performative, and though some cues and constructions are verbal, others are not. As he says, 'when an individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially credited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behaviour as a whole.'<sup>10</sup> Here, it is clear that Goffman implies that there is always an element of unconscious absorption of ideology, social mores and codes within performances, which correlates with Althusser's theories as they are outlined above. This is pertinent to my own underpinning argument that traces of one's contextual climate can always be found in artwork produced at that time and in that place, howsoever unconsciously they have crept in – a process which I call "indirect allegory." This is also why Goffman's theories are particularly pertinent to analysing theatre, which draws in part, as a discipline, from gestures and aphorisms that exemplify socially-sanctioned values, and it is why his

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<sup>9</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, p. 45.

work is so significant to assessing HUAC-era drama in particular. HUAC's preoccupations were, from the first, shot through with issues of performative identity. From "friendly" witnesses, the panel's representatives demanded the kind of exemplary self-representation described by Goffman above: the strong, plain, public adherence to the 'officially credited values' that HUAC's representatives had selected and issued. Because most hearings were public, and several celebrity witnesses' testimonies were widely reported, Goffman's astute observations about the form and function of engendering, and maintaining, communities were magnified and amplified by the climate of HUAC's America.

### **Self-Performance in HUAC's America**

The question of how and why people performed their loyalty to "America" through the HUAC proceedings, and what happened when their performance either failed, or was undermined and disbelieved by their fellow players, is central to examining the impact of the panel's work on theatrical art. 'It was theatre,' as Bentley plainly described the performative character of the proceedings, 'or, if you like, ritual [...].'<sup>11</sup> The impact of the ritualistically-enacted testimonies of both "friendly" and "unfriendly" witnesses on community formation is important to this thesis, because I agree with Benedict Anderson that the 'imagined community' is what comes to characterise and concretise national identity. Moreover, national identity – "Americanness" – and trying to imagine and define it is what obsessed HUAC. However, as Goffman argues, 'the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps.'<sup>12</sup> This means that the 'impression of reality' which HUAC was trying to foster by pursuing its witnesses

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<sup>11</sup> Bentley, 'Afterword,' in *Thirty Years of Treason*, pp. 933-953, (p. 947.)

<sup>12</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, p. 63.

and exacting its convictions was as vulnerable, and as constructed, as any other. In practice, “Americanness” was defined increasingly negatively by what it was not: by holding “unfriendly” witnesses up before the watching public as “un-Americans.” In the case of the formation and projection of national identity, the stakes were high: concrete prosecutions of those found to be in Contempt of Congress ensued for those falling short of HUAC’s selective and narrow ‘imagined’ “Americanness” test. Many whose performances contained the kind of ‘minor mishaps’ which meant that they did not, or could not, fit the delicate and unstable construction of “Americanness” created by HUAC were cast out of the dominant national narratives within which they lived and worked.

It is true that although those found guilty of “un-American” behaviour, either because they had engaged in leftwing, liberal or radical activities in the present or in the past, or more often because they refused to recant these views, or to implicate others who had held them, tended to remain nominally “American” in practice. However, their conviction made it difficult for them to find a place to belong. Public sector work, private sector employment, friendships and relationships were all threatened at various times for individuals who were charged with not belonging to HUAC’s narrative of “Americanness.” With the popularisation of the notion of “guilt by association,” also known as “fellow-travelling,” it became no longer necessary even to have behaved or believed subversively, but only to know one or several people who had.<sup>13</sup> This all meant

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<sup>13</sup> Understanding the full implications of the term “fellow-travelling” is central to understanding some of the ways in which HUAC operated. It is worth looking more closely at the notion here because the threat of being charged with it had a powerful and resonating effect on community formation, loyalty, and trust as these themes appear in the plays with which the thesis engages. A “fellow traveller” need not have engaged in any activity whatsoever that HUAC might class as “un-American.” They needed only to know someone who could be viewed as “un-American,” howsoever slightly, and be unwilling to break with them or to denounce them. HUAC called these “fellow travellers” the “dupes.” For instance, blacklisted screenwriter Al Levitt described to Ceplair and Englund ‘the large number of broken lunch and dinner dates, the phone messages which went unanswered, the unending chain of embarrassed excuses from good friends whom one had known, and been seeing socially, for years,’ in the wake of

that some people were rendered, by accident, by choice, or by smear, effective outsiders *within* their country. Next, this Introduction prepares the ground for a detailed assessment of theatrical documents which in one way or another all dramatise the dangers of casting people out thus, or of threatening their security and sense of belonging, at least. It also reflects on what might ensue socially from such exclusion and the undermining of a sense of safety, and particularly from its theatrical depiction. My contention is that all the plays under scrutiny offer various kinds of alternative “national biographies” of the disaffected, the excluded, and the lonely. Each in its own way constitutes a reaction against homogenising and narrow interpretations of “American” identity, and tries to celebrate otherness. This thesis evaluates HUAC’s ideological agenda, and explains why I am able to argue that it clashes so harshly with the atmosphere of the American-Irish plays under consideration. My case is built around a detailed evaluation of the dominant theme of all the plays under consideration herein: loneliness.

### **Hannah Arendt and Loneliness**

In this thesis, I contend that loneliness is the silent, invisible “twin” of American capitalist individualism. If anyone can, according to some national myths of America, achieve success and acclaim using only ambition and self-belief, then those who fail to succeed in becoming the self-made heroes of their own life-story have failed the system, rather than the system failing them, because these myths purport equality of opportunity for all. The feelings of exclusion and isolation engendered by this failure, I show, result

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receiving his subpoena from HUAC (p.364, *Inquisition in Hollywood*). This plainly demonstrates the more invidious and long-lasting effects of the work of HUAC on community formation and resilience, not least because in Levitt’s case, and in the case of many others, the *subpoena* was enough to fracture allegiances and loyalties. At the time at which he first noticed the cooling of friendships and partnerships within his community, he had not even been convicted by HUAC.

in loneliness, which is the single unifying theme pervading all the plays under consideration herein.

In discussing loneliness as a philosophical notion, I mobilise Hannah Arendt's succinct evaluation of the phenomenon and its implications, which can be found in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and apply it to reading the various effects of the work of HUAC on communities and loyalties. Although she did not write about HUAC itself, this section shows that her theories are applicable to understanding why the feelings of loneliness that my close reading of the chosen plays identifies in many of the characters became a thematic motif of HUAC-era drama. Arendt makes the important distinction that 'Loneliness is not solitude,' because 'Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others.'<sup>14</sup> In Arendt's terms, then, loneliness is intractably bound up with communities; with stories and other things one says, that is, and the audience to which one performs them. It is a public and reactive phenomenon, which can only be engendered – and, paradoxically, remedied – by the response of one's audience. HUAC required very public confirmatory statements of loyalty and, therefore, of belonging. This meant that failing to meet its criteria for "Americanness" could only stimulate loneliness in the protagonists featuring in the national drama that unfolded during the era. To apply Arendt's reflections to the HUAC era, then, engendering such loneliness may have been ideologically motivated, whether or not this was the Committee's conscious agenda.

Arendt asserts that 'Isolation and loneliness are not the same,' because:

I can be isolated – that is in a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me – without being lonely; and I can be lonely – that

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 476.

is in a situation in which I as a person feel myself deserted by all human companionship – without being isolated.<sup>15</sup>

These distinctions are important to the conceptual framework of this thesis, because Arendt later asserts that loneliness and terror go hand-in-hand. Therefore, any government that would be a totalitarian outfit mobilises loneliness, and people's fear of it, in order to fracture communities so as to undermine any concerted resistance to domination. As she argues, those experiencing loneliness 'are powerless by definition,' because they have no allies: no community, and therefore no support.<sup>16</sup> This powerlessness is crucial to understanding the wider social impact of HUAC's activities upon communities and individuals, because it has the potential to give the lie to the possibility of "agency," which is to say the freedom to self-define, identified by Jim Cullen, among others, as the cornerstone of all versions of the American Dream.

### **HUAC and Loneliness**

In this thesis, I draw on Arendt's definitions of loneliness and her predictions about the dangers of its potential to facilitate totalitarian domination, because she holds that such domination brings the destruction not just of communities and lives, but of independent and critical thought itself, which under totalitarianism is subsumed entirely by terror. This thesis argues for the relevance of her reflections to the twentieth-century America with which I am concerned to engage herein. I am aware of the need to be careful not to overstate the effects of the repressive climate of HUAC by likening it directly to Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. Nonetheless, certain characteristics of totalitarian rule as noted by Arendt do apply to HUAC's America. Accusations, rumours, hearsay and bad blood increasingly ruled the day as the era progressed and a climate of fear began to take hold. Martin Dies, the original Chairman of what became

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<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 474.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 474.



HUAC, described the foe against which HUAC pitched itself as the, ‘living, breathing, dynamic, clever, and furtive forces, which still are working ceaselessly to destroy us – you and me – and our belief in the sanctity of man.’<sup>17</sup> Describing the work of HUAC as the last bastion between American democracy and the sweeping tide of totalitarian communism was used as justification by figures such as Dies. Categorising communism in this way made the work of HUAC more important than constitutional rights, the practices of law, and the private integrity of any one individual. This shows tendencies towards totalitarianism, as it is understood by Arendt, under which ‘all men have become One Man,’ and ‘terror can be completely relied upon to keep the movement in constant motion,’ because ‘no principle of action separate from its essence would be needed at all.’<sup>18</sup>

One of Arendt’s signal concerns is the power of totalitarianism to separate human beings from their fellows, which leads to the death of hope. This is because without an audience with which to engage, a lonely individual will always come to conclude the worst about everything; she argues:

Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our *common* sense which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, we cannot trust ourselves – what we can see and hear; what we know, and what we sense – without another or others to validate and concretise this ‘sense data.’ This is important to my argument because it implies the way in which loneliness can lead to the death of hope, or more accurately, to the fading of the belief in a better time

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<sup>17</sup> Martin Dies, *Martin Dies’ Story* (New York: Bookmailer, 1963), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 467.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 475-476.

to come: because hope for the future needs another or others to sustain it. This is also why the function of the other or others to whom we look for this validation and concretisation of our sense of ourselves is to act as an “audience” to our stories. Combining the arguments of Goffman, outlined above, and Arendt, discussed in this section, facilitates my assessment of the social and community-related function of storytelling in the thesis that follows; a story cannot count as such without someone to hear it. Therefore, the potential within self-performing through storytelling to secure, or at least to assert, one’s place in the community thus becomes one of the central motifs of all the plays analysed within this thesis, and it is a theme that I address in more detail in the section below on storytelling.<sup>20</sup>

In the light of this, Arendt also observes that ‘terror can rule absolutely only over men who are isolated against each other.’<sup>21</sup> Here, totalitarian governments’ interference not just with the human being as he exists in the public domain, but also as he thinks and acts in the private realm, means that citizens find themselves in loneliness, ‘the experience of not belonging to the world at all,’ which she asserts is ‘among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.’ Crucially to my own reflections on American society and its manifestations on the American stage, she concludes by observing:

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain

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<sup>20</sup> Briefly, my argument about the depiction of storytelling on the second-generation American-Irish stage is that the plays under examination tend to work with conventional ideas of narrative and storytelling as positive and creative phenomena; characters constantly reach towards each other with their stories, and they tend firmly to believe that their tales are a viable basis for identities and communities. Richard Kearney would certainly agree, and his *On Stories* is therefore illuminative. However, my own argument goes further, in that there is a darker side to storytelling, and the plays under scrutiny also (and increasingly, in terms of chronology) tend to warn of the opposite potential result of narration in shoring up, or even creating, a sense of community: stories can rend people asunder from their communities; if they are not heard, or understood, or accepted, then the result is loneliness.

<sup>21</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 474.

marginal social conditions like old age, has become an every-day experience of the evergrowing masses of our [twentieth] century.<sup>22</sup>

This thesis investigates the extent to which a feeling of not belonging may have been engendered by the alienating free-market American capitalist ethos of individualistic self-improvement. It is possible that this alienation could have created a climate in which HUAC's marginalisation of all those not fitting its interpretation of "Americanness" subjected many to feelings of loneliness.

Indeed, there is something of a negative dialectic implied here, in that economic individualism seems to have need of an ideology of national identity – "Americanness" – in order to facilitate social cohesion, but this notion of community quickly emerges as only an empty, abstract, ideological notion of community rather than a homogenising and unifying force. Therefore, the attempt to cohere the nation under "Americanness" in a capitalist sense is the very thing which also produces the conditions for marginalisation and loneliness: the condition of the outsider.<sup>23</sup> This in turn is how it may be that HUAC's investigations developed the potential to become a totalising force in American social politics. I will show that the plays this thesis considers all grapple with this possibility, by looking at characters' experience of loneliness in the abstracted onstage microcosm of their small communities.

Arendt's reflections, taken together to make a picture of the post-war societies that she observed, create a conceptual framework which encompasses most of my own preoccupations: issues of community, belonging, identity and the need for an audience to validate and cement it, loyalty, communication (or lack thereof), and the causes and

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<sup>22</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 478.

<sup>23</sup> In a sense, this negative dialectic is analogous to the more well-known dialectic of modernity between mass culture and individualism. Reducing the idea of the human to a form abstracted from time and place means that we all effectively become identical, and this formal identity, projected onto us from the outside, forces us to attempt to differentiate ourselves by abstract individuality: insisting on minor differences that are not actually apparent.

effects of loneliness. Because I concur with how she develops and expresses her assertions, I intend to read HUAC, after Arendt's fashion, as a form of ideology, and one with totalising tendencies at that, because it was designed to be all-encompassing, complete and absolute. She describes ideologies as 'isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise.'<sup>24</sup> The very name of HUAC – the House Un-American Activities Committee – serves to demonstrate that its notion of "Americanness" was conceived as one single premise: there is an "Americanness" with fixed criteria which describe it, and one is either "American," or one is not. In HUAC's own terms, this means that one is either for or against Americanism as an ideology. This explains why I read HUAC as a form of ideological apparatus, in terms of my conceptual framework.

Furthermore, Arendt notices that under totalitarian rule, fear binds men together in an 'iron band of terror' which precludes dialectical or critical engagement with their oppression – forging a community of sorts, therefore, but not in a positive sense.<sup>25</sup> Yet for Arendt, paradoxically, the climate of all-pervading terror freezes men in inactivity and silence, impotence and loneliness, isolating them from their fellow citizens even as they are pressed together with them. HUAC's raising of the spectre of communism as that which was to be feared above all else, the ultimate threat to American democratic society and community, did both of these things. Fear bound community members together in anti-communism, bestowing upon them a shared, homogenous communal identity, albeit in a negative sense driven by fear and ignorance. Such enforced, artificial groupings are everywhere in evidence in the plays which this thesis considers, from the "bums" in Hope's saloon in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, to the uneasy alliances forged by Cornelius Christian in Donleavy's *Fairy Tales of New York*, and all the way

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<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 468.

<sup>25</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 466.

to the awkward extended family staged by Gilroy in *Any Given Day*. The three chapters of the thesis proper engage in detail with the depiction of these “pressed-together” micro-communities, reading them as indirectly allegorical of the climate of the era in which they were produced and staged.

Telling one’s story or stories, in the context of “belonging” to a community of sorts which is staged in the plays as being mistrustful and suspicious of its supposed members, was a dangerous thing to do under HUAC. As a result the texts often show, at their fictional remove, that to be known by one’s peers could expose one to censure and ostracisation. This can be seen, for instance, when the “bums” in Harry Hope’s bar turn against their erstwhile community member, Hickey, when he tells them the story of how he came to be disabused of his “pipe dreams,” the foundational myths on which he has built his life. Therefore, the instability and uncertainty engendered by holding a perilous and qualified position in one’s community, as the plight of Hickey demonstrates, could mean that those who did not, or could not, fit HUAC’s norm of “Americanness” were only unsuccessfully forced into alternative community groupings of the excluded and the lonely. These alternative groupings might initially have appeared successful, as their members’ sense of belonging to an alternative community was shot through with the meaningfulness of dissidence and bound together by their various acts of resistance to HUAC. The Hollywood Ten, for instance, would be a clear example of this type of collective as it appeared in the world outside the plays under consideration.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> One of the early high-profile set of HUAC prosecutions, and one which certainly demonstrated HUAC’s predilection for achieving publicity for the panel by targeting representatives of the Arts, were those of the so-called “Hollywood Ten” in 1947. Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund’s book *Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930 – 1960* (California & London: University of California Press, 1983) is the best account of these prosecutions and the ripple-effects that the fear they spread, and the total triumph of HUAC over the Ten, created. They argue, ‘The Hollywood contingent represents the fates of its anonymous and mute colleagues around the country,’ (p.xiv), a notion with which I will engage in more detail in the thesis proper. One lesson of the conviction and subsequent imprisonment of the Ten to artists in particular, perhaps, was to try to avoid engaging in overt or direct resistance to the investigations of HUAC, for fear of drawing the panel’s fire.

Conversely, some of those found to be lacking HUAC's traits of "Americanness" were condemned to seek belonging and acceptance from their hostile audience, and not to find it, like Hickey. This could happen immediately that one did or did not testify, as was seen in case of the unrepentant communist writer Howard Fast, who never worked again after his prosecution and subsequent blacklisting. Alternatively, it could occur later down the line, of which the penitential recantations of former Hollywood Ten non-testifiers such as Edward Dmytryk are examples.

Worse than the plight of those who either did testify and name names, or who did not, was the plight of the very many who were unfoundedly suspected and even tried. Difficult as it is to prove a negative, which is to say to prove one did not do something, many thousands lived out their days under a cloud of suspicion before what Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund have called 'the courts of public opinion,'<sup>27</sup> because as Brenda Murphy notes, 'the most difficult situation for a witness was to have nothing to confess.'<sup>28</sup> Because of the increasing number of prosecutions based on "guilt by association" in the 1950s in particular, association with anyone came increasingly as the HUAC era progressed to be shot through with risk, and once tainted with the suspicion of being an "un-American," it was hard to divest oneself of the stigma. In turn, if associating with people, past or present, was increasingly dangerous under HUAC as it could also draw one under suspicion – or bring trouble upon others, due to one's own beliefs and affiliations – then loneliness, in Arendt's terms a requisite cornerstone of totalitarian domination, became as the HUAC era developed an increasing threat to those who wished to be included under the umbrella term "American."

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<sup>27</sup> Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930-1960* (London: University of California, 1983), p. 270.

<sup>28</sup> Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 63.

## HUAC-era Theatre

In order to analyse the effects of the work of HUAC on the drama in hand, it is necessary to look briefly at why those subpoenaed were artificially polarised into “friendly/unfriendly” extremes, either for or against the committee and its aims, because the formation, maintenance and security of onstage communities is what drives the literary analysis of the thesis. My contention is that the act of questioning people’s allegiance and loyalty to America in a public and punitive way meant that dreams of belonging were undermined, regardless of the outcome of the trial, by the fact of the trial itself.<sup>29</sup> The punitive element of the HUAC prosecutions rather relied on some being found guilty and others not guilty of “un-Americanness,” because without prosecutions, the committee would quickly begin to look superfluous. This means that there must have been those who did not “fit” the narratives constructed by HUAC – those, that is, for whom some versions of dreaming failed.

By asking witnesses their defining question, *Have you ever been...?*, HUAC attempted to wrest the early, developmental stages of witnesses’ private lives into a public arena. This in itself serves to demonstrate HUAC’s increasing obsession with the need to *perform* one’s loyalty by publicly recanting one’s former beliefs. Moreover, such figures as were defined by these proceedings as “un-friends” to HUAC were in danger of being rendered permanently apostate from the ‘crusading faith’ of

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<sup>29</sup> A word is perhaps needed about using the word “American” to describe North Americans. There is a whole field of critical scholarship about this contentious, semantic “claiming” of all the Americas for the citizens of the U.S.A. Joel Kovel is particularly sharp, arguing that his fellow countrymen ‘casually perpetuate manifest destiny’ in so naming their country (*Red Hunting in the Promised Land*, p.3). However, he and others also recognise that “America” is a convenient shorthand; one not without its problems, but without a viable alternative in comparatively wide use. Indeed, the very fact that “America” and “American” are in fact critically loaded terms with multiple connotations is part of the point of assessing how and why the effects of the search by HUAC for “un-American” conduct and beliefs may have crept into the themes and the dramatic form of drama produced during its tenure. Because they are fractious and potentially contentious terms, it is possible that the search for the traits of them, and the *performance* of these traits, is what actually calls them into being.

“Americanness,” which in turn could cast their dreams and ambitions into uncertainty.<sup>30</sup>

Brenda Murphy describes the fluid terms convenient to itself in which HUAC defined “un-Americanness” thus:

Although the only legitimate function of the [HUAC] hearings was investigation, they were in reality rituals of accusation and degradation. [...] Because the crime against society that the hearings were set up to root out and condemn had only a metaphorical existence, the Committee had to invent a concrete one.<sup>31</sup>

Murphy’s telling use of the term ‘ritual’ draws attention to the theatrical, performative elements of the HUAC hearings, and the difficulties of the witnesses “accused” and “degraded” in the process of them is clear. If HUAC pursued an enemy or enemies which the panel itself had “invented” or, at least, had appropriated, then defending oneself against the charge of being an “un-American,” to avoid being cast out of the community in which the very charge itself had already cast suspicion upon one, became an impossible task. This means that the process of investigation had to, and did, create outsiders.

Therefore, I will read the plays under consideration as theatrical explorations of communities, friendships, loyalties and social interactions in the light of this. In these plays, allegiances are projected in microcosm onstage, and they function – to varying degrees, with varying success, and at an indirect allegorical remove – to comment upon the socio-cultural location of their audiences. These projections are not blunt-instrument agit-prop style anti-HUAC scenarios, thrust uncritically onto the stage. Theatrically this kind of dramatic form, with its empty stages and direct, didactic address to its

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<sup>30</sup> Hugh Brogan, *The Longman History of the United States of America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Edinburgh: Longman, 1999), p. 582.

<sup>31</sup> Murphy, *Congressional Theatre*, p. 58 and p. 60.



audiences, is engaging in its way.<sup>32</sup> However, it is too polemical and deploys too-broad brush-strokes to depict the kind of subtle, nuanced cultural and political critique that I regard as integral to the texts analysed in this thesis. In the plays under scrutiny, it is rather that the temperature of the ideological climate has crept into the plays' dramatic form, and into their thematic content. This means that their indirect allegorical significance must be inferred by the audience, rather than being passively absorbed because it is impossible to miss, as can be the case with agit-prop. Moreover, as I have intimated above, HUAC's America was increasingly subject to a climate of suspicion, doubt and mistrust. This meant potentially that nailing one's colours to the mast by writing such plays as, for instance, the Federal Theater Project's *Triple-A Plowed Under* could be downright dangerous, as the FTP's director Hallie Flanagan discovered when she was subpoenaed to HUAC early in its reign, on which more below.

This question of overt politicising on the stage is of relevance to the issues of autobiography pertaining to O'Neill, Donleavy and Gilroy because, in contrast to the demonstrably one-dimensional onstage critiquing of the wider climate of agit-prop, these playwrights set autobiography up *against* this kind of critique. Specifically, in terms of viewing autobiography critically as another form of constructed self-performance, these playwrights tend to hide behind autobiography, attempting to render their works small, personal and, therefore, non-threatening. All three artists purport to write at least semi-autobiographical texts, and write versions of themselves into their plays. They draw on their private cultural milieux, and make few overt attempts to

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<sup>32</sup> Notable agit-prop successes include many of the plays by the Federal Theater Project (America's only ever state-funded "national theatre") such as *One Third of a Nation*, the title of which was taken from a Franklin Roosevelt speech about poverty, deprivation, sickness and unemployment at the height of the Great Depression. The content of *One Third* was "edited" from newspaper reports, government papers, and other non-fictional documents; the staging was sparse, actors played multiple roles, and audience plants were used to incite chanting and cheering at key moments. Another substantial agit-prop success was *Waiting for Lefty* by Clifford Odets, about a striking taxi driver and his corrupt employers. Odets later became a "friendly witness" to HUAC.

universalise their self-narration; they prefer to distance themselves and their personal tales from the ideological context in which they are told onstage. As such, they set the stories that they tell at a conceptual remove from straightforward or direct allegory, preferring to render their narratives resolutely small and personal, thereby formally claiming seeming irrelevance to, or non-engagement with, critiquing wider dominant social and political mores. This makes any allegorical interpretations of their work necessarily “indirect.” Furthermore, in terms of chronology, when their plays are viewed as part of a developmental trajectory, it seems that each of the later two playwrights, Donleavy and Gilroy, does this more than his predecessor; therefore, O’Neill is most concerned to use autobiography to explore wider social concerns, and Gilroy is least so. However, as Althusser argues about the novels of Balzac and Tolstoy,

The fact that the content of the work [...] is “detached” from their political ideology and in some way makes us “see” it from the *outside*, makes us “perceive” it by a distantiation inside that ideology, *presupposes that ideology itself*.<sup>33</sup>

This means, in short, that the very mounting determination to control, personalise and narrow the scope of the narrative one is projecting is of relevance to my investigation into the climate of HUAC’s America, in which one’s stories could be appropriated, and then deployed against one. The resistance of the three playwrights under scrutiny towards commenting directly on the era in which their plays were written itself presupposes an unconscious, reactive artistic response to that very era. The presumed distance and separateness of the autobiographical theatrical artwork serves to draw attention to the pervading ideology of the HUAC years, and its effects on the artists who lived through them.

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<sup>33</sup> Althusser, ‘A Letter on Art,’ p. 225.

So, these are plays which thematically and representationally try to assert the right to self-definition in a context – HUAC’s work – in which people were being wilfully misrepresented by the state, labelled “un-American” and subversive for a swath of activities and beliefs which were in actuality neither of these things. The conflict between the producers of dramatic works and those who adhered to the importance of prosecutions by HUAC therefore ultimately arose around issues of who does, and who should, control the power of representation. For instance, speaking of the Hollywood Ten, the earliest high-profile “un-Americans,” Ceplair and Englund attest that, ‘As a symbol of “dangerous” radicalism, Hollywood was only the tip of an iceberg, but it was a flashing neon tip that captivated the nation’s attention – precisely as HUAC hoped it would do.’<sup>34</sup> If HUAC felt that Hollywood filmmakers and actors were in control of public opinion, then the convictions and subsequent imprisonment of the Ten constituted an attempt to wrest that control from them and into the hands of the Senators of the committee.

My contention is that the dramatic presentation of community, loyalty, and the search for friendship and connection, founded as it was in the notion of self-performance in order to exact self-actualisation, gained increased political currency in post-Depression America because of the work of HUAC. This work, which I concur ‘betrayed theatrical bias,’ as Eric Bentley has convincingly argued, exacerbated deep fault-lines that had run through America since the arrival of the first European settlers: fissures of religion, immigrant heritage, class, and politics.<sup>35</sup>

HUAC’s demand for a public performance of loyalty and fidelity to the abstract notion of a homogenous, unified “national” identity was central to the Committee’s

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<sup>34</sup> Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, p. xiv.

<sup>35</sup> Bentley, ‘Foreword’ in *Thirty Years of Treason*, pp. xxv-xxx, (p. xxvii.)

attempts to identify and penalise what they so tellingly called “un-American” behaviour. As such, the climate engendered by these forays into identity politics came to pervade theatrical art, itself a public exploration of a political position on a given social question, in both form and content. Conflict lies at the heart of all performance art, and the clashes between HUAC representatives and their subpoenaed witnesses were, at base, theatrical enterprises. This overt theatricality correlates precisely with Goffman’s assertion that everything is staged, performative and conveyed through theatrical signs. Pledging allegiance, for instance, would be in Goffman’s terms the perfect example of a publicly-performed demonstration of the abstract notion of national loyalty. Moreover, he insightfully asserts that ‘we must not overlook the crucial fact that any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character.’<sup>36</sup> For Goffman, as this quotation demonstrates, there is no public performance in any political context which can be stripped of its importance to moral questions of loyalty, fidelity, honesty and so on. This is certainly true of the definition of “Americanness,” and the loyalty and moral integrity it was intended to connote in HUAC’s America, and such questions are explored in depth across all the plays under examination herein. Next, I will outline briefly what was at stake for those suspected of “un-American” activities, and in particular those whose national identities may have been destabilised by the investigations of HUAC due to being of multiple or contested heritage. This is of relevance because the subtle, pervasive effects of HUAC’s occasionally racist bent surface at an indirect allegorical remove in the plays’ depiction of “Irishness,” the theatrical portrayal of which is analysed in the thesis.

### **Immigrants, HUAC, and Notions of Community**

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<sup>36</sup> Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, p. 24.

Immigrants felt more vulnerable to charges of alienness, disloyalty and “un-Americanness.” They feared exclusion and loneliness more, as they had fought harder and suffered more to attain their status as “naturalised” American citizens than the so-called “native-born.” The former Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer’s veiled bigotry in his mention of “undiluted one hundred percent Americans” hints at this vulnerability.<sup>37</sup> As Anderson has said in the second edition of his landmark text *Imagined Communities*, ‘from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood,’ and importantly, ‘one could be “invited into” the imagined community.’<sup>38</sup> This makes the ways in which HUAC appropriated terms such as “Americaness” significant to this thesis, because conceptually, my focus is upon loneliness and performed identity, and if it is possible to be ‘invited into’ an imagined community, it is possible to be expelled from one. Therefore, the various dreams which Irish immigrants to America brought with them were coloured by a desire to belong, whilst preserving a sense of their history.

This assertion is underlined by Roy Foster, who has argued, ‘With emigrant communities everywhere, the memory of homeland has to be kept in aspic. The perspective over one’s shoulder must remain identical to that recorded by the parting glance.’<sup>39</sup> According to Foster, the ‘parting glance’ memory, even down the generations, must be preserved in order for the permanent émigré to feel that a sense of their history is a part of their identity. However, I would go further: it is possible to imagine that the desire to belong to the adopted community is fired by the very fixedness and seeming timelessness of the remembered ‘homeland,’ because to return

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<sup>37</sup> Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (New York & London: Norton, 2001), p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 3rd edn (London: Verso, 2006), p. 145.

<sup>39</sup> Roy Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. xiii.

would endanger the perfection of the memory. This means that for immigrants to America, the fear of failing in the publicly-performed role of being a dreaming, aspirant, loyal American haunted those whose lives, backgrounds, beliefs, and even appearance made them vulnerable to being cast as “un-American” before a listening and judging audience.

The publicly performative, spectacular elements of the HUAC hearings – the fact that what occurred within them swiftly became common knowledge, and that those feeling their position to be unstable or uncertain were more vulnerable – reflects in every way Goffman’s understanding of how and why power dynamics between people can shift as any social encounter progresses. For Goffman, roles within communities of people shift from one to another – so a performer, for instance, becomes the audience for the performances of others in a group – and yet the performative nature of identity remains constant. Connections within communities are asymmetrical and shot through with power-dynamics that can destabilise a performance at any moment. However, although it can be derailed, whatever occurs after the crisis is also performative, so the performance is changed rather than ended. Goffman has astutely observed, ‘A basic problem for many performances, then, is that of information control; [...] a team must be able to keep its secrets and have its secrets kept.’<sup>40</sup> For Goffman, and for Richard Schechner after him, such performativity within agreed, if tacit, bounds, is ritualistic, in that certain signs and cues are repeatedly deployed as shorthand signifiers of a deeper ideological standpoint. In this light, choosing, for instance, not to name names under subpoena to HUAC became more than a simple choice between whether or not to say something. Such non-testimony came to signify a performed statement or stance about being the kind of team member who intended to keep the secrets of a ‘team,’ or in my

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<sup>40</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, p. 141.

own terms a dissenting community, comprising those not agreeing with HUAC's aims or conduct.

Therefore, there are loyalties that must be acted out within performances if a group is to be considered a 'team,' or as I am calling it, a community. Assumptions are made and tested, and overall, there is a sense that communities are forged – and broken – by the two-way relationship between the performer/s and the audience member/s, either of which group can fracture the illusion of cohesion being created. 'Together,' as Goffman describes the phenomenon of community formation,

the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured.<sup>41</sup>

The nuanced point to this observation is that a performative scenario need not necessarily be *true* in any absolute sense, if this is, indeed, even possible. Rather, the consensus between group members is what must take priority. This means that one can be loyal to a version of events without the version needing to be immaculately rendered for the audience members in the group to approve.

This loyalty to an imagined sense of common aims within a community is centrally important to this thesis, because such homogeneity is precisely what HUAC sought to engender in the American nation. It may be that failing to fit its definition of "American" conduct or character, and therefore being cast asunder from one's dominant national narratives, served to forge alternative 'imagined communities' of outsiders. It may also be that outsiderism was more acutely felt and, therefore, performed by immigrants, because of the expressly performative and ritualised nature of loyalty under

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<sup>41</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, p. 21.

the auspices of HUAC, seen for instance in the Loyalty Oath controversy of 1947.<sup>42</sup> Brian Neve confirms that ‘immigrants were particularly under pressure to affirm American values at the time [1940s],’ and mentions Erik Erikson, an immigrant, who ‘describes the loyalty oath controversy that he faced in the McCarthy era as “a test of my American identity.”’<sup>43</sup> The sense of exclusion and instability described by Erikson, in comparison to what he perceived to be the so-called “native-born” norm, is of relevance to this thesis because all three playwrights under consideration are second-generation American-Irishmen and Catholics. This thesis tests my theories about the instability of a performed identity in the climate of the HUAC era by assessing the extent to which the climate came to pervade both the themes and, crucially, the dramatic form of their works. The playwrights’ “Irishness,” as they perceive it, and their Catholicism, feature mutedly as part of the cultural value-system of their plays. This is not to say that these are “Catholic” or even “Irish” plays in any direct or unavoidable sense. Rather, it is to assert that the texts are coloured by the specific cultural context of second-generation American-“Irishness.” This means that the value-systems underpinning the plays, when they are examined closely and critically, will bear the indirectly allegorical marks of the playwrights’ backgrounds. This does not necessarily mean that their life-experiences will manifest in their works in an autobiographical sense; rather, these personalising references count as another form of constructed self-performance, and in Althusser’s and Goffman’s different and yet comparable terms, quite possibly as unconscious traces within this performance. This means that although

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<sup>42</sup> This controversy pertained to a piece of legislation approved by Harry Truman, which required government employees to swear a public oath of allegiance to America: another clear example of the overt performativity of nationality during the HUAC era. Truman’s requirement quickly spiralled out of control, causing the investigation, and the expulsion from public sector roles, of thousands. As with celebrity convictions in Hollywood, so it was in the public sector: often the stigma of receiving a subpoena at all – or even being rumoured to be *about* to receive one – was enough to cost a person their job.

<sup>43</sup> Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 173.



the playwrights under consideration may or may not have intended indirectly to critique the climate of HUAC's America, that climate, as a form of ideology, will still have ghosted into both the thematic concerns and the formal dramatic structure of the plays under scrutiny.

### **Storytelling and Self-Performance**

In the context of the theatre, the process of staging such value systems affords signal importance to what characters tell other characters about themselves. In undertaking this analysis, I will of course bear Goffman in mind, remaining aware that some narratives are non-verbal, borne by movement and silence as much as by what characters actually say to each other onstage. However, because stage directions are not read out to the audience of a play around the lines of the actual dialogue, all that those who see it can infer about anything is to be found in the words and gestures with which characters call themselves into being. Coupled with the theatrical materials of lighting, staging, setting and sound, all of these components become part of the "story" the production tells. Richard Kearney agrees; his recent book *On Stories* will therefore be important to this thesis, though he tends to be rather too uniformly positive about the power and effects of self-narration over the individual. He says, for instance, that 'Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition *human*.'<sup>44</sup> Using stories to self-create causes the sustenance of oneself which makes life in the world worth living, according to Kearney.<sup>45</sup> However, as this quotation

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London and New York: Routledge; Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), Thinking in Action Series, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Kearney's notion about the human, and humanising, value of stories and storytelling would be seen as problematic from a disability studies perspective. This field, exemplified in the works of David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, takes exception to the kind of uncritical assumption seeming to underpin Kearney's idea that people who cannot tell stories, or cannot understand them, are somehow less than

also shows, Kearney tends consistently to overlook the dangerous and destabilising aspects of storytelling and its concomitant aspect, self-performance.

The HUAC era exacerbated the fragility of the position of those who told stories about themselves and about others, and Goffman is characteristically astute enough to spot why:

Shared staging problems; concern for the way things appear; warranted and unwarranted feelings of shame; ambivalence about oneself and one's audience: these are some of the dramatic elements of the human condition.<sup>46</sup>

Both Kearney and Goffman recognise the great social significance of the practice of storytelling. Kearney sees it in a positive light, bestowing the freedom to self-invent and to find acceptance; Goffman recognises that allowing oneself to be known can allow one also to be seen in all one's uncertainties, ambiguities and failings. This thesis builds on the twin components of self-performance which are together exemplified by the theories of Kearney and Goffman. It investigates the extent to which the plays under consideration in this thesis yield a darker side of the dangers of storytelling and self-performance, in the context of the climate of HUAC's America. Analysing the stories told by characters to each other, and thereby told by the playwright to us, the audience, illuminates how each play under examination centralises the role of self-narration, to assert an identity which was felt to be under threat in the context of the era in which these plays were written and staged. Together, Schechner, Goffman and Kearney

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human. Because of the several depictions of disabled children in the plays of Frank Gilroy with which Chapter 3 of this thesis concerns itself, I will touch upon this field in that chapter. My argument is that the depiction of the (non-storytelling) disabled children in Gilroy's plays is not, ultimately, worthy of the frustration of disability studies scholars, both because storytelling is more multifaceted than the simple verbal narration of a tale to another or others, and because as symbols of the dangers of people connecting with others, these characters function in a more complex way than within the disability studies charge that the representation of disability tends only to be a 'narrative prosthesis' – which is to say, deployed as a shorthand symbol of degeneracy, deviance and evil.

<sup>46</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, p. 241.

provide much in the way of the methodological foundations of this thesis, around which I structure the literary analysis to prove my case.

## **Loyalty**

The vexed question of whom, or to what, one owes one's primary loyalty surfaces first in O'Neill, where it is staged within family units like the Hogans in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Josie has to choose whom to believe, and whom to suspect of treachery: her dissolute suitor Jim or her wily, manipulative father, and there are seeds of betrayal in both allegiances. In Donleavy, his singular, furious protagonists tend increasingly to turn away from emotional honesty and striving to make connections, in favour of doing what Arthur Miller described during his HUAC hearing as 'protect[ing] my sense of myself.'<sup>47</sup> Lastly, in Gilroy, characters tend to try to stay loyal to family members, spouses, and old friends, as my analyses of, for instance, *Who'll Save the Plowboy?* and *Any Given Day* will show. However, these performed allegiances are strained beyond their limits, because the allegiance is built on a false premise, and attempts to create homogeneity and harmony therefore fail.

It is my contention that in the staging of all these different kinds of comings-together, there is the subtle allegorical echo of the publicly-exercised demands increasingly laid on communities by the work of HUAC. Therefore, the plays of this thesis can be read as indirect allegories, and function as such for their audiences, whether or not the playwrights actually intended them to be about HUAC-era America. This is still the case if, as is increasingly true of the plays of Donleavy and Gilroy particularly, the playwrights deliberately aimed to avoid social comment. This is because these writers were immersed inescapably in the environment and atmosphere of

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<sup>47</sup> 'Arthur Miller,' in *Thirty Years of Treason*, p. 820.

HUAC's America. As Althusser argues, although art is distinct from ideology, it cannot but be steeped in it, because art involves the application of the critical consciousness of the artist and, crucially, of the reader – or in this context, the audience. Its function therefore is not to teach or to reinforce its ideological context, but rather to *show* it; speaking of Balzac and Solzhenitsyn, Althusser observes, '[n]either [...] gives us any *knowledge* of the world they describe, they only make us 'see', 'perceive' or 'feel' the reality of the ideology of that world.'<sup>48</sup> To expand slightly, this making us 'see' need not necessarily be a conscious and deliberate depiction of the wider ideology surrounding the artist and the artwork: unconscious and indirect allegorical depictions are equally possible, read against the grain of the surface narrative that is in clear view.

### **The American Dream**

For the purposes of my argument, it is important to examine the values of "America" which HUAC sought to define and project through making examples of people during their investigations. These values have been rather cynically highlighted by Jim Cullen, who has noted that:

The failure of countless social reforms in this country [America], which founder on the confidence of individual citizens that *they* will be the ones who overcome the odds and get rich, is one of the great themes of American politics.<sup>49</sup>

The plays with which I engage in this thesis often manifest a political undertone, in part because they were produced within and, therefore, in response to, the climate in which various playwrights worked. This does not make all such theatre two-dimensional agit-prop; it means only that in the context of HUAC, which was prone to blurring the divide between private beliefs and public life, the wider climate in which the work is produced

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<sup>48</sup> Althusser, 'A Letter on Art,' p. 223.

<sup>49</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 6-7.

and staged cannot but have crept into its form and content. The misplaced, uncritical confidence which Cullen observes, in the teeth of suffering, exclusion and failure, is therefore one of the great themes of the twentieth-century American stage.

Indeed, many of the plays which this thesis considers are particularly concerned to stage their protagonists' uncritical – and often unfounded – optimism that however abject their situation may be, better times will surely come. This optimism, famously defined by O'Neill as “hopeless hope,” is undermined by the restrictive, oppressive naturalistic form, which stops the plays' characters breaking out into the wider community. The solid, fixed, naturalistic box set, and the continuity of action within this fixed locale, serves formally to imprison the characters in these plays; in this way, to varying extents, the rigidity of the set can be read as reflective of the rigidity of notions of “Americanness” as they were imposed by HUAC. Protagonists manifesting the non-verbal signs of feeling claustrophobic and trapped come to stand as allegorical signifiers of the gap between the dreams of some, and the restrictions the climate of one's community places on others. This thesis plots a developmental trajectory from the earlier work of O'Neill, through Donleavy's plays, and on to Gilroy's later work. Therefore, investigating the extent to which this “hopeless hope” is carried as a theme across the work of these three American-Irish playwrights will be instructive. My argument is that hope, and dreaming, are the signal themes in all these plays, and that the dreams which are staged are of a particularly American hue. This is an important element of my study; it is worthy of attention because the central preoccupation of HUAC, in its search for “un-Americans,” was ultimately to do with what constituted “American” conduct, behaviour and beliefs. That the dreams staged, as I read them, are the dreams of outsiders to the HUAC ideal and yet are still recognisably “American” is significant to the conclusions I will draw.

Cullen's *The American Dream* offers some useful reflections on the various kinds of Dream in evidence in American culture; I utilise his reflections in the thesis proper by looking for echoes of them in my selected plays, insofar as these plays are representative cultural documents which stage, and sometimes problematise, such preoccupations. Like Cullen, I intend to use the phrase "the American Dream," which echoes throughout this thesis, as a kind of collective term. Its deployment is intended to encompass different versions of the Dream, which I expand upon where necessary in the ensuing chapters, when I discuss its – or their – depiction onstage.

Cullen says, 'In the twenty-first century, the American Dream remains a major element of our national identity, and yet national identity is itself marked by a sense of uncertainty that may well be greater than ever before.'<sup>50</sup> My contention is that the challenge of HUAC's obsessive search for "un-American" traitors, outsiders and threats from within the 'imagined' nation in the twentieth century has caused this climate of uncertainty to cast a shadow over the period of HUAC's tenure. Moreover, my literary analysis shows that this search has left its mark on the cultures and communities which existed after it was disbanded, too. This shadow is manifest in theatrical art produced both during HUAC's ascendancy – as is the case with Eugene O'Neill and J.P. Donleavy – and after it, as my analysis of Frank D. Gilroy's plays demonstrates. Issues of loyalty and community are staged in all these plays, and it is my contention that the gathering anger, negativity, and failures to connect, all of which themes increasingly feature in my chosen plays as the HUAC era progressed, are an indirect allegorical reaction to the investigations of the committee. This putative relationship is exemplified by the literary analysis that follows, in which I compare the intensely personal, small, autobiographically-tinged subject-matter of the plays in hand with the chronology of the

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<sup>50</sup> Cullen, *The American Dream*, p. 6.

HUAC era. This comparison allows me to identify allegorical evidence, or at least echoes, of the effects of the panel's work even in plays whose writers profess not to wish to engage with wider political and social events and concerns.

### **“Irishness,” Catholicism and HUAC**

The next section of this Introduction posits the peculiarly Catholic-“Irish” timbre of some aspects of the HUAC proceedings, which I have already started to identify in my mention of the confessional, and publicly penitential, aspects of the hearings. The analogy between the Un-American Committee in America, and the Catholic Church in Ireland, is framed here by the presentation of two quotations: one from the Irish cultural historian Declan Kiberd, and one from that great champion of HUAC's work, Roy M. Brewer. I will then discuss the aspects of the comparison which are of relevance to the focus of this thesis.

There was, if anything, less freedom in post-independence Ireland, for the reason that the previous attempt to arraign the enemy without gave way to a new campaign against the heretic within. The censorship of films (1923) and of publications (1929) was a symbol of a wider censoriousness, of a kind which would be found in many infant states as they sought to outlaw the impure and to keep their culture unadulterated by “corrupt” foreign influences.<sup>51</sup>

Communist attempts to penetrate Hollywood started about 30 years ago [in c.1932], when the commies embarked on a long-range plan to take over the industry and use it as an instrument of its program for world revolution. The ultimate objective, of course, was to overthrow the government of the United States and destroy our Judeo-Christian civilisation. There is substantial evidence to establish that this effort was Moscow-directed and, to a large degree, Moscow-financed. [...] The communists have sold the idea that such [friendly] witnesses are informing on their associates rather than helping a government agency uncover a diabolical conspiracy aimed at the freedom of all of us [...].<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996) pp. 263-4.

<sup>52</sup> Roy M. Brewer, ‘The Truth about the “Blacklist”: an answer to communist propoganda which tries to prove that red is black,’ in *Thirty Years of Treason*, pp. 195-206, (p. 197 and p. 201.)

The campaign against ‘the heretic within’ is what ties the different climates that these quotations describe together into a continuum. The difference between American-“Irishness” and other kinds of “hyphenated” identities, in the context of this thesis, is that the Irish in America have long been part of the fabric of the socio-political establishment there. Joseph R. McCarthy, HUAC’s great demagogue, was himself a Roman Catholic and second-generation American-Irishman. Although I am always cautious not uncritically or exclusively to equate Catholicism with “Irishness,” so too are all three second-generation American-Irish playwrights whose work this thesis examines.

And there are certainly elements binding the climates of HUAC’s America and twentieth-century Ireland together, in that there are echoes of the climate of the latter in the former. In particular, I argue in the thesis to follow that the HUAC hearings had elements not just of ritual, as Bentley and others have long since noted, but of specifically Catholic rituals of confession, self-abasement, and atonement. For instance, the imperative that a witness must confess their own sins, and also name others whose souls needed to be saved, in order to prove their repentance and be purged of the taint of communism, has distinctly Catholic overtones. Even the layout of the Committee rooms cast the witness in a position of abject supplication, stranded on his own in the middle of the room, with his interrogators above him, like judges or priests. There was much sermonising by panel members; there was a fair amount by witnesses too, both “friendly” and “unfriendly.” Some witnesses to HUAC came to be cast in the role of martyrs to various causes or to the Constitution as was seen, for instance, in the convictions and imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten in 1947.

This thesis evaluates the extent to which the search for ‘the heretic within’ which was well underway by the 1920s in Ireland, according to Kiberd, had its mirror



image in the investigations of HUAC in America by the 1930s. Catholicism, like all religions, is as much a cultural and political way of framing the world as it is a spiritual one, which means that whether or not the playwrights under consideration practised their religion is irrelevant. It is the subtle cultural atmosphere of a Catholic background which I will note in their plays; certain underpinning rhythms of the cultural apparatus of Catholicism.

The pervasive atmosphere of HUAC's America is shown herein to be carrying some of the subtly, indirectly allegorical elements of "Irishness," and in particular Catholic "Irishness." Therefore, my investigation serves to establish the extent to which the form and content of dramatic works produced by second-generation American-Irish playwrights of the HUAC era was influenced by the climate that prevailed. In turn, this puts me in a position to comment on this intriguing assertion from McCarthy's sympathetic biographer Richard Rovere:

There were Roman Catholics, particularly those of Irish descent, who saw in this aggressive Hibernian the flaming avenger of their own humiliations of the past and who could not believe that the criticism he provoked was based on anything but hatred of his Church and his name.<sup>53</sup>

What is fascinating about this observation is that it may serve to mark the psychological point at which "Americanness" and a certain kind of "Irishness" – comparably manufactured and performed – came to be conflated, which is of direct relevance to the concerns of this thesis. The second-generation American-Irish playwrights whose work is considered herein would therefore be rejecting not only the oppressive and censorious climate of HUAC, but would be resisting something of their own cultural and political background too. The alternative communities they therefore stage in their plays, as a result, could come to be viewed as a critically important, albeit subtle, *political* reaction

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<sup>53</sup> Richard H. Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (London: Methuen, 1959), p. 23.

against McCarthyism too. Moreover, this resistance would cast the playwrights and their work in a tradition with “American” overtones, of fierce individualism and a reluctance to be co-opted to a cause which their sense of individualism found unappealing. I will weigh the possibility that this is the actual intervention my thesis makes in the critical terrain in the Conclusion.

### **“Americanness” and Anti-Communism**

Next, having drawn attention as an aside to some of the specifically “Irish” aspects of HUAC, this Introduction turns back towards HUAC’s definitions of “Americanness,” so central to understanding the committee’s search for “un-American” behaviour. The dominant story of “Americanness,” so deeply entrenched in its own economic market, sees this market as organic, natural, permanent, perfect and self-recovering. Anyone, so one of the predominant versions of the American Dream says, can climb to the very top of the mountain through hard work and dedication. The only obstacle to one achieving greatness and recognition is the self-imposed one of one’s ambitions. The system cannot and does not fail; one can only fail the system, meaning if one fails to become a successful, well-respected self-made millionaire, then it is one’s individual, personal responsibility that they have so failed. ‘Agency,’ as Cullen confirms, ‘[...] lies at the very core of the American Dream, the bedrock premise on which all else depends.’<sup>54</sup>

The works of all three playwrights under consideration strive to adhere to this ‘bedrock premise.’ They stage characters whose belief is that it is their free choice to step outside economic success and social or political esteem, rather than that they live in the context of a system where there is not a place for them. This misguided faith in

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<sup>54</sup> Cullen, *The American Dream*, p. 10.

“manifest destiny,” another shorthand term for the American Dream, which denotes the certainty that all misfortunes and exclusions are actually contributing to leading one towards one’s individually-conceived and self-fulfilled success and esteem, can for instance be seen in *The Iceman Cometh*’s Harry Hope. Hope does not leave his bar for twenty years, and yet he daily claims that he could at any time regain the political influence he had once wielded. This means that he feels himself voluntarily to be excluding himself from the wider ‘imagined community,’ rather than not being permitted a place in it *by* that community. This assumed agency is intractably bound up with the individualistic self-interest that pervades capitalist American society, and which has indirectly contributed to structuring the themes and forms of the plays herein considered. It is a performative state, because it pre-emptively exacts rejection by the community by loudly and publicly attesting that acceptance is unwanted anyway. In the twentieth century, ‘Americans,’ as Bentley astutely observed, ‘saw capitalism as everlasting like its God, and Socialism as a totally uncalled-for idea, cranky, perverse, alien, in a word – in *the* word – *un-American*.’<sup>55</sup> Communism and its advocates therefore became, under HUAC’s auspices, the nightmarish Other, onto which could be projected all the uncertainties, fears, and doubts about the validity and the dangers of dreaming of a better life under capitalism. Harry Hope, and others in these plays, assert their self-constructed “Americanness,” as they see it, by casting themselves *as* Others before being cast out *by* others.

In Marxist terms, the trouble with binding the story of capitalism up with the story of how to become successful and esteemed is that it is impossible in practical terms for capitalism to serve equally the needs and dreams of all. In order for capitalist doctrines to prevail, it is fundamentally necessary for the majority to contribute their

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<sup>55</sup> Bentley, ‘Afterword’, in *Thirty Years of Treason*, p. 935.

surplus labour to the economy for less than it is worth, and in the service of others who own the means of production, in order to enrich the few and to entrap the many in a cycle of earning to spend without progressing. Thus it is that an ideology, capitalism, that excludes more than it includes, came to be part of the national identity of Americans – meaning that the dominant myths of this nation are ingrained with a system that will exclude some in order to privilege others, despite telling a tale about inclusivity and opportunity for all. Again, Cullen is a useful observer of this paradox; he says:

the Dream also served as a powerful vehicle for blaming those who did not succeed and for distracting those who might otherwise have sought structural changes by seducing them into thinking they weren't really necessary.<sup>56</sup>

Robert Griffith concurs that “Americanness” as Cullen has described it, and to which definition I broadly adhere, in its twentieth century lived experience, produced McCarthyism and its aftermath *from* its existent political atmosphere, calling the era:

a natural expression of America's political culture and a logical though extreme product of its political machinery. What came to be called “McCarthyism” was grounded in a set of attitudes, assumptions and judgments with deep roots in American history.<sup>57</sup>

This demonstrates the political inflections of national identity, because it conflates the political and social phenomenon that came to be known as McCarthyism with what Griffiths describes as ‘a set of attitudes’ much older and more essential to American national identity than merely a short-lived political storm. It also makes the important point, relevant to this thesis, that the search for “un-American” behaviour had to be already ingrained in the ‘imagined’ national consciousness as the necessary mirror in which “Americanness” could come to be defined. This means that HUAC rather

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<sup>56</sup> Cullen, *The American Dream*, p. 101.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1970), p. 30.

crystallised and refracted concerns which were already around, as opposed to inventing an enemy against which the national consciousness could solidify in opposition. This is significant because it means that in a *positive* sense, against Brogan's claim that the era 'did incalculable damage and no good,' the work of HUAC did succeed in one way.<sup>58</sup> It interpellated many individuals of many different backgrounds and cultures, for better or worse, into one "American" nation, and gave them an homogenising cry which they could recognise: anti-communism.

However, the homogenising effects of the hardening of anti-communist fervour under HUAC can be argued to have had another, perhaps unforeseen effect on communities. Because it is antithetical to individualistic capitalist success to be surrounded by many others in a similar position, my further contention in this thesis is that alternative, non-mainstream community formations are the inevitable side-effect of American individualism, and that the HUAC investigations stimulated these communities too. Therefore, the dramatic art of the period moots that those whom various versions of the American Dream failed or forsook sought each other out, and imagined new versions of "Americanness" together. Curiously, then, HUAC was responsible for forging at least two "American" communities: one in favour of its work, and one against.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Brogan, *Longman History of the United States of America*, p. 595.

<sup>59</sup> There is a wealth of anecdotal evidence in the literature to bolster a claim such as this. The long-blacklisted communist writer Walter Bernstein has spoken of 'the constant support of friends,' and how he came to class himself as being at one with 'the ostracized others.' (p.x) Ceplair and Englund describe in detail the many cases of blacklisted artists who had left America during the HUAC years forging alternative communities of "exiles" abroad, and also demonstrate plainly how alternative 'imagined' communities of those carrying the stigma of having been subpoenaed existed within America too, as for instance when they observe that the 'shared burdens and pressures bound together the blacklisted as they went their separate ways.' (p.400) Conversely, on the other side of the for/against HUAC divide, David Caute castigates the uncertainty of some American citizens towards what might constitute "Americanness," alleging that HUAC's work was successful in binding people sympathetic to HUAC together into communities only because there was no homogenous national identity to which one could adhere that pre-existed HUAC's investigations: '[O]ne of the appeals of McCarthyism was that it offered

## **Outsiders in the Plays**

The close literary analysis which comprises the three chapters to follow illuminates the extent to which the characters in the plays under scrutiny have managed to find a place in one or the other of these two nascent “national” communities. However, this analysis also shows that the dramatic representation of those who dreamed of belonging, whether or not they achieved it, makes it possible to infer the fate of those who did not fit – communists, fellow travellers, and others convicted of “un-American” activity. Onstage, the insecurity ensuing from the characters’ exclusion, of which they are not always themselves aware, pervades the plays’ dramatic form. Each character under examination makes attempts, in different ways and for different reasons, to reach out to their onstage “audience” – to tell their stories, and to secure their threatened identity through this attempt to connect. Whether or not these attempts at connection are successful – on the whole, they are not – the motivation of the characters is both to be heard and to be understood by their “audience,” without which connection, they are rendered lonely. This loneliness, as it is depicted in the small community groupings that the playwrights stage in their work, is the thematic link holding together all three of them on a continuum which I am starting to identify: one of indirect allegorical critique of the activities of HUAC.

## **The Playwrights**

Next, this Introduction turns in detail to the three playwrights whose work is examined in the thesis to follow. Because I am looking closely at the era spanning the moment of production of the texts in hand, the plays under scrutiny together represent a

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every American, however precarious his ancestry, the chance of being taken for a good American, simply by demonstrating a gut hatred for Commies.’ (p.21) Much evidence of this nature is necessarily anecdotal because loyalty and belonging are subjective and amorphous states; therefore, it is taken largely from memoirs, interviews and personal recollections.

wide swath of twentieth-century Irish America, and they indicate the existence of a wider trend of indirect allegory as it appears in the form and content of twentieth-century American theatre. The plays share thematic preoccupations, and often they are formally restricted, set within the family home. The three playwrights under consideration are connected doubly, by their ancestral Irish heritage and by their dominant themes. So, their work taken collectively reveals more than studying each playwright in isolation would do, because when examined chronologically, it is possible to start to trace a trajectory of specifically second-generation American-Irish playwriting which manifests symptoms of the effects of HUAC's work, albeit often subtly and indirectly.

Eugene O'Neill, the playwright under consideration in Chapter 1 of this thesis, is the most critically acclaimed of the three, and I engage with his four late plays: *The Iceman Cometh* (1940); *Hughie* (1959); *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956); and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1945). As these dates show, only the late plays of O'Neill are pertinent to my inquiry into the effects of the work of HUAC, because the committee was not founded until 1938 and I argue that its effects on content and dramatic form were cumulative, mounting and intensifying as the era progressed.<sup>60</sup> This is also why I have structured the thesis in order to examine my three playwrights chronologically, from early – O'Neill – through Donleavy, and to the most contemporary playwright under consideration, Gilroy.

When writing on O'Neill in the twenty-first century, the question that presents itself no longer concerns whether there is anything of substantive academic merit to be

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<sup>60</sup> I also hold that the ideology underpinning HUAC's founding principles predates the formation of the Dies Committee in 1938, and is rooted in a set of attitudes and assumptions which are an older part of the cultural and political fabric of America. This means that it is likely that O'Neill's earlier plays would, under close examination, bear the unconscious traces of the same concerns; such a study, however, would constitute a different (and much longer) thesis.

found in examining his works once again. Rather, the question turns on itself: one wonders why the academy is unable to let go of its obsession with him, and the Conclusion to this thesis will reflect on his towering influence over the American-Irish stage. For instance, as recently as March 2012, *The Guardian* asserted plainly, ‘His [O’Neill’s] significance can hardly be overstated,’ and described the commonly-held belief that *Long Day’s Journey* is ‘the pinnacle of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American theatre.’<sup>61</sup> O’Neill’s plays are traditionally separated by literary critics into three groups, of his early, middle, and late periods – the three-volume Library of America edition of his *Complete Plays*, for instance, is indicative of this trend. Limitations of space prevent my looking at two works which nominally count as late plays, and there are other reasons for their omission too. *More Stately Mansions* (1988) is unfinished, meaning that any conjecture as to the moral and political thrust of it as a finished product would be, at best, speculative. *A Touch of the Poet* (1946), although not released until it would fall into the late-play canon, is actually the lone surviving text from O’Neill’s eleven-play epic cycle *A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed* – and is therefore a middle play, disqualifying it from selection according to my rationale of chronology. I have chosen to found this thesis in close analysis of the late plays of O’Neill because the other two playwrights with whose work I contend have received almost no critical attention. It is important to find a way into analysing Donleavy’s and Gilroy’s work, and the decision to situate their plays on a continuum that starts with O’Neill, comparing their themes and dramatic form with his, is that way.

J.P. Donleavy is better-known for his novels than his plays, all four of which latter texts are based on his full-length books; Chapter 2 of this thesis addresses his first two texts for the theatre, *The Ginger Man* (1959) and *Fairy Tales of New York* (1960).

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<sup>61</sup> Sarah Churchill, ‘Pain and Passion’, *The Guardian*, Review section, 31 March 2012, p. 16.



There is little that can be said for the later two texts, *A Singular Man* (1964) and *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S* (1972), which cannot be abundantly evidenced by close reading of his first two theatrical efforts: he is a playwright of consistent and narrow preoccupations. His work represents the “middle period” of my thesis; analysis of his first two plays links up the early HUAC era with the late- and post-HUAC climate. *The Ginger Man*, released as it was in 1959, just after the fall from grace of Joseph McCarthy and at the height of HUAC’s notoriety, is a challenging text filled with contentious and offensive scenes. Donleavy quickly came to understand that his “home” nation would not welcome his work when he returned from Ireland to stage it.

Frank D. Gilroy has been completely overlooked by several significant scholars of twentieth-century American drama, including – but not limited to – C.W.E. Bigsby. Part of the intervention this thesis makes into the critical terrain of American-Irish playwriting is to assert that he has been overlooked wrongly. Chapter 3 closely examines three of Gilroy’s full-length works, *Who’ll Save the Plowboy?* (1962), *The Subject was Roses* (1964), and *Any Given Day* (1993), the last of which is a prequel to *Roses*. Gilroy’s work fits well with the other two playwrights discussed above. He deploys naturalism as his chosen form, as O’Neill and Donleavy tend to, which is part of what yokes these three playwrights’ output together and justifies looking at them on a continuum. Thematically, he engages with the stifling politics, the cyclical failures to hear and to understand one’s family members, which seem to characterise the second-generation American-Irish family experience, as depicted by all three playwrights. His work completes the trajectory that I start to plot in this thesis, following a strand of specifically second-generation, American-Irish playwriting which manifests the subtle signs of having been touched by the effects of the work of HUAC.

### **“Americanness,” “Irishness” and the Playwrights**

I have drawn particular attention to the playwrights' status as second-generation American-Irish citizens in my introduction of them above, because assessing the position of "hyphenated" Americans in relation to HUAC, and what was at stake in questions of loyalty and belonging, will comprise part of my discussion of performative identity in the thesis. Cullen astutely observes, 'The saga of what might be called the "Dream of the Immigrant" – a subset of the Dream of Upward Mobility – has long been marked by ambivalence and despair.'<sup>62</sup> That immigrants have their own Dream, or Dreams, is in itself symbolic of the ways in which America is still riven with inequality and exclusion, despite the national myths that proclaim to the contrary that 'All men are created equal.'<sup>63</sup> This, coupled with the self-elected outsider-status of the theatrical artist which I have observed above, makes issues of community, loyalty and belonging of particular pertinence to the three playwrights under consideration. Their second-generation *and* immigrant status, taken together, would seem doubly to exclude them from the world in which they were living and working. This exclusion is critically assessed below in terms of how it shows itself in the form and content of their work in the light of the search for, and nostalgia towards, notions of "home" which characterises diasporic exile – and the common rejection of this yearning by second-generation immigrants.

The importance of notions of home and belonging to Irish immigrant Americans was best observed by Kerby Miller, the great historian of the mass movement of Irish people to America. He argues that 'the Irish made no easy accommodation to the

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<sup>62</sup> Cullen, *The American Dream*, p. 188.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Jefferson, 'The Declaration of Independence (1776): A Transcription,' <[www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html)> [accessed 6 September 2011] (para. 2 of 6)

changing conditions that buffeted them both at home and in North America.’<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, of the complicated implications of diasporic, multiple identities, he says:

both the exile motif and its underlying causes led Irish immigrants to interpret experience and adapt to American life in ways that were often alienating and sometimes dysfunctional, albeit traditional, expedient, and conducive to the survival of Irish national identity and the success of Irish-American nationalism.<sup>65</sup>

Alienation, dysfunction, preoccupation with the past and tradition, assertion of national identity in the teeth of its expediency: Miller is writing about nineteenth-century immigrants, but he could be summarising the atmosphere of the world surrounding the plays with which this thesis contends. This is why the “Irishness” that these three playwrights mobilise is worthy of evaluation, alongside their attempts to render “Americanness.” Both ‘imagined communities’ are relevant to investigating the effects of the climate of HUAC’s America on the playwrights’ work, because both are to do with community identification and the requisite search for belonging that structures the plays with which I engage. By aligning themselves, howsoever unconsciously, with “Irishness,” O’Neill, Donleavy, and Gilroy all stake a claim of filial and ancestral belonging to this one area of American national identity. However, my thesis also shows that such identification is a performed, constructed fiction, just as “Americanness” under HUAC is; or, as Ien Ang so clearly states the matter, ‘To a certain extent then, any identity is always mistaken.’<sup>66</sup>

In short, what this whole investigation serves to do is to stage my assertion that all the plays under consideration can be read, to a greater or lesser extent, as indirect allegories of the climate of HUAC’s America. They have been indirectly affected and

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<sup>64</sup> Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. viii.

permeated by the atmosphere surrounding their moment of production, but they are not deliberately and bluntly reflective in the manner of, for instance, agit-prop. It is my assertion that storytelling, whether fictionalised or disguised as a merely personal, autobiographical tale, became increasingly dangerous as the HUAC era progressed. It will therefore seem, as my analysis unfolds across the three chapters of this thesis, that the playwrights themselves are not fully aware of how much their work is allegorical. It is rather that the political climate has come subtly to contribute to the formation of an “American” national character and identity – or, rather, two: either in line with McCarthyism and its aftermath, or in opposition to it. In this thesis, I show that the stage is particularly suitable to examine for evidence to bolster these assertions, as it deals in pervasive atmospheres, non- or extra-verbal communication, and silence. This is in a wider social context in which bald, publicly-performed statements of one’s ideological position could threaten one’s standing: onstage community formation, it could be said, mirrors the pressures HUAC brought to bear on society, by staging conflictive family loyalties and allegiances in miniature. It may even be that the work of HUAC, ironically enough, indirectly served to spur on the writers it intended to suppress and censor, forcing them – quite possibly without them being fully aware of it – to deploy ever more subtle and nuanced metaphorical representations onstage. This subconscious attempt to transcend the atmosphere of the time, which Bernstein has evocatively described as ‘smelly and poisonous,’ facilitates my reading of the plays to follow as having been coloured, shaped and influenced by the climate of the time, without ever explicitly challenging the status quo.<sup>67</sup> The conclusion of this thesis will reflect on this hypothesis.

By engaging in extensive, close literary analysis of the plays I have selected, my thesis demonstrates that the fields of community loyalty and social responsibility probed

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<sup>67</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), p. 164.

by HUAC, and thereby defined in its terms, are to be found echoing in the second-generation American-Irish playwriting produced both during and after the committee's thirty-year tenure. I evaluate the playwrights' depiction of storytelling, and their critical deployment of national and ethnic stereotypes, with particular reference to "Irishness," in order to assess the causes and effects of the onstage portrayal of them. I argue that loneliness is the key, defining theme in the works of O'Neill, Donleavy and Gilroy, and use the exemplification of this argument to infer the beginnings of identifying a tradition of second-generation American-Irish playwriting of the McCarthy era and after, with loneliness yoking disparate plays together thematically. The reason that works for the stage were disproportionately affected by the activities of HUAC, and were therefore disproportionately concerned to depict the causes and effects of loneliness, is due to the twin roles of theatre at its best. These roles are to reflect, and to help to create, communities, and the identities of those who comprise them.

The thesis is split into three chapters. The first is entitled 'All the Lonely People: The Late Plays of Eugene O'Neill in the Early HUAC Years' and closely reads *The Iceman Cometh*, *Hughie*, *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The second chapter, 'Singular People: The Plays of J.P. Donleavy in the Mid-HUAC Years,' contains detailed literary analyses of the dramatic adaptations of Donleavy's novels *The Ginger Man* and *Fairy Tales of New York* – the first such studies to be offered to the critical field. The third and final chapter is entitled 'Saints, Sinners and Symbols: The Plays of Frank D. Gilroy in the Late- and Post-HUAC Years.' It completes the thematic and formal trajectory which this thesis traces between the dramatic works of the second-generation American-Irish stage during the HUAC era by addressing itself to Frank D. Gilroy's *Any Given Day*, *The Subject Was Roses* and

*Who'll Save the Plowboy?*. As with Donleavy, no such contribution has elsewhere been made to the Theatre Studies discipline.

I argue strongly in the thesis to follow that HUAC's influence, which was at the time and afterwards seen as wholly negative by all but the most recalcitrant "friendly" witnesses, may have had the paradoxically positive effect of stimulating playwrights to greater literary achievements, in the hope of resisting the reductive imposition of HUAC's definitions of identity and loyalty. One of the earliest and most famous examples of the Committee's tendency to fear and to doubt the motives of theatrical practitioners – and the position of ignorance from which its representatives interrogated the theatre's representatives – is an exchange between Hallie Flanagan, formerly the director of the Federal Theater Project, and Senator Joe Starnes. Quoting an article in which she mentioned the FTP's 'Marlowesque madness,' Starnes asked Flanagan, 'You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?'<sup>68</sup> This snapshot serves as an example of the Committee's conviction that theatre is an innately subversive art form which can critique dominant social and economic mores, and therefore instigate the kind of critical reflection in its audience that sows the seeds of change. This is an assumption that I share with the Committee, which is why I feel justified in commenting within the thesis upon the wider social implications of the microcosmic community groupings portrayed in my chosen plays.

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<sup>68</sup> 'Hallie Flanagan,' in *Thirty Years of Treason*, pp. 6-47, (p. 25.)

Loneliness, Storytelling and Community in Performance: The Climate of the House Un-American Activities Committee's America in Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill, J.P.

Donleavy and Frank D. Gilroy

**All the Lonely People:**

**The late plays of Eugene O'Neill in the early HUAC years**

**Introduction**

In order to commence my investigation into the impact of the work of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on the form and content of second-generation American-Irish drama, I will start with a close literary analysis of the late plays of a giant of the American-Irish stage: Eugene O'Neill. This chapter progresses through examinations of *The Iceman Cometh* (1940), *Hughie* (1959), *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1945). It will reflect within each section on the spectacular and performative elements of the HUAC proceedings as they are outlined herein, and the effects of the form and content of the hearings on the form and content of the community groupings that the plays under consideration stage. The role of storytelling in the formation of these onstage communities is also weighed. *The Iceman Cometh* was released less than two years after the Dies Committee, the earliest incarnation of HUAC, first took the stage in 1938. I will argue that loneliness and the dangers of trying to connect with one's putative community – often, in O'Neill, a semi-forced and awkward grouping – are thematic echoes that figure in these plays as indirect allegorical critiques of the climate in which they were written.

**Loneliness**

This section focuses on loneliness and its thematic significance to understanding some of the late plays of Eugene O'Neill. As a theme, loneliness may pertain to social stigmatisation, existential isolation, or failures in communication between people and within communities and families. It 'presses men together in an iron band of terror,' in the terms of Hannah Arendt, and thereby has the effect of causing those that are artificially grouped thus to mistrust and doubt one another. After Arendt, I will show that in the works of O'Neill, this 'iron band' does come to forge a community of sorts, but rarely in a positive sense: rather, its members are only defined by what they are not, bound together by fear of others and oppressed by their failure to perform themselves to a standard that achieves acceptance and understanding.

Loneliness is of particular relevance thematically when considering notions of Irish diasporic exile, and I will touch on some traits of "Irishness" as they are portrayed in these plays, reflecting on the performative elements of national identity as they are seen, to varying degrees, in O'Neill's late works. I am seeking to start to identify a specifically second-generation Irish strain of American drama, and will show that loneliness is a recurrent motif, the portrayal of which can be used to trace its assertion and development, and thereby to comment on some of the effects upon theatrical art of the early HUAC prosecutions.

Loneliness is the single unifying principle of the four key texts from O'Neill's late period. These texts, when taken together, constitute a kind of alternative "national biography" of America's outsiders. They provide a commentary on how communities form and why people need each other: as an audience for each other's stories; as validation of each person's identity, in the face of the overt attempts artificially to homogenise the American national consciousness which characterised HUAC's increasingly active anti-communism. This contribution is actually what makes O'Neill



so consistently important to the American stage, and is evidence not of his nihilism, but of a message of hope for the future of American society.<sup>69</sup> In his late plays, we see that if an audience for one's stories can be found, there is hope that loneliness will not consume one, but instead that it is possible to find a way to reach out thereby, to connect – and therefore to exist. There is also, however, a warning in much of O'Neill's late work: associating with people can be dangerous and can render one vulnerable. For O'Neill, loneliness is not a singularly or simply negative phenomenon. There are times at which separation from others can be seen as a safe haven, or rather that the impossibility of physically escaping the claustrophobic onstage situation causes one to yearn for solitude for the characters, however much they may fear it. Now, I will begin to make a case to support these assertions by analysing the earliest of the late plays to be staged, *The Iceman Cometh* (1940). What will yoke together my twin thematic concerns of loneliness and community in all the analysis to follow is the foundational principle that the investigations and prosecutions of the House Un-American Activities Committee were, in essence and in effect, performance-obsessed and driven by external appearances.<sup>70</sup>

### ***The Iceman Cometh* and Loneliness**

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<sup>69</sup> It is not uncommon in O'Neill Studies to find scholars who are so affected by the grief and quiet horror in which O'Neill's plays are steeped as to find them devoid of any hope at all. See, for instance, Louis Broussard: 'The philosophy to be drawn from [O'Neill's] literary testimony is essentially a pessimistic one, and of the darkest kind, with death the only certainty, the only peace, and suicide the only logic.' (*American Drama: Contemporary Allegory from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 38).

<sup>70</sup> That HUAC was an expressly performance-obsessed enterprise, and that its representatives disproportionately targeted members of arts communities, is a well-established idea. From the work of the great HUAC scholar Eric Bentley and onwards through later HUAC commentators like Ceplair and Englund, David Cate, Brenda Murphy and Victor Navasky, this fact is a starting-point of analysing HUAC's activities. My own argument builds on these commentators' by reading second-generation American-Irish theatre in particular as being coloured by HUAC's investigations, and analysing subtle references to the climate which intended to theatricalise anti-communism in this specific branch of the actual theatre itself.

*Iceman* is a play about loneliness. Each character prefers to be in Harry Hope's saloon, asleep or awake, drunk or sober, with money or without it, than upstairs in their rented room. Each seems to belong, both to the bar and to each other, albeit in varying degrees and ways; it is made abundantly clear that none of the inhabitants belongs anywhere else in the world. The opening stage directions tell us that the only figure who sits and sleeps alone, Willie Oban, is being wracked by a terrible nightmare, '*shaking in his sleep like an old dog.*'<sup>71</sup> For Harry Hope's regulars, nothing is more threatening than being isolated, even while unconscious – without companionship, they have nothing, and struggle to define and believe in themselves. From their companions, above all things else, the characters seek an understanding and sympathetic audience to the stories that make up their lives. Richard Kearney puts his case for the central importance of storytelling to the human psyche succinctly: 'Every act of storytelling involves someone (a teller) telling something (a story) to someone (a listener) about something (a real or imaginary world).'<sup>72</sup> Kearney argues that what makes a story is not only the teller and the tale, but the audience that hears it. In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill demonstrates his deep grasp of the need to be heard as well as the need to speak; alone, no character can see themselves clearly or feel that they belong. An audience completes the story by bearing witness to the identity of the characters, and thereby validating them.

### **Loneliness and Community**

A good early example of the awareness of the importance of an audience for O'Neill's characters is to be seen in Larry and Rocky's opening exchange. Rocky calls Larry 'De old anarchist wise guy,' and Larry responds, 'I saw men didn't want to be

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<sup>71</sup> Eugene O'Neill, '*The Iceman Cometh*,' in *O'Neill: Complete Plays 1932 – 1943*, ed. by Travis Bogard (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988) pp. 561 – 711, I, (p. 572.)

<sup>72</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London and New York: Routledge; Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), Thinking in Action Series, p. 150.

saved from themselves, [...] I took a seat in the grandstand of philosophical detachment.<sup>73</sup> Immediately, he then ‘reaches over and shakes Hugo’s shoulder,’ saying, ‘Ain’t I telling him the truth, Comrade Hugo?’<sup>74</sup> Larry, despite his professed detachment, needs an audience to bear witness to his narration of a ‘real or imaginary world,’ in Kearney’s phrase, and he needs the glances from Rocky which ‘kiddingly,’ ‘flatteringly’ attend to him, too. His self-constructed life-story will not stand up without the support of others around him, and their positive regard goes some way towards alleviating his loneliness.

In fact, there is overall a great deal of love and warmth shared between various characters throughout *The Iceman Cometh*, of which the exchange between Rocky and Larry is but one example. Apologies are ‘sincere’ and ‘eagerly accepted’; compliments, even when sardonic as Larry’s often are, stem from a deep-rooted grasp of the recipient’s outlook and background.<sup>75</sup> Prior to Hickey’s arrival, pity, kindness, consideration, sympathy and understanding are everywhere in the stage directions that describe how each character handles the stories of each other’s lives.

Of many examples, observe the behaviour of Jimmy Tomorrow when Wetjoen and Lewis are exchanging their old stories about fighting on opposite sides in the Boer War. The way he engages with the two old soldiers shows the ways in which the regulars’ stories intertwine, and highlights the tolerance they regularly extend towards each other. Jimmy sits between the two men, ‘blinks benignly from one to the other with

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<sup>73</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 570.

<sup>74</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 570.

<sup>75</sup> There are dozens of examples of the overall impression of the eagerness to forgive in *Iceman*. Act II probably contains the most frequent examples of genuine vindictiveness and nastiness – induced by Hickey’s steps towards disabusing the “bums” of their pipe dreams – which, when taken back, are unconditionally cast aside. Here is just one example, after Hope has reduced the “street walkers” to tears at his birthday party: ‘(He comes forward to the two girls, with Jimmy and Hickey following him, and pats them clumsily.) Bejees, I like you broads. You know I was only kidding. (Instantly they forgive him and smile affectionately.)’ *The Iceman Cometh*, II, p. 642.

*a gentle drunken smile,*’ and then ‘*quotes with great sentiment*’ a poem which is part of his own, endlessly retold story of being a wartime correspondent.<sup>76</sup> Larry needles Jimmy for his sentimentality, and yet there is no offence meant, nor any taken – Jimmy merely responds to a mild insult with a compliment, ‘No, Larry, you can’t deceive me. You pretend a bitter, cynic philosophy, but in your heart you are the kindest man among us.’<sup>77</sup> In this exchange, as in countless others in Act I of *Iceman*, gentleness pervades, despite the differences in colour, nationality, background, aspirations, and standards of hygiene of the inhabitants of the bar. Even violence leads quickly to reconciliation and apology, with no character ever doing serious physical damage to any other. To the best level it is possible to construct one from such a wide cast of disparate figures, the regulars of Harry Hope’s saloon have formed a community, or as Larry calls it, ‘our whole family circle.’<sup>78</sup>

This outward show of solidarity between those of disparate ethnic, political and religious backgrounds gives the lie to those critics who cast O’Neill as a mere nihilistic chronicler of human social decay and malaise. On the contrary, his formal employment of repetitious stories and self-narrations demonstrates that he is both alert to the need for performance and highly sensitive to the *power* of such performances, both to construct and to destroy the individual consciousness. C.W.E. Bigsby is one of the few scholars of O’Neill who concurs; he asserts that in O’Neill’s late plays, ‘his characters are all self-conscious performers seeking protection in the artifice of theatre, playing roles which will deflect the pain of the real.’<sup>79</sup> If there is an argument that the characters onstage in *Iceman* are to some extent representative “types,” this is not, therefore,

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<sup>76</sup>*The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 589.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 589.

<sup>78</sup>*The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 585.

<sup>79</sup>C.W.E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 20.

formal and dramatic laziness on the part of the playwright. Rather, these types make an astute commentary on the externalisation of identity, of the need to perform oneself loudly and openly to avoid suspicion in HUAC's America, the climate of which was just taking root when *Iceman* was written. The desire to carve a place to belong and to be safe is exemplified by Hope's regulars. They have succeeded in this, without addressing their lack of belonging to the dominant socio-political narratives of the play's moment of production. This community of "bums" are outsiders together, whether willingly or reluctantly, and as Bigsby says, their outsiderism is intended to 'deflect the pain of the real.' In the case of these characters, the 'real' of which Bigsby speaks is a wider world in which, as Ceplair and Englund have attested, '[t]he compliance of the American press in sensationalizing "leaks" by the Dies Committee members and staff led to a trial-and-verdict-by-newspaper-headline even before the "inquiry" commenced.'<sup>80</sup> Therefore, this was already a world in which, as Ceplair and Englund outline, hearsay, rumour, and misrepresented tales had the power to expose one to ostracisation and ridicule; a 'real' world in which, that is to say, there was no 'real' place for outsiders. This goes some way towards explaining why such outsiders as those whom O'Neill portrays in the late plays are so preoccupied with being both heard and, crucially, understood by their peers.

Next, I will seek to go beyond Bigsby's argument, in that for better or for worse – which is to say, in a positive way or a negative one – I will show that Hope's regulars are doing more than 'deflect[ing] the pain of the real.' They are attempting consciously to construct an alternative and separate community, howsoever unsuccessful and flawed. Their performance, as Goffman argues, is more than an attraction to 'the artifice of the theatre.' It stakes a claim to calling into being an *alternative 'real'* – a viable,

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<sup>80</sup> Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930-1960* (London: University of California, 1983), pp. 155-6.

non-mainstream micro-community. This claim to the authenticity of experience, and the possibility of connection, is an indirect allegorical response to the instigation of HUAC's activities under Chairman Martin Dies, because as Fredric Jameson argues, 'the political perspective [is] [...] the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.'<sup>81</sup> If this is the case, and it is my contention that it is, then a play, *Iceman*, written in 1939 and released in 1940, cannot but have been affected by the activities of HUAC, which commenced in 1938. This instigation occurred barely a year before this play was written, and it quickly became clear that HUAC's work would constitute a threat to connections and experiences not fitting its bill.

### **Storytelling**

Therefore, in *Iceman*, O'Neill dramatises both the imperative need, and the possible danger, of connecting and being known by others; that it is possible to be trapped or typecast in one's self-narration. The bar's inhabitants periodically – indeed, ritualistically – treat each other unkindly. They can be occasionally sincerely malicious, and are also regularly derisive and dismissive in a seemingly light-hearted way towards one another's stories. This is seen clearly, for instance, when Larry berates himself, 'Ah, be damned! Haven't I heard their visions a thousand times? Why should they get under my skin now?'<sup>82</sup> Even when inhabiting the one place which each character believes to be their sanctuary, by attempting to be close to their fellow inhabitants, each of the characters exposes themselves to potential ridicule by, and exclusion from, the group. This opens the possibility that they each suffer loneliness, even among the members of their erstwhile community.

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<sup>81</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Oxon: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 597.

It is in the knowledge of this danger that Larry's decision to inhabit the 'grandstand,' maintaining physical and emotional distance wherever possible, can be understood as a necessary attempt to protect himself from further alienation from the world in which he has chosen to live. Sub-textually, the precariousness of the community in Hope's bar and the ritual debasement of the characters by each other comments caustically on the dangers of telling one's story – however fabricated, flimsy, well-worn or pointless – to anyone at any time. It is therefore no coincidence that the Dies Committee, to whom scores of "friendly witnesses" publicly disgorged themselves of stories about their connections, their past, their fears and their associates, too many of which contained little grounding in historical fact, was barely two years old when this play was completed. Griffith observes,

It was the Dies Committee, for example, that popularized in the United States the technique of "guilt by association," through which a person is considered suspect because of the organizations to which he belongs or the friends whose company he keeps.<sup>83</sup>

In *Iceman*, Hope's "bums" cannot sustain themselves without finding an audience, sympathetic or otherwise, for their stories and dreams. They therefore risk the 'guilt by association' touched upon by Griffith; moreover, by ritually retreading the events of the past aloud, they also risk further alienation. Repetition of one's life-stories both keeps past associations and political affiliations present, and potentially implicates the hearers in the recriminations such stories could occasion.

This is not to say that *Iceman* is a bluntly didactic docu-drama-esque text that is determined to tear the mask from the publicly-acceptable face of HUAC or its forerunners. Rather, my argument hinges on the inevitable, and disproportionate, effect

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<sup>83</sup> Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1970), p. 32.

of the panel's investigations into the activities of arts practitioners. This effect is inevitable because from its earliest days, HUAC 'betrayed theatrical bias,' in the words of Eric Bentley, choosing deliberately to target figureheads of the American arts.<sup>84</sup> It is disproportionate because of this same 'bias.' Because theatre concerns itself with issues of the externalisation and performance of the self and of community ties, as a literary form it renders itself more vulnerable to ideological persecution in a climate such as that fostered by HUAC.

This analysis endeavours to demonstrate that for O'Neill, stories, be they pipe dreams, fantasies, or plain statements of bald fact, have a double-edged quality. They have the potential to deliver the safety and security of acceptance and identity; one can hide behind them by endlessly retelling and rereading them, to maintain ownership of them and to find comfort in the familiar. One can even attempt to call oneself and one's community into being through them, as the example of Larry's physical demand that Hugo attend to him emotionally in Act I of *Iceman* underlines. However, O'Neill also shows that by so doing – by making stories public, and by attaching one's identity and one's name to them – one becomes vulnerable to attack and vilification by the community and, by indirect allegorical inference, by those who commanded popular opinion upon what constitutes belonging: at this time, HUAC. Whether positive or negative, though, the ritual exchange, treading and rereading of each character's stories in *Iceman* does present O'Neill's audience with somewhat of a critique of American individualism. *Iceman* shows that no individual can exist in a vacuum; that everyone performs themselves, and therefore needs an audience to whom to perform in order to save themselves from loneliness and stigmatisation. Telling stories in public casts the

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<sup>84</sup> Eric Bentley, 'Foreword', in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-1968*, ed. by Eric Bentley (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Press, 2002), pp. xxv-xxx, (p. xxvii.)



speaker in the potentially dangerous position of being known, and therefore being tainted, in the climate of Martin Dies' ascendancy with which *Iceman* precisely coincides. Moreover, self-performance problematises some myths of self-reliance and independence of character, as such myths are bound up with ideas of America which have helped to shape the idea of the nation, and shows that howsoever dangerous it is to do so, self-performance in a vacuum is to be avoided.

### **Storytelling and Authenticity**

In Hope's bar, the most hurtful charge, guaranteed to grieve each member of the group, is the implication that the stories they tell themselves and each other about themselves – their past, their relationships, their reasons for drinking, their plans for the future – might not be true. It is essential that these stories are believed in order that the person telling them is at peace with themselves. This is the mistake Hickey makes on his arrival. He believes that his friends' peace can only be attained by facing the emptiness of their stories, and abandoning the pretence that they are relevant to the characters' present day situations. In their lonely lives, the inhabitants of Harry Hope's bar find company and solace in their 'pipe dreams,' and cannot function in their little society without them. Larry, at the beginning of Act I, makes this point explicit: 'To hell with the truth! As the history of the world proves, the truth has no bearing on anything. [...] The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober.'<sup>85</sup>

Therefore, Hickey errs because robbing Hope's regulars of their pipe dreams does not free them; their freedom, in actual fact, is *in their dreams* and the telling and retelling of them to their peers. Without such self-performance, they cannot attempt to

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<sup>85</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 569-570.

formulate their own, non-mainstream version of American individual self-determination. Travis Bogard, one of the later but no less enthusiastic O'Neill biographers, claims:

O'Neill came to see the need to dream as a universal one, shared by all men, a human drive, possibly man's most basic urge. Any dream sustains, whether it gives hope or hopeless hope or acts like hope [...]. The dream alone gives life.<sup>86</sup>

It is Hickey's attempt to impose his own dream, of a world without expectations and disappointments, a world devoid of aspirations and the demands they make, on the inhabitants of Hope's bar that precipitates the play's crisis. He imposes his dream, but he does not allow it to exist in dialogue with the dreams and hopes of his peers, and therefore, declaring himself 'bughouse,' he is carted off to the electric chair.<sup>87</sup> O'Neill's clear message is that Hickey's dream is flawed, and that without stories, and the audience to them which Kearney says storytelling presupposes, no community can be forged or maintained.

This means that *Iceman* is not actually about the failures of language and the formal limitations of realism, as several O'Neill scholars believe all the late plays to be. Matthew Wikander, for instance, refers to O'Neill's periodic slippage into 'output,' as he calls it, which he considers to be 'confused and banal, hysterical and over-blown, inadvertently ridiculous and condescending.'<sup>88</sup> Even Bigsby, in his characteristically gentle way, still has cause to call O'Neill's a 'rough talent.'<sup>89</sup> I disagree: O'Neill maintains total control over the dialogue and stage directions of all the late plays, and the inarticulacy and emotional incompleteness of the onstage characters is a deliberate

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<sup>86</sup> Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, revised edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 412.

<sup>87</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, IV, p. 699.

<sup>88</sup> Matthew Wikander, 'O'Neill and the Cult of Sincerity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, ed. by Michael Manheim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 217-235, p. 217.

<sup>89</sup> Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, p. 14.

formal device, not the result of the limitations of the playwright's abilities. *The Iceman Cometh*, in particular, is about how the language of narration, storytelling, invention and performance to an (onstage) "audience" can act as people's salvation, rather than their damnation. O'Neill does successful battle with the problem astutely identified by Margaret Loftus Ranald, of the difficulties of making 'an inarticulate character communicate ideas.'<sup>90</sup> Ranald was speaking of the much earlier play *The Hairy Ape* in this quotation, but it is clear that this problem pursued O'Neill throughout his playwriting career, and my analysis of *Iceman* builds on her work. Inarticulacy is nowhere more apparent as a technical problem to be overcome than in the late plays, wherein nearly all of the characters speak ceaselessly yet communicate only poorly. It is not O'Neill's limitations which are apparent in the seeming failures of language in plays like *Iceman*; it is the limitations of his characters' ability to speak their innermost thoughts, despite their compulsion to do just this.

Trying to tell the stories of their lives, whether fictional, embellished, true or downright silly, helps to ease the loneliness of the characters' ultimate existential isolation in *Iceman*. Their tales do more than excuse their endless drinking and inaction. Collectively, howsoever inarticulately expressed, they conjure up a community that accepts them, when mainstream American society, increasingly dominated by the climate engendered by HUAC, has excluded them. Each character has their "role" to play, and each is usually safe within it. The real truth of 'the lie of a pipe dream' is that by "dreaming" at all, the drinkers in Harry Hope's bar assert their "Americanness," although America's dominant ideology seems unable to offer a place for so many people of 'one-time' professions and lifestyle choices.<sup>91</sup> Hope's regulars forge an

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<sup>90</sup> Margaret Loftus Ranald, 'From Trial to Triumph (1913-1924): The Early Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, pp. 51-68, p. 63.

<sup>91</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 569.

alternative real by listening to, hearing, and understanding one another. This play therefore indirectly allegorises how communities form by dramatising them; it explores why people need each other, and what happens when social interactions are placed under external strain – as occurs in *Iceman* with the incursion of Hickey.

However, there are two sides to these considerations and in *Iceman*, a negative side to the indulgence of fantasy-based self-narration is also dramatised. For instance, we regularly see that Jimmy Tomorrow's peers allow various patently untrue chronicles about his past to run unchecked in the cyclical airings of life-stories and hardship. In this, his friends actually stymie, rather than support, the development of his identity, and the related claims to individual acceptance and belonging which such stories as his assert. Jimmy's predicament demonstrates how, by becoming trapped in one narrow version of their self-narrated identities, the regulars in Hope's bar talk themselves into inaction and stultification. Their tales render themselves and each other unable to break out of the bar and into the wider community of the America that exists outside the saloon doors.

This situation is an indirect allegory of the position of those witnesses subpoenaed to be cross-examined by HUAC in its heyday. An individual's briefest and most superficial flirting with anything of a very vaguely liberal bent – signing a petition, for instance, or attending a political meeting – could result in their being permanently painted into the role of an intellectual or political subversive. If painted thus, one became vulnerable to being un-American, and thereby being cast out from the dominant national narrative. Indeed, the very fact of the black-and-white, with-us-or-against-us “casting out” by HUAC of the so-called “un-Americans” was expressly designed to

perform the superiority of the dominant national narrative that they sought to enforce.<sup>92</sup>

Bentley noted in his Afterword to *Thirty Years of Treason*,

The public got the impression that informers just ran to Washington and talked to HUAC while America eavesdropped. In fact, HUAC carefully dramatized the act of informing for purposes of waging political warfare: to intimidate some, to encourage others, and so on. It was theatre or, if you like, ritual: a rite of purification that would also put the fear of God (HUAC's man in Heaven) into the as yet unpurified.<sup>93</sup>

Telling a story to anyone meant, in the climate in which *Iceman* was written and certainly in the climate in which it was first produced onstage in 1946, that one was imprisoned by this narrative version of him- or herself, and tied to it forever. O'Neill demonstrates this formally by the extensive use of repetition and reiteration in the stories of the characters in the late plays. The 'ritual' to which Bentley refers is the clearly performative nature of informing or not informing. He draws attention to the notion that national identity and loyalty had to be *publicly* demonstrated and reinforced under HUAC. When allied with testimonies to HUAC, stories are shown to have the power to make a case for inclusion or exclusion from the social and economic mainstream, meaning that they can have both positive and negative effects.

Nonetheless, O'Neill's observations about the climate in which he was writing, embedded as they are in the selected late plays which I am examining, are not nihilistic, negative chronicles of the pointlessness of action, change or self-improvement. On the contrary, my contention is that the "hopeless hope" with which he famously imbued his characters is one which allows for the audience of the plays – rather than the onstage

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<sup>92</sup> Many scholars of the HUAC era have noted that HUAC increased its circle of influence and threatened its detractors' reputations, moving to invest itself with validity and continue to attract healthy levels of Congressional funding, by the simple expedient of labelling any critic of any of its activities an "un-American," or worse, because even more vague, "communistic." On this, see – among others – the works of Ceplair and Englund, Victor Navasky, and David Caute.

<sup>93</sup> Bentley, 'Afterword,' in *Thirty Years of Treason*, pp. 933-953, (p. 947.)

audience for the stories of the characters – to recognise the significance of self-narration to the construction of identity. Then, they must carry this knowledge with them out into the world beyond the theatre walls, as his characters are unable to do: to own their stories, and to tell them strongly, in the full knowledge of their power and import. As Kearney puts it, ‘The story told by a self about itself tells about the action of the “who” in question: and the identity of this “who” is a narrative one.’<sup>94</sup> Telling a story in order to fix one’s narrative identity can only be a performative enterprise, and national identity, by indirect allegorical inference, therefore becomes a performance too.

### **Community and “Americanness”**

One story that underpins the themes and dramatic form of *The Iceman Cometh* is that of the “dream” of belonging, and particularly the complexities of each individual case of such self-assertion. It is notable, in terms of seeking to identify what might be dubbed an apparently “American” character or outlook within O’Neill’s work, that so many of the inhabitants of the bar are first- or second-generation immigrants. Rocky is Italian; Hugo is Hungarian; Hope is Irish, and so on. Above, I have posited that O’Neill’s works function as a kind of “national biography,” illustrating a different “story” of America than the mainstream messages of, for instance, Broadway. On the American mainstream theatre, Daniel J. Watermeier has commented:

By the [twentieth century’s] late Teens, professional theatre in America was centralized in New York. Indeed, “Broadway” and “American theatre” had become virtually synonymous. Broadway, in turn, was largely controlled by producers driven primarily by commercial, rather than artistic interests.<sup>95</sup>

*Iceman*, although completed by 1940, was not staged on Broadway until 1946, and closed after only 136 performances. At over four hours’ stage-time, it was considered

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<sup>94</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, p. 152.

<sup>95</sup> Watermeier, ‘O’Neill and the Theatre of his Time’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O’Neill*, pp. 33-50, p. 33.

unpalatable in both form and content, in that it was too long, rambling, repetitive and directionless to suit the two-dimensional commerciality then characterising American mainstream theatre. It was ten years until 1956, when the play was revived and finally became commercially successful in America.<sup>96</sup> In this instance, then, O’Neill’s message proved durable enough to challenge audiences, in the fullness of time, with a viable alternative to the increasingly asinine Broadway successes on offer in the mainstream American theatre. This bolsters my argument that he succeeded in crafting a non-mainstream counter-community of misfits and the excluded onstage and, by extension, in the theatre, and the indirect allegorical expression of non-belonging is the technique by which he did it – whether knowingly or not.

### **Notions of Home**

In terms of *Iceman*, therefore, it is not accidental that the characters virtually all call somewhere else ‘home,’ whether actually, as the Captain and the General do, or tacitly, as in Larry, whose stereotypically Irish features are described as resembling ‘*a pitying but weary old priest’s*.’<sup>97</sup> To bring the Old World into the New World, to assert their case for belonging despite, or even because of, their ancestral foreignness, the characters incessantly tell stories about ‘home,’ as it is figured in their stories by describing their parental and spousal relationships. Their experiences of living in America are framed by their awareness of their newness and precariousness within that ‘imagined community.’ This brings a kind of notion of a “home away from home,”

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<sup>96</sup> See William Hawley: ‘Three landmark productions help chart the critical response to Eugene O’Neill’s play [*The Iceman Cometh*], which was written in 1939, but was neither produced or published until 1946. In that year, critics were moderate in their praise for O’Neill’s first new Broadway production in twelve seasons, feeling in general that the Theatre Guild’s production surpassed the inherent quality of O’Neill’s script.’ (William Hawley, ‘*The Iceman Cometh* and the Critics: 1946, 1956, 1973,’ *The Eugene O’Neill Newsletter*, xi, (3), (1985) <[http://www.eoneil.com/library/newsletter/ix\\_3/ix-3b.htm](http://www.eoneil.com/library/newsletter/ix_3/ix-3b.htm)> [accessed 12 February 2012] (para. 2 of 6).) When it was revived in 1956, the critics were unanimous in hailing it a masterpiece.

<sup>97</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 566.

situated in Hope's bar, which is ringingly described by Larry as 'the No Chance Saloon [...] Bedrock Bar, The End of the Line Café, Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller!'<sup>98</sup> In simple terms, it is in the last place one would expect to find it.

In this way, despite their perceived exclusion, Hope's regulars become archetypes – rather than stereotypes – symbolising the American immigrant experience, and its integral connection to the formation of ideas of “Americanness.” These ideas are important in the context in which the play was written, if only because of the danger that falling into the category of “un-Americanness” could pose under Dies and HUAC. To exemplify this point entails expanding on the effect upon some immigrant communities of these two categories, “Americanness” and “un-Americanness,” in the climate of HUAC's America.

### **Clashing with HUAC's “Americanness”**

Kevin Kenny describes it as positively:

axiomatic of recent American immigration history that national and ethnic identities are malleable, unstable and constructed, rather than fixed, essential and unchanging. They are contested rather than consensual, fought over rather than agreed upon in advance. Senses of collective identity change with history; they do not stand outside historical time.<sup>99</sup>

The identity of the members of Hope's community is still in negotiation; they therefore function simultaneously as representative types and as psychologically elaborated singular members of the immigrant section of American society. These types are not indicative of unreflective dramatic laziness in O'Neill's admittedly loose sketching of national characteristics onto archetypal characters for thematic purposes. His characters are “types” in order to distinguish one from the other *formally* onstage, rather than

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<sup>98</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 577.

<sup>99</sup> Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000), p. 4.



specifically to give voice to a broad cross-section of immigrant Americans for whom the mainstream has no space. By this, I mean that each character is singular specifically because they are the only one of their “type” in the play. Their isolation makes them representative, and simultaneously their storytelling, dialect and other such formal devices engender the empathy necessary to make them psychologically plausible, as well as rendering their sense of self as ‘constructed,’ in Kenny’s terms, which is to say performative.

### **The American Dream**

This assertion goes some way towards offering an answer as to why the characters’ gentle handling and needling of each other pervades *The Iceman Cometh*. As the only one of their type, each character’s loneliness is highlighted by the play’s dramatic form. Everyone in the bar dreams, in some way. I have said above that the American Dream is often a singular, individualistic one, and that the equal and opposite result of self-realisation, therefore, is loneliness: everyone in the bar is lonely. If everyone onstage is lonely, and everyone on stage is a type, then the form of the play asserts that the economic success required of dreamers of any version of the American Dream engenders loneliness in those who do not succeed in becoming economically and therefore socially triumphant. O’Neill does not spell this out for his audience; his critique of all the various versions of the American Dream, as we see it staged in *Iceman*, is only implicit.<sup>100</sup> The characters need to be believed – or mocked – by their peers, if only to become secure in the knowledge that their stories have been heard. Their loneliness is bearable only because they think they have found a safe arena in

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<sup>100</sup> The very fact that such critiques as these come to appear in increasing levels of subtlety and implication in drama as the HUAC era progressed is itself indicative of a gathering climate in which one had to be careful not just of what one said, but of what one was *seen to say*, as I will discuss later in the thesis.

which to be themselves, and to create themselves in their preferred national, ethnic and personal image.

However, *Iceman's* characters' success is limited, because all that they can manage in terms of a contribution to their society is to iterate and reiterate their own stories, and to be witness to those of others. Their lived reality serves formally indirectly to critique the structural flaws in HUAC's extensive attempts to measure and impose an homogenous "American" national identity and value-system on its witnesses. HUAC demanded a publicly-performed version of people's life-stories that chimed with the prejudices of the panel. Stories alone are nothing without an audience, and are not enough to sustain a society, although they are essential to the formation of a community. This is what Kearney recognises when he frames the argument of his book *On Stories* by saying, 'Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition *human*.'<sup>101</sup> This chimes with O'Neill's assessment of the climate of fear pervading the second half of the twentieth century in America. By taking possession of the stories told to it, HUAC effectively dehumanised the storyteller, co-opting their story for its own political ends, and forcing the development of a particular performative identity by manipulating the terms and results of the performance.

### **Insanity**

One very deep-rooted fear in the climate of the time was that self-knowledge, gleaned through self-performance or otherwise, could lead ultimately not to freedom of expression and achievement, but to insanity. In this, O'Neill dramatises the equal and opposite Yang to the Yin of the dominant national narratives of America in the 1940s.

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<sup>101</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, p. 3.

He asserts – in *Iceman* and, as I will proceed to argue below, in the other late plays too – that national, social and personal identity must be rooted *in the mind* and projected outwards, rather than imposed or projected from outside sources such as HUAC onto the individual. For O’Neill, possession of mind permits the expression of the self through storytelling and therefore, insanity echoes throughout *Iceman*, and it is often explicitly linked to loneliness: it is the experience of the latter which invokes fear of the former. For instance, when threatened with the ‘bum’s rush’ upstairs, Willie is filled with ‘*pitiabile terror*,’ crying, ‘No! Please, Rocky! I’ll go crazy up in that room alone!’<sup>102</sup> Willie’s terror, with which all the other characters sympathise, is sincerely expressed but is not explained fully within the play. It seems his fear – which is reflected in all the other onstage characters – is that self-knowledge *in a vacuum* could lead ultimately to insanity. Without sympathetic witnesses to their stories, the characters lose faith in the possibility of having a solid, rooted identity. Upon this matter, Kerby Miller states that by as late as the 1920s:

Irish emigrants still composed a disproportionately large percentage of patients in [American] public mental institutions: many suffered the effects of chronic drinking, but even more from schizophrenia – ironically symbolic of [...] the still-enormous gap between new emigrants’ naïve expectations and the often unpleasant realities they encountered.<sup>103</sup>

As the play progresses and each member of *Iceman*’s community comes to realise that their pipe dream is faulty, flawed or fake, they come to start to grasp the ‘unpleasant realities’ of their situation outside the American mainstream. The play thereby raises the question as to whether the whole complex notion of “Americanness” is likewise imperfect. Stripping the characters of their own dreams through the intervention of Hickey therefore indirectly allegorises the exposure of Americans of all political and

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<sup>102</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 587.

<sup>103</sup> Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 506.

social stripes to the investigations of HUAC. Some witnesses were cross-questioned, accused, disbelieved and, in several cases, driven mad or to suicide by a censoring public body which provided no place in which to hide oneself. Upon this serious matter Bentley, for instance, includes in *Thirty Years of Treason* a letter from the widow of a scientist who poisoned himself two days before appearing before HUAC.<sup>104</sup>

In turn, this is why Larry's 'comically intense, crazy whisper' is the narratorial voice of the play.<sup>105</sup> It is why everyone whose dream is threatened by Hickey accuses him of being 'bughouse' himself. Finally, it strongly emphasises the potential in the dream of American individualism to engender loneliness, when such individualism is not underpinned with dreams of unbounded success, and awarded an audience to hear the stories of the attainment of such success. Though self-knowledge and self-realisation are ingrained components of the American nation as it was dreaming itself into being, as they are staged in *Iceman*, they are hollow aspirations.<sup>106</sup> The play subtly, indirectly allegorises the journey of self-creation O'Neill's protagonists are embarked upon, and warns that once one knows oneself and is known as oneself, the world – and the self – become dangerously open notions, vulnerable to attack and mental disintegration.

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<sup>104</sup> Alvah Bessie, 'From Inquisition in Eden by Alvah Bessie (New York, 1965),' in *Thirty Years of Treason*, pp. xix-xx.

<sup>105</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 595.

<sup>106</sup> This is the kind of internally resonating theme of O'Neill's late plays that has seen him charged with nihilism by some scholars of the theatre. Self-knowledge and self-realisation are aspirations that underpin every single civil rights movement: they are not dreams specific to America. However, my argument here is that for O'Neill, who grappled throughout his working life with the great existential question of what it means to be human, the failure of such aspirations in their lived reality in twentieth-century America is precisely what led to his feeling, as he put it, 'that America is the greatest failure in history.' (Eugene O'Neill in Croswell Bowen, *The Curse of the Misbegotten* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959) p. 313) He called his eleven-play epic cycle *A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed* because he felt that America's peoples had more desire, and more opportunity, to achieve the realisation of these dreams of self-actualisation than the older and more dessicated civilisations he had seen and read about in Europe, and the failure of its citizens' attempts to make them come true is what makes the state of the nation worthy of theatrical depiction in the framework of tragedy. It is important to remember that in classical conceptions of tragedy reaching back to Aristotle and the Ancient Greeks, tragedy is not nihilistic: it is cathartic, and therefore ultimately uplifting and cleansing for its audiences.

## Hope, Failure and Community

In formal terms, the connection between the individual ‘pipe dreams’ of each member of Hope’s alternative, non-mainstream community and the self-forged identity of each member is clearly indicated by the way in which, once they have been disabused of their dreams, the individual characters in Hope’s saloon begin to lose their singular attributes and to merge into a faceless kind of chorus. For instance, Hickey’s heartfelt toast to Hope at the latter’s birthday party enables him to lead all the attendees in drinking champagne to wish Harry good cheer. However, when he offers a second toast based on his promise to deliver ‘a new life of peace and contentment where no pipe dreams can ever nag at you again,’ the stage direction tells the reader that, ‘*He drains the remainder of his drink, but this time he drinks alone. In an instant the attitude of everyone has reverted to uneasy, suspicious defensiveness.*’<sup>107</sup> This stage business demonstrates that whether they feel threatened or celebratory, suspicious or maudlin, drunk or sober, the group pulls together as one, once to toast with him, and once to rebuff his intrusion into their private lives. This breathes life into the paradoxical concept of being “alone together,” and emphasises the sense in which the lonely outsiders populating the play have formed an alternative, non-mainstream community in Hope’s bar. This cohesion offers a gesture towards the continued hope underpinning the play that loyalty and community are indeed possible, in particular with an elected “other” against whom to band together.

Formally, the import of the choral ensemble into which Hope’s regulars merge is an example of the kind of HUAC-era-flavoured indirect allegorical critique of the glue that nominally holds together communities in the event of the failure of loyalty and fidelity to one’s peers: namely, fear. As Cate has argued about the HUAC era, the

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<sup>107</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, II, pp. 645-646.

panel's activities '[...] offered every American, however precarious his ancestry, the chance of being taken for a good American, simply by demonstrating a gut hatred for Commies.'<sup>108</sup> The key word in this quotation is *demonstrating*: it was not enough to support the investigations of HUAC, or to hate the Communists (their professed targets) – one had to be *seen* to support them, and *this* is what would stake one's claim to belonging. Conversely, it was the fear of failing in this particular performance which, I argue after Arendt, is what forced together collectives of outsiders into alternative community groupings.<sup>109</sup>

The exclusion of Hickey from the *de facto* community of Hope's bar, which occurs in response to his attempt to bring something positive to that community, also demonstrates that for O'Neill, aspiring to community belonging is not always a positive thing. The selfsame unity of feeling and action between all the protagonists barring Hickey in Act IV of *Iceman* serves to strip the individual figures of their individualism. Without their stories and dreams, they must move and act as one faceless, united character, in order to define the constitution of their community against the unpalatable behaviour of an unwanted, distrusted outsider who poses a threat to it. In this sense, the community has the potential to become a repressive, negative force acting upon an individual that does not fit the requisites of that community.

This is not to say that *Iceman* is a direct critique of HUAC's ascendancy; it is allegorical, and indirectly so at that. This means that it is possible to read the homogenisation of Hope's regulars as metaphorically gesturing towards those pro-HUAC Americans who found a sense of belonging in anti-communism and the search

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<sup>108</sup> David Cate, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 21.

<sup>109</sup> My argument builds on Arendt's theories about loneliness by applying her analysis of loneliness specifically to an analysis of HUAC era American-Irish drama in the twentieth century.

for “un-Americanness.” Conversely, one can choose to read the choral device as a muted indictment of the pressures that forced such negatively-defined, oppositional unity onto groups of people. The indictment is clear, albeit subtle. The formation of this particular community, forged only negatively in opposition to Hickey, is an example of people’s forced kinship by means of Arendt’s ‘iron band of terror,’ whereby people are pressed into each other’s company and sympathy because of harsh and frightening external pressures.<sup>110</sup> Artificially forced together thus, the members of this community are more lonely than ever, because ‘loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others,’ as Arendt also notes.<sup>111</sup>

### **Loneliness, Community and “Americanness”**

The formal function of loneliness and its seeming opposite, community belonging, thus come to the fore when the characters in *Iceman* merge into a kind of chorus in Act IV: as they are stripped of their dreams, their individualism begins to fade. This suggests both that their loneliness is engendered by their dreams and that, conversely, their dreams serve to sustain their community, which reduces their feelings of separation. Furthermore, and paradoxically, community belonging, notions of identification with one’s peers, and the necessity of this identification in order to feel that one belongs, could also be seen as the *cause* of loneliness. As Arendt argues, if a community is artificially formed, forced together by a commonality of what its members are *not*, then its imperfectly-elucidated definition, and the contradictions of its structure, has the potential to alienate each seeming member. To be bound together by an ‘iron band of terror,’ in Arendt’s terms, therefore has the potential to exacerbate feelings of loneliness and non-belonging, because the bond is forced upon the members,

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<sup>110</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 476.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, p. 476.

rather than being chosen. In *Iceman*, arguably, it is Hickey who acts as the coercive force.

Hickey ends the play cast asunder even from Hope's "bums," an enforced micro-community of outsiders; he vociferously protests his own insanity, but the point is moot as to whether he is the only sane character in the bar, or the only insane one. O'Neill does well to sketch this complex character without thoughtless recourse to the state of mind which Bentley warns against in *The Theatre of Commitment*: 'We shouldn't go to the theatre to have our already inflated self-righteousness further blown up by ritual denunciation of an acknowledged villain's villainy.'<sup>112</sup> Hickey's character far from typifies the two-dimensional melodramatic villain, despite his cold-blooded murder of his blameless wife and his subsequent attacks on the identities of Hope's other regulars.<sup>113</sup> He is a difficult character to quantify and one who is hard to condemn outright, despite his flaws. Hickey serves several formal purposes. He is a salesman, and unlike the majority of the bar's inhabitants, he is not a "one-time" employee, but a successful exponent of his field. His profession is in selling things to people, which raises several issues relevant to this thesis. He knows a lonely life on the road, but the excitement among the other characters as they anticipate his arrival attests that he also knows how to reach out to others, and to connect with them. He does this through his stories – which fits him neatly into the criteria of inclusiveness in Hope's community – and through offering money to buy everyone drinks. He therefore peddles to Hope's regulars both 'pipe dreams' – that is, lies – and oblivion through alcohol. His mistake is in ritualistically attempting to strip the attendees of their dreams after having once, seemingly, renounced his own pipe dream of self-improvement and atoning for his sins

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<sup>112</sup> Eric Bentley, *The Theatre of Commitment; and Other Essays on Drama in Our Society* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1968), p. 35.

<sup>113</sup> One of the more powerful moments of horror in the whole play is when Hickey announces to the bums, '(simply) So I killed her.' (*The Iceman Cometh*, IV, p. 700.)



against his saintly, off-stage wife. This is significant because selling is all about telling stories, too. And if America is, according to the symbolic function of figures such as Hickey, all about selling, then America is all about telling stories.

Hickey eventually breaks down in Act IV and confesses that he had to murder his wife in order that her hopes that he could improve himself would die with her. As he exclaims in self-disgust and loathing that he projects onto Evelyn, ‘She’d never complain or bawl me out. [...] Christ, can you imagine what a guilty skunk she made me feel!’<sup>114</sup> As a salesman, Hickey’s business is in propagating ‘the lie of a pipe dream,’ to quote Larry out of context: that material goods will make people happy and fulfilled. The fact that he has to leave his home and betray his wife in order to sell people the very image of domestic bliss that he cannot attain – yoked, of course, to consumer durables – raises the question as to the ways in which Hickey’s profession, as so many of the ‘one-time’ professions of Hope’s regulars, might be ‘*stamped all over him.*’<sup>115</sup> If the policeman, the circus sideshow worker, the military men and the prostitutes all have the mark of their professions upon their physical presences, where does Hickey’s show? In formal terms, it is in his desperation to get the others to join him in what he believes to be his position of clarity: he simply must succeed in selling them the recognition of their lies, or his own life choices become meaningless and his loneliness deepens to an unbearable level. He wants to come home, but the inhabitants of Hope’s bar must provide him with a home which he has sold them.

### **Storytelling and *Iceman***

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<sup>114</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, IV, p. 698. This whole passage, of which this quotation is only a snapshot, gives the closest insight into the internal motivations of Hickey; as a character whom the “bums,” and therefore the audience, are encouraged to dislike and mistrust, it is a tribute to O’Neill’s abilities as a playwright that Hickey’s confession in this scene is so upsetting to witness.

<sup>115</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 567.

For their part, Hickey's erstwhile friends in Hope's bar start to mythologise Hickey by turning him into a story of their own, rather than telling his version of his story to each other, the moment he is removed from their sight. Hope becomes sentimental after Hickey's arrest, crying, 'Poor old Hickey! We mustn't hold him responsible for anything he's done. We'll forget that and only remember him the way we've always known him before – the kindest, biggest-hearted guy ever wore shoe leather.'<sup>116</sup> Above, I have noted that Hickey, as a salesman, is subtly allegorical of America's preoccupation with material acquisition in the post-War period. This mythologisation through "re-writing" or, rather, re-narrating Hickey's stories into terms more palatable and less dangerous shows that it is the *reality* of the intrusion of American capitalism into their world that the characters in *Iceman* cannot abide. It is the abstract *dream*, the fantasy of self-fulfilment and self-attainment of success when told as the story of America as a nation, which they esteem and crave. Indeed, the impossibility of everyone attaining material wealth and social renown of astronomical levels is part of the excitement that it is, in theory, possible for some to do so. This paradox is integral to grasping the implications of American Dreams, and therefore, at an indirect allegorical remove, the way in which the "bums" turn Hickey into an untouchable, retrospectively-perfected dream-figure. In this light, "Americanness" itself becomes a performative construct that needs an audience in order to be viable; it needs to be dreamed into being, narrated and re-narrated, just as the inhabitants of the bar do. *The Iceman Cometh* is a story about storytelling, and about how such self-creation before an audience can mirror or bolster the creation of a nation.

### ***Hughie (1959)***

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<sup>116</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, IV, p. 706.

I have argued up to this point that *The Iceman Cometh* is a play that dramatises people's need to perform their stories to a listening and understanding audience, in order to seek to engender the common feeling and mutual identification which underpins a sense of community. The play also stages the potential of such connections to sow the seeds of instability, fear, and ostracisation. I have argued that such thematic preoccupations are prevalent in the play because they have been unavoidably, if unconsciously, touched by the climate of Martin Dies' and HUAC's ascendancy, and the quest to find "un-American" behaviour that characterised this rise to prominence. The literary analysis of this section develops these assertions by testing them in an assessment of the form and content of O'Neill's relatively unsung late masterpiece, *Hughie*.

In comparison to the sprawling, repetitious, lengthy and complex three plays with which the rest of this chapter engages, *Hughie* is an anomaly. It has only two onstage characters, and of them, only one speaks at length aloud. It is also an exception in its absence of alcohol to fuel the stories being told onstage, or to comfort the characters as the play progresses through the night and towards the dawn. Lastly there is, unusually for an O'Neill play of any era but particularly of the late plays, a lack of categorical engagement with issues of "hyphenism," immigrant status, and related questions of belonging and exclusion. 'I would hesitate,' John H. Raleigh cautions his readers, 'to extract a "message" or a "moral" from such an organic masterpiece as *Hughie*, and I am sure O'Neill intended none.'<sup>117</sup> I disagree that *Hughie* bears no moral, because it is as much a product of its time as every artwork is, and to presume so is to undermine the social value of the theatre's contribution to defining a community. In contrast to Raleigh's reverential approach, my analysis will root *Hughie* firmly within

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<sup>117</sup> John H. Raleigh, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972 [1965]), p. 155.

the late plays canon. I will demonstrate that its themes are commensurate with the foundations of a tradition I am starting to identify, of second-generation American-Irish allegory in the climate of HUAC's America.

For Raleigh, because *Hughie* is not baldly allegorical, the play can have nothing critical to say about the era in which it was produced and staged. Against this rather flat reading of a highly subtle and complex play, I prefer to take my lead from Althusser: even if an artwork – in this instance, a play – expressly disavows delivering a “message,” the wider climate in which it was written still has the potential to ghost into the form and content of it; this unconscious structuring is unavoidable. In turn, against Raleigh's doubts about the play conveying a “message” or “moral,” as readers we should still be able to take something in the way of understanding of the climate from undertaking a more nuanced, below-the-surface examination of a play produced within it – whether or not O'Neill ‘intended none.’

Therefore, it emerges below that the same themes appear in *Hughie* for the same reasons that they appear in the other plays which this chapter examines, although national immigrant archetypes are less prevalent in it. In particular, this short and beautiful play clearly dramatises O'Neill's belief that stories hold the individual together, and even serve to call him into being. Any and every single person must have an audience for his and others' stories, or there is nothing for which to live. Again, as with *Iceman*, the “message” of the play, despite Raleigh's doubts about the presence of one, is about hope: we can use our stories to reach through the solitude and loneliness in order to connect with another – any other – and thereby find a way to imagine a community, and therefore a sense of belonging.

### ***Hughie* and Identity**

I use Anderson's phrase about an 'imagined community' here somewhat out of context because *Hughie*, above all the late plays, demonstrates O'Neill's problematic belief that one's identity exists in one's mind and is projected outwards, rather than being imposed externally upon the subject.<sup>118</sup> *Hughie* intends to teach us that only two people are required to form a community, and that a connection forged by any means necessary – even merely by talking ceaselessly to one who appears not to listen – can save one from the loneliness of being abandoned outside the dominant myths comprising one's community. This notion of a pre-social<sup>119</sup>, utterly individual, self-determined self is problematic because it is designed to transcend the homogenising practices of HUAC's search for "un-American" behaviour, and the gathering paranoia of the Cold War era, but because it is reactive to these stimuli, it actually achieves the opposite. The irony is that, as I have asserted against Raleigh that *Hughie* must be a product of its era because all artwork is, so must the playwright – and everyone else – be. The absolute individualism to which O'Neill lays claim for his protagonists is actually undermined on two fronts.

First, O'Neill's belief in autonomous individualism is a very "American" tradition in itself, one version of the Dream being that of a lone pioneer spirit, forging a way into the New World. O'Neill calls on this tradition to stake a claim of belonging for

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<sup>118</sup> The reason I call this reference to Anderson's phrase "out of context" is that his thesis in *Imagined Communities* is rooted in a historically specific context which makes the phrase "imagined communities" not directly apposite to the way in which I use it in this thesis. Anderson offers an account of the emergence of "nationness" that he sees as being intractably bound to the worldwide move from Latin to vernacular languages (exemplified and driven by the rise of the printing press), from feudal dynasties to constitutional monarchies and republics, and from an illiterate population to an increasingly literate one. It is not to take away from his achievement in his seminal tome to re-appropriate and redeploy his lovely, and most useful, phrase in a different context: it is to underline its versatility and endurance. In the rest of the thesis I intend to continue to "borrow" his grasp of nation-ness, as his phrase "imagined communities" encapsulates my ideas about the specific communities about which I am writing.

<sup>119</sup> By "pre-social," I mean that because O'Neill believes in a pre-existing, innate self which is already an integral part of the human being before he or she meets any other person, he thereby goes against the grain of the prevailing narratives about the imperative need for storytelling as it is staged *in his own plays*. A formal uneasiness therefore arises on occasion, with which the analysis of *Hughie* will engage in detail.

his characters, as the following textual analysis demonstrates, meaning the play is not contextless. Second, and significantly, the absolute individualism which is formally laid claim to in this play is an artificial construct; at base, it is the connection between the two characters which allows them to ‘imagine’ a community, not an inner or innate character which sustains them alone. Without the other, the identity of each protagonist is destabilised and under threat.

### **Failing Dreams**

*Hughie* is situated historically by the playwright in the period just preceding the Wall Street Crash and the ensuing Great Depression, but the reader/audience knows what is shortly to come in the history of the American nation, meaning that the time that it was written, in the aftermath of these signal events, is what is of relevance to understanding it. The stage directions inform the reader that the hotel in which the play is set ‘never benefited from the Great Hollow Boom of the twenties.’<sup>120</sup> Like *Iceman*, it is immediately clear that the play is intended to have a timeless quality; all the significant events of the first thirty years of the twentieth century have passed it by. Yet, all the hallmarks of its moment of production are there to be found, and to exemplify this argument I will examine them now.

Speaking of the late 1920s, indeed of precisely the time in which *Hughie* is set, Brogan somewhat sardonically describes some Americans’ ideological suppositions about their social responsibilities thus:

The assumption had always been that on the whole the thrifty and diligent would never know real want; private charity was a duty, which would look after the unfortunate; the riffraff could be left to look after themselves. This assumption

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<sup>120</sup> O’Neill, ‘*Hughie*,’ in *Complete Plays*, ed. by Bogard, pp. 831 – 851, (p. 831.)

had been out of date since the Civil War; but it had never been so ruthlessly tested before.<sup>121</sup>

*Hughie*'s two characters are types symbolising the 'riffraff' abandoned by, or never having belonged to, the dominant national narratives surrounding them. With the collapse of the American financial markets in October 1929, the plight of the outcasts, misfits and 'fog people' with which O'Neill tends to populate his plays were put in the spotlight.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, post-Wall Street Crash, there were many more such people in America, those for whom what Jim Cullen has called 'the Dream of Upward Mobility,' under the tenets of which 'anyone can get ahead,'<sup>123</sup> had failed.<sup>124</sup> Change is to be found in *Hughie*, despite Raleigh's doubts. For instance, the Night Clerk's internal monologue finally breaks through his silence and reaches into Erie's life, just at the very moment when he was about to despair fatally. This can be read as O'Neill's indirect, and probably unconscious, allegorical questioning of the permanence and wisdom of the American capitalist enterprise too. This play constitutes one of his attempts to cast a light into the darker, more lonely recesses of American society.

### **Dramatic Form**

In *Hughie*, the stage directions go beyond even the compulsive, controlling detail of *Iceman* to become a counter-narrative to the play's leading spoken narrative, which latter is delivered by Erie Smith. It has been posited that such obsessive attention to staging detail within all the late plays is indicative of a mistrust of actors and stagecraft on the part of the playwright; Brenda Murphy, for example, asserts that

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<sup>121</sup> Hugh Brogan, *The Longman History of the United States of America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Edinburgh: Longman, 1999), p. 515.

<sup>122</sup> O'Neill, 'Long Day's Journey into Night,' in *Complete Plays*, ed. by Bogard, pp. 717 – 828, IV (pp. 812-813.)

<sup>123</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 60.

<sup>124</sup> For more detail on this particular version of the Dream, see his chapter 'Dream of the Good Life (II): Upward Mobility,' in his excellent book *The American Dream*.

‘O’Neill always tried to write against the prevailing norms of Broadway.’<sup>125</sup> However, in *Hughie* the situation is far more subtle than this suggestion, in formal terms. Verbally, for much of the play the Night Clerk seems to function only as a foil against which Erie can direct his speech. However, on the page, the stage directions which inform the reader of the internal monologue of the Night Clerk reveal another play, and another lead character. This is one of the reasons that *Hughie* is the formal anomaly of the four late plays with which this chapter engages, and it stands alone to refute Matthew Wikander’s claim in his angry essay ‘O’Neill and the Cult of Sincerity,’

What the Gelbs interpret as O’Neill’s desire to “forestall an actor’s personal interpretation [Gelbs p.591]” can lead not just to the novelistic stage directions for which O’Neill is well known; it can also lead to plodding expository dialogue. What actors are trained to think of as subtext frequently finds its way to the surface in O’Neill.<sup>126</sup>

Formally, the fascinating conceit of *Hughie* achieves the opposite of Wikander’s charge; the Night Clerk’s “monologue” is almost *all* subtext, appearing overwhelmingly in the stage directions, rather than existing as text as we understand it in a play, which would be spoken aloud onstage.

On the page, the Clerk’s thoughts dramatise the internal self which O’Neill believed to be the origin and seat of all identity, conscience and dreams. This self is so far under wraps in the case of the Night Clerk that although we are told his name, we continue to see him referred to in the text by his profession alone. His identity is, however, struggling to emerge from the faceless façade of its owner’s mindless job and into the open, to breathe and, crucially, to connect imaginatively with another. Through the course of the play, the Night Clerk moves from idly to desperately wishing that Erie

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<sup>125</sup> Kurt Eisen, ‘O’Neill on Screen’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O’Neill*, pp. 116-134, p. 120.

<sup>126</sup> Wikander, ‘O’Neill and the Cult of Sincerity’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O’Neill*, p. 220.



Smith would go to bed and leave him in peace, to concluding the play, surprisingly, by abruptly making a superhuman effort to reach out and make a connection with him.

## **Community**

The Clerk's sudden recognition is that a connection of any kind – the beginning of forging a community – might in fact save him from death, whether this is the living death of his night's work, or his actual death, at which the demise of the former Night Clerk hints. He hopes that connecting with Erie has the power to deliver him to a place to belong, *'I should have paid 492 more attention. After all, he is company. He is awake and alive. I should use him to help me live through the night.'*<sup>127</sup> This character's story has been ritualistically silenced by the dramatic form of the play, which incarcerates it in the stage directions, and inside a mannequin-like body. However, as I have already shown for *Iceman*, the reading audience – rather than the listening audience in the theatre, as would more usually be the case – is drawn into the Night Clerk's soaring and imaginative internal monologue, and is made complicit with him thereby. This is another example of O'Neill's efforts to forge alternative communities of the excluded within the walls of the theatre, and to offer a message of hope that belonging and acceptance may ultimately be found. The Clerk's quest *'to live through the night'* by sharing stories with a listening and understanding audience is best to be understood within Goffman's terms of self-performance, in the context of the gathering momentum of publicly-performed tests of national and political allegiance in HUAC's America. This quest also gives the lie to O'Neill's notion that identity is rooted in the mind above all, as does the mismatch between what Erie thinks he is like, and how he actually is.

## **Self-Performance and Storytelling**

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<sup>127</sup> *Hughie*, p. 846.

In *Hughie*, it is repeatedly shown that Erie's self-perception does not match his actual character; either the stage directions describing his position are at odds with his attempted delivery of a particular line, or his honesty and earnestness shine through his various attempts to create himself performatively as a 'Wise Guy.'<sup>128</sup> As his narrative progresses, it becomes clear that he exists only on the very periphery of the scene to which he pretends to belong – just as the hotel in which he rooms exists on the very edge of the society it serves, housing other outsiders and mainstream rejects.

That both the central characters are deferred in this way, displaced outside their version of themselves and left to tell their stories with the increasing desperation of those who know they have nothing else with which to anchor themselves, comes to seem subtly allegorical of the HUAC operation as the era progressed. This is because HUAC was so successful at purging the entertainment and public sector industries of communists, liberals and any form of subversive or agitator that, within a few short years of its establishment, it had the serious problem, as an antagonistic and provocative body, of lacking a material enemy to pursue. J. Edgar Hoover's meticulous biographer Curt Gentry puts the situation plainly:

By 1956 the Communist party USA was close to moribund. Starting with the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, events had not been kind to the party. Factionalism, purges, the Smith Act trials, deaths, and defections had left its rolls decimated. By all the best estimates, under five thousand members remained, some fifteen hundred of whom were FBI informants.<sup>129</sup>

Therefore, although the search for subversion continued, it became increasingly necessary for any kind of petty grudge, slur, slight or lie masquerading as a story about "un-American" behaviour to be uncritically believed in order for the Committee's work

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<sup>128</sup> *Hughie*, p. 851.

<sup>129</sup> Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 442.

and budget to continue to be justified. There is an indirect allegorical trace of this shift to be found in Erie's blustering attempts to present himself as a well-respected and successful gambler. Such attempts recall one to those hysterical fantasists who found "Reds under the bed" and Soviet spies in the faces of all strangers, most immigrants and several other suspicious types, in a climate described by Donald F. Crosby as 'fanatically anticommunistic.'<sup>130</sup>

It is worth pausing here to note briefly that although "Reds" – communists – were ostensibly the subject of HUAC's investigations, the enemies their adherents sought, and found, were often more nebulous. This is significant to analysing *Hughie*, and others of O'Neill's late plays, because one of the ways in which HUAC extended its tenure and influence was by raising the spectre of "sympathisers" and "fellow travellers" to communism. Such figures were ones who never joined the Party, but whose associations and political affiliations served to cast them in a dubious light. Perennially difficult as it is to disprove a negative, being tainted with "fellow travelling" was dangerous as, like the measles, one could pass it on to other associates thereafter, merely by seeking to connect, or to maintain connections. This highlights the darker side of storytelling, the risks within self-performance: that to be known by another, in one's context, has the power to imperil both oneself and, potentially, one's associates.

The centrality of storytelling as a double-edged sword, and particularly its potentially positive effects, is highlighted by the character list of *Hughie*, in which Erie Smith is described as '*a teller of tales*.'<sup>131</sup> This demonstrates immediately that the concern of this play with storytelling and the power of telling tales to keep the teller

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<sup>130</sup> Donald F. Crosby, *God, Church, and Flag: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the Catholic Church 1950-1957* (Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. 229.

<sup>131</sup> *Hughie*, p. 830.

anchored in the world is of a piece with the other great O'Neill late plays. Speaking of ancient Greece, Kearney says,

Myths were stories people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and others. But it was Aristotle who first developed this insight into a philosophical position when he argued, in his *Poetics*, that the art of storytelling – defined as the dramatic imitating and plotting of human action – is what gives us a *shareable world*.<sup>132</sup>

This quote is centrally important both to the construction of my argument in this chapter as a whole, and to understanding *Hughie* in particular. In terms of the overall thesis, Kearney emphasises the importance of telling one's story in order to find understanding and a place in the world. He also recognises that a story in a vacuum does not fulfil its full potential, and that making a '*shareable world*' is what makes storytelling so crucially important to community formation and maintenance. In terms of the specific play under analysis, this '*shareable world*' is, at base, an *alternative* world to the dominant hegemony, in which two rejects of mainstream culture and society reach out to each other, one to speak, and the other to listen.<sup>133</sup>

The comradeship thus engendered at the play's dénouement between the two protagonists speaks of more than the power of storytelling to bind people together in a homogenous sense – “Americanness.” It also highlights its ability to create spontaneous micro-cliques and connections between those whom the wider economic and social world has abandoned or excluded. Erie demands understanding from the Night Clerk by

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<sup>132</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, p. 3.

<sup>133</sup> For the clearest example of this 'shareable world' and its ability to offer hope and security to outcasts in *Hughie*, see the very end of the play, when Erie and the Night Clerk finally find a way to connect:  
'ERIE: (*generously*) Now I see you're a right guy. Shake. (*He shoves out his hand which the Clerk grasps with a limp pleasure. Erie goes on with gathering warmth and self-assurance.*) That's the stuff. You and me'll get along. I'll give you all the breaks, like I give Hughie.  
NIGHT CLERK: (*gratefully*) Thank you, Erie. (*then insistently*) Is it true that when Arnold Rothstein plays poker, one white chip –  
ERIE: (*with magnificent carelessness*) Sets you back a hundred bucks? Sure. Why not?  
(*Hughie*, p. 850.)

telling his stories, because otherwise his explanations of where and who he is in the world cannot be validated, and he would therefore lose all hope, and crucially, his faith in himself. Indeed, in a sense, there would be no “self” there at all without the Night Clerk to confirm its presence; therefore, *Hughie* serves indirectly to allegorise the threat to connecting with others posed by the investigations of HUAC.

### **Self-Performance by Storytelling**

Erie speaks to the Night Clerk, Charlie Hughes, who is usually referred to in the stage directions by his profession rather than by his name, which is as generic as the former Night Clerk’s (also Hughes) and the man with whom he associates, Smith. The Night Clerk seems to have blended with his environment after so long in it; each mention in the stage directions governing his reactions to the comments put to him tends to manifest in the past tense. For instance, when Erie laughs derisively at him for having been ‘careless’ in conceiving his children, the Night Clerk reflects that, ‘*He had been a little offended when a guest first made that crack,*’ which implies that he is no longer capable of summoning offence to anything a guest could say.<sup>134</sup> This reflection also emphasises the cyclical nature of the themes of the play. In formal terms such ritualised repetition – even when it does not appear onstage, in that Erie is the only character we ever hear make this ‘*crack*’ – serves to show that when people talk to each other, even if they recite by rote the same kinds of comments and stories, feelings are affected and bonds are forged or broken.

This echoes the sentiment of Kearney’s quote above about stories creating a ‘*shareable world,*’ and further develops the implications of it. Kearney’s indefatigably optimistic outlook tends to view this “sharing” as necessarily and automatically a

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<sup>134</sup> *Hughie*, p. 834.

wholly positive thing, but O'Neill shows that it is not. By sharing stories and tales, one is, as I have said above, rendering oneself vulnerable; knowledge is power, and self-knowledge can therefore be equally dangerous. When he has not had a discernibly satisfactory, emotionally engaged response from the Night Clerk in a protracted amount of time, Erie's swaggering posturing begins to crumble into despair. The stage directions tell the reader at one point that, '*He pauses, his false poker face as nakedly forlorn as an organ grinder's monkey's.*'<sup>135</sup> In this pause, we can see the danger one could be in if telling one's story to an unsympathetic listener, or worse, to one who does not hear or understand. Erie's loneliness is palpable, and until his identity is validated and fixed by the Night Clerk's attention at the end of the play, he is wholly adrift from the world in which he lives, rather than merely on the periphery of it.

Part of the difficulty in Erie's attempt to connect is that he speaks to one who is also on the extreme periphery of society, and moreover, one not physically or emotionally equipped to respond in a satisfactory way. The Night Clerk's features are described as '*without character*'; his eyes are '*blank*' and '*contain no discernible expression*'; and at his desk when the play commences, '*He is not thinking.*'<sup>136</sup> In comparison to *Iceman*, wherein every character's profession or 'one-time' vocation is '*stamped all over him,*' it is possible to say that the Night Clerk's profession features upon his physical person in its very absence of physicality and uniqueness.<sup>137</sup> That is to say, his job requires him *not* to think – not to engage with time, mental activity and so on – for fear that his situation would become immediately unbearable, should he take note of its detail. He is so inured to not thinking and listening, that he no longer can

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<sup>135</sup> *Hughie*, p. 847.

<sup>136</sup> *Hughie*, p. 831.

<sup>137</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, p. 567.

think or listen with anything like focus and commitment, as is his express desire as the play draws to a close.

### **Stories as Dreams of Belonging**

The Night Clerk's alienation is therefore close to entire when he meets Erie, which is expressed formally in his very blankness. In this important way, he needs '492' as much as Erie needs an audience. Together, despite both men's differently-motivated attempts not to, they form an essentially important micro-community of two, and populate it with figures from their different dreams. They are two middle-aged men from the 'sticks' who have come to the 'Big Town' to seek success, and who have not succeeded in finding it. They are two of what Edmund Tyrone calls 'fog people': drifting outcasts, lost and looking for somewhere to belong, surrounded by a world that is confusing, threatening, and excludes them from its heart.<sup>138</sup>

One of these figures tells tales as a kind of profession; the other is paid a low wage to be on hand to hear the stories of such people as may have no other audience. The actual audience of the play, then, as with *Iceman*, is implicated in bearing witness to Erie's self-narration, and is tacitly encouraged to side with him, against the world which keeps him on the periphery of its successful and respected centre. The America of successful individual entrepreneurialism and market-driven progress is also, we see, home to many whose individualism, whose stories and dreams, have not served to position them anywhere that they can feel accepted. As a reader, we are outside the mainstream and in the hotel housing others like us: O'Neill forges an alternative community of misfits in the theatre, binding us and his characters together in a band of

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<sup>138</sup> *Long Day's Journey into Night*, pp. 812-813.

those who speak and those who listen. In an important formal twist, we are all the Night Clerk.

That an audience can relate to the Clerk in this way serves to make him more of a representative type, in formal terms, than the automaton which the stage directions sketch him to be. He has only very recently begun the job in this specific hotel, which is telling, because it hints at many more hotels just like it, with Night Clerks just like him. As usual with O'Neill, this typecasting is not the work of a lazy playwright, but one who is highly sensitive to the need for an externalised identity which proves it is not threatening by being clearly in view and comprehensible. He offers a representative type-character in the Night Clerk in order to imply that America is full of men who are unawakened, waiting for morning, not even aware of waiting. Tom F. Driver believes that 'Where O'Neill did succeed, [...] was in his representation of a world in which, as in most Greek tragedy, there is no future.'<sup>139</sup> It is fair to claim that the Clerk, Erie and the other underdogs with whom O'Neill populates his plays may sometimes be unaware of their situation, and of the fact that they are waiting for mainstream society to make space for them to be successful and accepted. However, I cannot agree with Driver that 'there is no future' apparent in any of the late plays, and most particularly in *Hughie*. It is not that there is no future in *Hughie*; it is that the situation portrayed seems as though it has no end, but this seeming timelessness and limitlessness is only a dramatic illusion.<sup>140</sup> The play is set in 1928, and the reader/audience can apply the benefit of hindsight to the sure knowledge that the situation of the hotel and the characters must be shaken to its core in the near future.

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<sup>139</sup> Tom F. Driver, 'On the Late Plays of Eugene O'Neill', in *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1964), pp. 110-123, p. 112.

<sup>140</sup> Below, I will posit the same argument about O'Neill's later and more well-known play *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956).



## Outsiders and Insiders

So, there is a future coming for the Night Clerk, for Erie and, of course, for the third “character” in the play, the city of New York itself: time moves inexorably on and leaves no-one behind. O’Neill’s late plays can therefore be understood as a paean of love for those without acceptance. He offers an alternative kind of “national biography” of American non-mainstream society and the individuals within it, struggling to find a way to the future, which does exist – unlike what Driver claims – but cannot yet be attained. O’Neill depicts his outsiders as those people who are drawn together by their non-belonging, situating them firmly within the wider American cultural narrative in that, paradoxically, they are not part of it. He creates contrast by including absent, offstage characters who are, ironically, “outsiders” of a kind, in that they are affluent and renowned, and O’Neill’s protagonists are not. This can be read as a subtly allegorical formal device which emphasises that there is actually another kind of twentieth-century American experience, and only some are excluded from it.

In *Hughie*, the absent character is the unimaginably successful Arnold Rothstein, with whom the Night Clerk fantasises about playing poker. He is one of several referents to the possibility that the system does work for some – just not for those whom we actually see onstage. Sharing stories of others who are successful introduces both poignancy and hope to the relationship between Erie and the Clerk; Rothstein’s success raises their aspirations, and simultaneously sharpens their feelings of incompleteness and inadequacy. This device of absenting representatives of hope from the stage is comparable to *Iceman*. The offstage idealists therein – Bess, Evelyn, Rosa – constitute in their different ways a parable of hope, because even if they did not find a better world in their lifetime, they dared to dream of one. The message embodied in Arnold Rothstein is that some gamblers always win: and that, therefore, being willing to believe

this is possible, makes it possible. This is an echo of the observation above about the impossibility / possibility dichotomy of various versions of the American Dream – the fact that it works for some, and yet is so far out of the reach of many. Rothstein’s formal function is that both Erie and the Clerk need to hear stories of him and people like him, and Rothstein’s success is part of what draws the two men together into a micro-community. Such stories of success and esteem are necessary, even if Rothstein’s situation is painfully unattainable for those who tell them, since stories of success keep dreams of success alive in others. The Dream of an homogenous American nation populated with happy and fulfilled, safe and successful individuals is perpetuated through stories of those for whom the Dream *has* worked. The quiet message of hope that such tales, and the sharing of them, signifies, shows O’Neill to be less of a nihilistic thinker than he is often considered in critical circles.

## **Hope**

This hope, muted as it is, can best be understood formally through examining the “absent” narrative of the Night Clerk’s thoughts. This narrative runs throughout the play, despite explicit introductory stage directions repeatedly claiming that he does not think and he does not listen, and it situates the play historically and geographically. This means that there are two narratives running concurrently throughout the play: Erie’s speeches and the Night Clerk’s thoughts, the location of his “mind.” A good example of the way these two narratives depart from each other and come back to weave the characters together again occurs early on in the play:

*The Clerk’s mind remains in the street to greet the noise of a far-off El train. Its approach is pleasantly like a memory of hope; then it roars and rocks and rattles past the nearby corner, and the noise pleasantly deafens memory; then it recedes and dies, and there is something melancholy about that. But there is hope. Only so many El trains pass in one night, and each one passing leaves one*

*less to pass, so the night recedes, too, until at last it must die and join all the other long nights in Nirvana, the Big Night of Nights. And that's life. "What I always tell Jess when she nags me to worry about something: "That's life, isn't it? What can you do about it?"*<sup>141</sup>

Erie's next line, immediately following this passage, is, 'Say, you do remind me of Hughie somehow, Pal. You got the same look on your map.'<sup>142</sup> At the stroke of two sentences, the absent character of Hughie is bound physically and emotionally, both to Erie, who recognises the reflection of his old friend's expression in the new Night Clerk's face, and also to the Night Clerk himself. This draws common ground between him and the many like him, waiting on the periphery of successful society. In this way, the 'look on [his] map' shows that even without speech, stories can seep out of people without them being fully aware of it. This extra-verbal communication, which is also part of one's self-performance, has the potential to contribute to forming connections and, thereby, communities between people. As Kearney asserts with crystal-clear perceptiveness, 'Every human existence is a life in search of a narrative. This is not simply because it strives to discover a pattern to cope with the experience of chaos and confusion. It is also because each human life is *always already* an implicit story.'<sup>143</sup> The story of one's life is only 'implicit' until it finds its audience, its witness; each human life cannot imagine itself in a vacuum, but must be contextualised by performing its story to another.

The quotation above, describing the Night Clerk's thought patterns, is quite clear: '*there is hope.*' The present absence of the sound of the El train which passes periodically demonstrates onstage both the passing of time, and the tangible loneliness of the night. Through this train, time and loneliness become linked, with each other and

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<sup>141</sup> *Hughie*, p. 838.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 838.

<sup>143</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, p. 129.

with the city in which the hotel is situated, and the play is jerked out of its seeming timelessness and situated in a specific moment. In spite of the fact that the “death” of the night does not sound a particularly positive metaphorical note, nonetheless this is not a nihilistic perspective. Hughes is only a Night Clerk at night; as the night wears on, therefore, he draws closer toward himself, and every sound from outside conveys further the fact that the night is wearing on. From this perspective, the last line of the above quotation becomes a kind of covert call-to-arms. Having stated that there is hope, but not really having specified what that hope is or how, if at all, one should act upon it, to leave his thoughts hanging on a rhetorical question as to what can be done could be seen to be inciting the reader to act.

## **HUAC**

This incitement is covert because the line only appears in the stage directions – it is not spoken aloud, which is why I refer to the “reader” rather than the viewing audience of a theatre. In terms of dramatic form, this is a fascinating paradox. The Night Clerk tacitly goads us, the audience, to act in order to change our situations and not end up like him. He tells us what to think and how to behave – but he does not say it aloud. Therefore, he *shows* us what to do: use the mind to think oneself out of one’s situation and imagine a better world for oneself. He is actually more awakened than he is designed to appear – but most of the dialogue in this difficult play is itself absent, including the (in)direct instructions herein mentioned. That so little is *voiced* by the Night Clerk, an oppressed and unhappy staff member of a slum-hotel, serves as a subtle allegory of the climate of America in the 1940s, when the play was written, and indeed, even of the 1920s, when it is set. In his book *The Politics of Fear*, Robert Griffith makes this claim about the phenomenon that came to be known as McCarthyism:

When Joe McCarthy stepped down from his plane and out before the Republican ladies of Wheeling [in 1950], he entered a full-dress debate in which the sides were already chosen, the issues drawn, and the slogans manufactured. The crusade (if it may be called that) of which he was about to assume leadership had been nearly ten years in the making.<sup>144</sup>

One of the contentions of this thesis is that the assertion in this quote is correct and can be further pre-dated, beyond the early 1940s when Griffith considers anti-communist sentiment to have become entrenched in American domestic policy, and as far back as the fear, horror and offence inspired in America by Russia's 1917 October Revolution, as Bentley and Brogan believe. This is why I am able to argue for the relevance of the activities of HUAC to understanding certain indirect allegorical references to the wider climate as they appear in plays of O'Neill's which might, on superficial assessment alone, seem to pre-date the worst excesses of the search for "un-American" activity. The House Un-American Activities Committee's *modus operandi* was heavily reliant upon using people's words and documents *against* them; criminalising advocacy of anything which threatened 'the continuance, or even the convenience, of the liberal, capitalist, individualist system,' as Brogan neatly puts it.<sup>145</sup> The defining question of HUAC, "Are you now or *have you ever been*," is one designed to threaten the security of the identity of the witness. Once something has been uttered aloud or practically acted upon in the public arena, it becomes under HUAC the possession of that public sphere, meaning that one is yoked to it forever. This means that one must either stand by a belief and defend it, or renege on one's own identity and self-loyalty in order to contradict it. In this climate, O'Neill shows us through the Night Clerk's thoughts and his personal development as the play progresses that thoughts are still free, and he asserts that identity must be, and is, rooted in the mind.

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<sup>144</sup> Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1970), p. 30.

<sup>145</sup> Brogan, *The Longman History of the United States of America*, p. 582.

As I have noted above, this is an intriguingly flawed assertion. The very attempt to lay claim to an inner, authentic self, untainted by external political and social pressures, is itself an ideological construct: performative, and in reaction to the external world of the playwright's historical moment. The late plays of Eugene O'Neill are not bluntly allegorical, and yet there is no question but that they are coloured and shaped by the world in which they were written and produced. This world was one in which one's self-performance – and one's private beliefs – were in danger of being co-opted as public property, because non-“un-American” status was reliant upon a publicly-performed assertion of loyalty akin, for instance, to the Pledge of Allegiance. Murphy has said that ‘HUAC’s major weapon’ was ‘the committee hearing, which was in reality a trial without a defense, a jury, or even, in many cases, evidence against the accused.’<sup>146</sup> In such an environment, the only defence a witness could offer was a glimpse into the private world of his mind, in order that its fidelity to “American” mores, as defined by the panel, could be adjudged. Therefore, O'Neill indirectly allegorises, and thereby reacts against, HUAC's requirement to answer for one's private, internal narrative publicly, by incarcerating the Clerk's internal monologue in the stage directions of *Hughie* in order to lay claim to a pre-existing, essential self which it is, in practice, impossible to possess. In formal terms, he undermines this act of quiet rebellion by depicting characters that cannot exist in a vacuum, and also by rendering the Clerk's monologue silently public, by publishing the play.

Formally, this being-in-the-world, the inescapability of one's ideological climate, and O'Neill's resistance to these notions, are negotiated in *Hughie* by the sounds of the city at night, which the Clerk's mind tracks. It is possible to view sounds like the El train as a third “narrative,” one which binds the characters together because

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<sup>146</sup> Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 4.

whether or not they listen to each other, they can both hear the sounds from outside the hotel. Indeed, it is the initial desire to escape from Erie's stories and not to be an audience for them that sends the Night Clerk's thoughts out of the hotel and into the streets of the city, fantasising about exciting shootouts, fires, explosions and, above all, the passage of time. Without Erie's stories, seen negatively here as an incitement to try to imagine a different life or to think of another world in order to escape from them, *Hughie's* other protagonist would never have found his way imaginatively, at least, out into the world beyond the hotel doors. In this way, *Hughie* becomes, as *Iceman* before it, a kind of "national biography" of the disaffected, the excluded, and of America itself, challenging the dominant self-mythologizing national narrative, which is as false as Erie's 'Wise Guy' posturing.

### **Notions of Community**

This posturing, and its utter failure to convince, reflects O'Neill's well-known mistrust of actors and the physical side of dramatic art. Practically, it would be impossible for a figure variously described as 'corpse'-like, a 'waxwork' and 'characterless' to convey the intricate thought patterns and narrative detail with which the stage directions imbue the Clerk. This privileges the reader, and simultaneously problematises the piece as a dramatic text. If identity is performative in twentieth century America, as Goffman's theories instruct us that it is, performance must by necessity fail the Night Clerk's internal attempt to assert his character, and his sense of affiliation with the city and the country. Thus, O'Neill shows that outsiders internalise their isolation, and reclaim their loneliness as something which belongs to them, meaning that it is not a singularly negative phenomenon.

Dramatically, the use of a voiceover or a projection screen would be necessary to allow an audience to access the Night Clerk's internal monologue fully. One wonders whether the play is deliberately doomed to fail dramatically, if only because so much of the "dialogue" is absent that nothing approaching a dialectic can be achieved onstage. There is only one point at which the Clerk's internal monologue spills into what he says aloud, to the confusion and discomfiture of both onstage characters. This slip is centrally important to the thematic import of the whole play, because what confuses both is the ringing note of hope which the line in question sounds:

Yes, it is a goddamned racket when you stop to think, isn't it, 492? But we might as well make the best of it, because – Well, you can't burn it all down, can you? There's too much steel and stone. There'd always be something left to start it going again.<sup>147</sup>

This odd eruption of part of the Clerk's earlier fantasy monologue is dually hopeful – one kind of hope with foundation; the other without.

### **“Hopeless Hope”**

From one perspective, the above quotation is an emphatic affirmative statement, against the grain of the play's master-narrative of exclusion, hope deferred and loneliness, of hope for the future. Conversely, it could be seen as indicative of the kind of false consciousness so pervading the America of the twentieth century: the unshakeable, ill-founded belief in the ability of the economy to recover itself “naturally,” which is to say, without measures to protect the vulnerable. In tone, the Clerk's comment serves to echo Brogan's insightful assertion that ‘Americanism is a crusading faith.’<sup>148</sup> Brogan is absolutely right to view “Americanness” as something constructed and then projected outwards; as a faith, rather than an innate or natural state

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<sup>147</sup> *Hughie*, p. 848.

<sup>148</sup> Brogan, *The Longman History of the United States of America*, p. 582.



of mind. The infectiousness of this faith in the idea of America has found its way as far as *Hughie's* Night Clerk. He knows that the system is a 'goddamned racket' because he is being failed by and excluded from it, but also firmly believes that 'you can't burn it all down,' despite the fact that he and countless others like him could well benefit from an overhaul of the capitalist system which excludes so many.

Therefore, even O'Neill has been affected by the master-narratives forming the nation in which he worked, and which his notions of an internal, essential self of the mind are designed to resist. Because of this, *Hughie* can be read as an indirect allegory about O'Neill's specific socio-cultural time and place. He shows us the connection that arises between Erie and the Night Clerk, who forge a tiny micro-community of two in order to save each other and themselves. Through their ability to achieve this, O'Neill lays claim to an innateness and independence of mind, and the possibility of a purely accepting audience, which infuse the play with hope. Escaping from exclusion and failure merely by retaining possession of one's thoughts is indeed, in reality and in O'Neill's own words, a "hopeless hope." Even staging the possibility of an escape from exclusion interpellates the playwright, and his characters, into a reactive dialogue with the historical Cold-War American moment. Yet, the contradiction I have highlighted has its own internal logic, and emerges as a "moral" of sorts, howsoever conflicting at its root, which undermines Raleigh's claim that none was intended, or can be found, in *Hughie*.

### ***Long Day's Journey into Night (1956) and A Moon for the Misbegotten (1945)***

In my analyses of both *The Iceman Cometh* and *Hughie*, I have demonstrated that their seeming timelessness is undermined by the subtle seepage of the ideological climate of early Cold War America into both their themes and their form. It is

timelessness, and the impossibility of it, that governs *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1945), the final two plays with which this chapter engages. In these plays, loneliness not only pervades; thematically, it dominates, to the point that it obstructs the examination of other themes and the naturalistic form that presents them. It forces the plays from the realm of timelessness into which the playwright intended to insert them, shining a light through the fog and bringing the onstage family members firmly into their historical moment – and therefore, the playwright into his – as an indirect allegory of the era in which they were produced.

### **National Identity in Performance: “Irishness”**

*Journey* crystallises O’Neill’s long-term probing of the relationships between human beings, the effects of their attempts to connect and to be heard, to be safe and to be understood, by staging twenty-four hours in the life of the Tyrone family. The playwright who once said, ‘One thing that explains more than anything about me is that fact that I am Irish,’ calls on all his knowledge of “Irishness,” as he had seen it enacted on the stages of his youth, to sketch the Tyrone family.<sup>149</sup> Some of these stage-Irish stereotypes linger into his late period, and O’Neill mobilises them critically in *Journey*, in order to explore what it means to be of second-generation Irish descent, in America, in the twentieth century. He does this by refracting his analysis through the lens of his own American-Irish background. Edward L. Shaughnessy asserts, ‘*Long Day’s Journey* has established O’Neill’s Irish authenticity more than any other play. [...] He has made valid his claim as legitimate Irishman [...].’<sup>150</sup> ‘Authenticity’ is a difficult word to employ uncritically, but Shaughnessy is correct in this particular instance. There are consistent, self-conscious attempts throughout the play to root it within an Irish family

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<sup>149</sup> Virginia Floyd, *The plays of Eugene O’Neill: a New Assessment* (New York: Ungar, 1985), p. 537.

<sup>150</sup> Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Eugene O’Neill in Ireland: The Critical Reception* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 71.

first and foremost, both physiologically and thematically. The “Irishness” of the Tyrone family – they are even named after a county of Northern Ireland – is clearly of central importance to understanding the play properly. I will be taking account of the portrayal of “national” traits in the analysis to follow, in the light of this chapter’s continuing preoccupation with identifying the subtly allegorical echoes within the late plays of O’Neill of the HUAC era and its effects on theatrical art.

Because *A Moon for the Misbegotten* was designed to be a fictional sequel to *Journey*, for the purposes of this section, I will be discussing the two plays together. There are differences in the characterisations in the two plays, but they share enough in common to be considered, at a stretch, as one document.

### **Loneliness and “Irishness”**

Nowhere in any of O’Neill’s plays does loneliness so plainly function as the unifying principle of the drama than in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. Each character is always lonely; they are misunderstood, challenged, and misinterpreted by their fellow family members at every turn. They are condemned ritualistically to narrate and re-narrate themselves and their pasts, to each member of the group and to each individual in turn too, *ad infinitum* throughout the play. They make various and increasingly desperate attempts to connect with their family “community,” to justify poor decisions and past indiscretions, or to apportion blame for the tragedies that they have experienced. They tell each other’s stories to each other, too, but without the kind of tolerant amusement that is often seen in *Iceman* towards the narration of the characters’ “pipe dreams.” The characters in *Journey* want to understand each other, and are trapped in the frustrating, cyclical inability to do so.

Normand Berlin believes that O’Neill wrote *Moon* in order,

to fulfil a wish that had no relation to autobiographical reality, [to give] Jamie Tyrone a peaceful death. Jamie O'Neill died in a sanatorium of cerebral apoplexy, nearly blind and mad from too much alcohol. In *Misbegotten* he goes gently into that good night.<sup>151</sup>

However, the portrait of Jamie's loneliness, suffering and advancing dissipation in both plays is ultimately less than kind. His character is self-consciously steeped in many of the glib elaborations of historically and politically questionable stage-Irish tropes. This is not commonly acknowledged in the critical sphere because it is so widely known that O'Neill based the stage version of Jamie on his own brother. Jamie seems to be doomed to a life of lonely alcoholic horror largely because of his Irish heritage: he is afflicted by a particular kind of homogenised, stereotyped "Irishness." This is not indicative of hack writing, or laziness in the characterisation of such a centrally important influence on O'Neill and his canon of work. The stereotypes in evidence in the presentation of Jamie are carefully selected and deployed. The attempt is both to reclaim such cavalier staging of Irish national identity on the American stage, and to redraft it for the purposes of subtle socio-political commentary, albeit couched in a seemingly quietly personal family saga. I have asserted above that all the late plays dramatise O'Neill's belief that storytelling and self-performance through narrative are centrally important to the formation of a community. The maintenance of the unity of that community in the face of its being attacked by hostile forces which do not understand what drives and maintains it, and why such alternative communal formations are necessary, also preoccupies him. The portrait of Jamie/Jim Tyrone in *Journey* and *Moon* is a portrait of a man whose heritage, and the identity-related confusion it brings, is killing him. He is a man whose stories are both killing him, and keeping him alive.

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<sup>151</sup> Normand Berlin, 'The Late Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, pp. 82-95, p. 92.

The stage directions in *Journey* that describe Jamie are indicative of O'Neill's awareness of the stereotypical "Irish" national characteristics on which he was drawing:

*on the rare occasions when he smiles without sneering, his personality possesses the remnant of a humorous, romantic, irresponsible Irish charm – that of the beguiling ne'er-do-well, with a strain of the sentimentally poetic, attractive to women and popular with men.*<sup>152</sup>

The "hyphenism," as Harry Truman would have called it, of the Tyrones is only of the thinnest onstage presence, when the stage directions and casting instructions are allowed to dominate. Tyrone Senior is 'a simple, unpretentious man, whose inclinations are still close to his humble beginnings and his Irish farmer forebears'<sup>153</sup>; Edmund's 'big, dark eyes are the dominant feature in his narrow Irish face'<sup>154</sup>; and of Mary, the stage directions tell us, 'Her face is distinctly Irish in type [...] Her voice is soft and attractive. When she is merry there is a touch of Irish lilt in it.'<sup>155</sup> The family, in short, are so very Irish that it is clear why they have, in *Journey*, failed to make friends with their American neighbours, and why Mary feels isolated when the male members of the family are drinking or absent.

Again, as with *Iceman*, the paradox of being "alone together" raises itself in the choral assemblage of the Tyrones. They suffer because they cannot be together without cyclical guilt, blame, recrimination and personal attacks, but they only have each other with whom to attempt to connect. They are trapped together in the home, each suffering the loneliness engendered by being misunderstood by his and her closest people – that is to say, by his and her "audience." The very act of iterating and reiterating their stories serves to bind them to their fellow characters, and also, which is part of what makes the play so tragic, to cast them asunder from those who would understand them too.

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<sup>152</sup> *Long Day's Journey into Night*, I, p. 722.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 718.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 723.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 718.

In her book *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, Nicola King observes, ‘Repetition is [...] a textual device which reinforces the pattern of narrative determination [...]’.<sup>156</sup> The family determines each member’s identity – their responsibility and guilt, their perspective and their dreams – by bearing witness to the ritualised, cyclical repetition of the family’s history throughout the play. The Tyrones suffer what seems to be a congenital inability to grasp the true import of the past as it manifests in these stories, and therefore cannot move on from it. John Houchin says in *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, ‘the conservative community in the United States (which is actually a multifaceted manifestation) sought solace and protection by embracing the past.’<sup>157</sup> In one sentence, Houchin inadvertently succeeds in casting Eugene O’Neill as a radical playwright, despite his deployment of classical naturalism for the dramatic form of the late plays. This is because although every onstage character in *Long Day’s Journey* is obsessed with ritually retreading and re-examining the past in the cyclical way that characterises all the late plays, the past brings no joy, ‘solace’ or sanctuary. The past in O’Neill’s plays is a dark, dangerous, sad place which, although it cannot be controlled or changed, also cannot be put aside. Therefore, all the characters in, for instance, *Journey* are doomed endlessly to revisit the past in the hope of achieving resolution. From this perspective, the Tyrone family’s “Irishness,” as it is part of that past and therefore part of what binds the family together, is both an integral part of their individual identities, and is also a millstone around their collective neck.

O’Neill makes comparably similar claims of physiological ethnic authenticity for the heroine of *Moon*, Josie Hogan, as he does for the protagonists of *Journey*, urging

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<sup>156</sup> Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2003), p. 76.

<sup>157</sup> John Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 & 2004), p. 3.

the casting of a woman with a ‘*map of Ireland [...] stamped on her face.*’<sup>158</sup> Her ‘*long upper lip and small nose, thick black eyebrows, black hair as coarse as a horse’s mane, freckled, sunburned fair skin, high cheekbones and heavy jaw*’ elucidate this ‘*map*’ for the casting agent.<sup>159</sup> However, he also urges the casting of a woman of such large proportions ‘*that she is almost a freak.*’<sup>160</sup> This shows O’Neill’s tacit acceptance that the characteristics of “Irishness” which he deploys in sketching Josie, Jim *et al* are constructed ones, which will be difficult to stage in reality. One is recalled to the unstageable minutiae of the stage directions of *Hughie*, wherein the Night Clerk’s automaton-like frozen visage and stance is given such soaring, detailed, poetic and complex emotions, memories and thoughts to convey without words. O’Neill therefore uses the stage directions describing his characters in such a way as to set them at odds with their physical selves.

Such clear, self-conscious racial stereotyping also recalls *The Iceman Cometh*’s Larry, with his ‘*gaunt Irish face*’ and ‘*mystic’s meditative pale-blue eyes with a gleam of sharp sardonic humor in them.*’<sup>161</sup> In his case, the stereotyping is even slightly troubling, as some would find it straightforwardly insulting that the shirt of an archetypally Irish character ‘*has the appearance of never having been washed,*’ and that ‘*he methodically scratches himself with his long-fingered, hairy hands,*’ because ‘*he is lousy and reconciled to being so.*’<sup>162</sup> What we have here is a stage Irishman, and not a flattering physical portrait of one at that.

It is important to reiterate here the argument prevailing throughout this chapter. Far from idly or casually deploying two-dimensional and derogatory stereotypes

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<sup>158</sup> O’Neill, ‘*A Moon for the Misbegotten,*’ in *Complete Plays*, ed. by Bogard, pp. 857 - 946, I, p. 857.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 857.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 857.

<sup>161</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, I, p. 566.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. 566.

uncritically in the late plays, O'Neill as a playwright and actor's son remained throughout his working life acutely alive both to the need for performance, and to the power of performance to externalise and fix an identity in question or under threat. Larry's 'gaunt Irish face' and Edmund's 'narrow Irish face,' the 'map of Ireland' demanded of Josie's appearance and the traces of Tyrone Senior's 'humble beginnings and his Irish farmer forebears, draws all these characters together into a continuum of people with multiple loyalties and ethnic backgrounds, who are not free from them, despite being settled in twentieth-century America.<sup>163</sup> One might think that in deeper, sub-textual terms, the loneliness of the first- and second-generation Irish characters in the two plays could be read as a subtle, indirect allegory about feeling in some way that they do not belong in the world in which they find themselves. Shaughnessy believes, for instance, that 'O'Neill's view' of "Irishness" reflected the themes of 'fatalism, alienation, and the full expectation of the despair and sorrow described by Kerby Miller,' meaning that he consciously worked to identify his plays thematically within the Irish immigrant tradition, as well as populating them with first- and second-generation Irish characters.<sup>164</sup> It is clear, however, that it is not at base the Tyrone family's ethnic and national heritage which casts them out of the dominant myths and stories of their adopted nation, but their position in the world in material terms.

Harry Cronin overlooks this in his short book *Eugene O'Neill: Irish and American*. The main problems with this text are twofold. First, Cronin makes the common, but still problematic, error of automatically and exclusively correlating "Irishness" with Catholicism. A great many Irish and those of Irish descent are indeed Catholic, but a great many are not. This uncritical glibness undermines the thesis of the book, as Cronin tends to take every example of what he perceives to be O'Neill's

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<sup>163</sup> *Long Day's Journey into Night*, I, p. 718.

<sup>164</sup> Shaughnessy, *Eugene O'Neill in Ireland*, p. 37.



Catholic heritage as it shows itself in his writing, and read this influence as the playwright's markers of authentic Irish heritage. More worryingly, though, is the yardstick by which Cronin measures what he deems the signifiers of having an "Irish" character to be; he uncritically deploys a highly problematic and outmoded list collated by Raleigh,

John Henry Raleigh puts forth the following ten characteristics of the Irish temperament: the Irish are "excessively familial; non-communal; sexually chaste; turbulent; drunken; alternately and simultaneously [cynical and] sentimental about love; pathologically obsessed with betrayal; religious-blasphemous; loquacious...." and prone to marry late in life.<sup>165</sup>

I disagree with Raleigh and Cronin, in that what I believe we have here, as with Larry's un-cleanliness and Josie's horse-like hair, is a description of a stage-Irish character, rather than a critically engaged socio-political probing into the depths of the Irish soul.

Cronin continues,

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of the family in Irish culture, but it is equally important to consider its unique nature. The Irish family is a unit bound together by no rules. The members of the family may love or hate one another as they wish. Parents may rule their children or be ruled by them. They may say horrendous things to one another or betray one another. But the family is always there with its pervading influence: its awful power of destructive hate or saving love. The excessive concentration on the family can have its own unfortunate backlash. This brings us to the second point: the Irish are non-communal. They are capable of intense loneliness and alienation.<sup>166</sup>

The kind of exiled, isolated, irredeemably Irish cast to the characters of *Journey, Moon* and *Iceman* is a common feature of manufactured stage "Irishness." The echoes of such manufacture can be clearly seen in Cronin's arbitrary lists of what he deems to be "Irish" national traits. Such generalisations are politically dangerous, because they impose an artificial homogeneity on a community, or communities, comprising

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<sup>165</sup> Harry Cronin, *Eugene O'Neill: Irish and American – A Study in Cultural Context* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 23.

<sup>166</sup> Cronin, *Eugene O'Neill: Irish and American*, pp. 26-27.

millions. This is a dangerous standpoint because it fails overtly to acknowledge the political, and unavoidably class-related, aspects of the representation of national and ethnic identity onstage. It is ironic that Cronin, a scholar of O'Neill, falls straight into the trap of generalising about national identity, before examining plays in which O'Neill self-consciously employs such tropes in order to problematise their too-easy elucidation.<sup>167</sup>

### **Self-Performance and Self-Narration**

The “story” of “Irishness” as it is seen in the work of the likes of Cronin, in short, draws on the principle memorably identified by Kerby Miller that the original Irish émigrés who made the crossing to the New World were forced from their homeland by starvation and British racketeering. This left them and their offspring to pine eternally to go “home,” unable truly to settle in their adopted country, regardless of how many generations were born on non-Irish soil. Miller argues that enshrined in the American-Irish consciousness is a self-image of ‘the Irish immigrant as a political exile, victimized by British oppression.’<sup>168</sup> Wherever one stands on this tradition personally, O'Neill nods to its archetypes, and its absorption into the performed “Irishness” of first-generation immigrants to America in his various portrayals of Hogan, Tyrone Senior, Mary, Larry, and Hope. Tyrone Senior, for example, has a strong streak of the Catholic martyr about him, and he is alternately sentimental and aggressive when drunk.

O'Neill highlights these traits as constructed, performative and in process by having Edmund and Jamie conflate Tyrone's fearful memories of the poverty and

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<sup>167</sup>To give Cronin his due, it was in a footnote in this book about O'Neill in which I first found Frank D. Gilroy mentioned; his knowledge of American-Irish playwriting and its playwrights is encyclopaedic. It is just that the cases he makes often fail to convince.

<sup>168</sup>Kerby Miller and Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland: The Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Washington D.C.: Elliot and Clark Publishing, 1994), p. 23.

destitution from which he fled in Ireland, with the hammy nineteenth-century melodramatic acting style in which he made his name:

TYRONE: No, stay where you are. Let it [the light] burn.

EDMUND: That's a grand curtain. (*He laughs.*) You're a wonder, Papa!<sup>169</sup>

In this short exchange, it is plain to see that Tyrone Senior carries a sincere fear of returning to the poverty and suffering of his youth. However, this fear, groundless by this point in his life, has solidified into a ritualised, performative martyrdom that helps him to keep in touch with what he considers to be an integral part of his identity formation: his “Irishness,” as he sees it. His American-Irish sons deride this determination to stay Irish, as is equally traditional in second-generation offspring. This derision, too, is a performative construct which lays claim to an “Irishness” that has been absorbed, processed, assimilated – and rejected.

The danger of the kind of recognisably stage-Irish portrayal of “Irishness” seen in Tyrone is that stereotypes based partly on such arbitrary signifiers as hair, shape of face, and roguishness, are as reductive in their way as HUAC's attempts to measure and enforce certain traits and styles of “Americanness.” Both models project a particular, specific and narrow interpretation of very complex concepts of heritage, genealogy and cultural articulation in order to force artificial homogeneity on endless combinations of individuals.

Bluntly, the ‘over-the-hills-to-the-poorhouse’ tale that Jamie charges James Tyrone with spinning to Edmund's doctors is just that: a tale. He performs the story of his ‘authentic’ Irish suffering and childhood deprivation to his more comfortable, and more critically engaged, sons, and as is common in second-generation offspring, it

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<sup>169</sup> *Long Day's Journey into Night*, IV, p. 794.

irritates them rather than inspiring them with awe. For instance, in Act III when Edmund dismisses his mother's retelling of James' childhood poverty and the menial work he undertook from the age of ten by saying, 'Oh, for Pete's sake, Mama. I've heard Papa tell that machine shop story ten thousand times.' Mary replies, 'Yes, dear, you've had to listen, but I don't think you've ever tried to understand.'<sup>170</sup> This distinction between a story which is told, and one which is understood, is an important one. If the family's history, as told through their stories, is not being conveyed to the other family members, then the power of such self-narration to perform, and therefore lay claim to, an essential sense of self is undermined. In fact, the lack of understanding and acceptance between the four Tyrones, and their reiterated, stylised ethno-nationalistic posturing, problematises O'Neill's whole professional history. I have shown that O'Neill's belief that identity is internally constructed and then projected outwards is contradictory, and this is why. The Tyrone family constantly creates and recreates each of its members through storytelling. The reception of such constructions by the others – the need to be heard, understood and accepted – demonstrates that they are not possessed of an innate or essential internal self, one which can stand apart and alone, at all. This is why the storytelling in *Journey* is repetitious and cyclical: because it is not achieving its essential social purpose.

Moreover, among other points of contention, the short exchange between mother and son quoted above offers a clear articulation of the argument against O'Neill's late plays typifying a straightforwardly searing autobiographical outpouring of honest, lonely anguish. It shows his protagonists' characters formally to be as constructed, manufactured and performative as the playwright's understanding of what it means to

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<sup>170</sup> *Long Day's Journey into Night*, III, p. 787.

have Irish heritage. Kenny goes as far as to say that ‘one of the classic patterns of American immigration history’ is that,

ethnicity is discovered or invented in the new homeland, rather than being carried across the ocean from the old. Having an ethnic identity, far from being an impediment to assimilation, had been for most immigrants a defining characteristic of becoming American.<sup>171</sup>

From this perspective, ethnicity is not and cannot be un-problematically something which is ‘*stamped upon*’ one, but is rather a conscious, contested and performative condition. Thereby, members of a hybrid nation populated largely by immigrants come to ‘imagine’ a collective identity based on ethnic and cultural signifiers of what they are *not* – British, black, and so on – rather than creating a positive impression and performing what they *are*.

## **Ritual**

The rituals of confession, abasement, misunderstanding, frustration, regret and penance introduce a secular version of Catholicism into *Journey* and *Moon*. This secular Catholicism is, in its way, as manufactured as the version of “Irishness” performed by characters such as Jamie/Jim and Tyrone Senior, and is not unconnected to it. Ritual repetition fills up time and should therefore allow loneliness to recede, whether or not such repetition results in one character coming to be closer to another. This both takes into account King’s comment, quoted above, that ‘Repetition [...] reinforces the pattern of narrative determination,’ and expands upon it by reading the reiteration of self-narrating stories as *ritualised* exercises in self-performance, as well as being comments on the need for ‘narrative determination.’ Ritual exists in layers in O’Neill’s late plays. His characters ritualistically tell each other stories about themselves and each other; the

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<sup>171</sup> Kevin Kenny, *The American Irish: A History*, p. 27.

playwright is telling a story, or stories, on top of the onstage narration; and the actors perform people who are performing themselves. Of many examples, Hickey's description of the murder of his wife in *Iceman* has ritualistic elements containing all these layers, as can be seen when he describes chanting his lines about pipe dreams over her dead body. Such ritual is secularised and symbolic, stripped of any overtly religious meaning, an observation which is true of the confessional tone of all four of the plays with which this chapter concerns itself – but it is largely public, as is the ritual of, for instance, going to Mass.

This ritualisation of self-performance and its imperative need for an external audience of some kind to validate and concretise it is significant because, as I have argued consistently in this chapter, identity is performative in twentieth century Irish America, particularly for any of those groups vulnerable to the suspicion of having divided loyalties. Allegiance to the Pope, for instance, or to the “homeland,” could in HUAC's America come to be at odds with American community and national identity formation. If it is the case that innately “American” characteristics must be shown to be of a piece with other religious and national heritages and concerns, then it is possible to conclude that America as a nation was ‘imagined’ into being, as Anderson would have it, *because* it is full of immigrants. This is to say that both “Irishness” and “Americanness” are more than just performative and secularised rituals; the claim becomes that they call *each other* into being by existing in parallel to, and sometimes at odds with, each other. Neither can mean anything in a vacuum; everything is contingent on the performance of identity and loyalty, first, and the audience which receives that performance, second. Seen in this light, undertaking the Pledge of Allegiance, for example, becomes a public performance of national identity. This underlines the validity of Kenny's idea, quoted above, that ethnic and national identification for the

Irish in America was called into being *because* of being an immigrant, rather than being imported *with* the immigrant from the home country to the New World.

### **Storytelling to find Belonging**

O'Neill as a playwright proves himself to be acutely alive to the paradox of these performative and secularised rituals. This is why he has the Tyrone family speechifying, quoting extensively from literary texts, and storytelling incessantly throughout the play. He dramatises both the power of language to situate the individual in a place that they can call home, and the equal and opposite phenomenon that by being trapped by one's stories of the past and one's guilt and blame, these selfsame stories can threaten the feeling of belonging that a home should engender.

For instance, Mary Tyrone in particular is preoccupied with narrating and re-narrating her husband's inability to feel at home in their summer house, or indeed, to grasp the value of a home as a sanctuary, in order to contextualise and therefore to assuage her own loneliness and lack of place. She says to Jamie in Act II Scene I,

He [James] thinks money spent on a home is money wasted. He's lived too much in hotels. Not the best hotels, of course. Second-rate hotels. He doesn't understand a home. He doesn't feel at home in it. And yet, he wants a home. He's even proud of having this shabby place. He loves it here.<sup>172</sup>

Here, James' story, of being on the road for most of the year and therefore failing to see the benefit of a fixed home, is intractably bound up with Mary's story, of being from a more affluent background than her husband. This explains her slightly snobbish tone regarding the kinds of hotels Tyrone favours, and her frustration at failing to recreate her idealised parental home in her own family story. The play makes it clear that the lack of fixed belonging of the Tyrone family is in part connected to their Irish heritage.

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<sup>172</sup> *Long Day's Journey into Night*, II, 1, pp. 749-750.

However, it is concerns of money, expense, debt and security which have ultimately determined their lack of a cemented identity which is bound up with place: material concerns, that is to say, over issues of spiritual longing. American capitalism, therefore, is the fundamental underpinning force affecting the Tyrones' inability to resolve to fit each version of each story with every other, and therefore to create the domestic harmony they all crave. In this way, *Long Day's Journey* actually subtly interrogates its specific socio-economic context, at the indirect allegorical remove of depicting a world in which, at first glance, family politics seem to take thematic prevalence.

### **Belonging to Another**

By contrast, in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, notions of home and belonging are not connected to any fixed physical place – a building, a town, or a country. Such notions are realised rather by the representation of the crucial importance of an unconditionally understanding, forgiving *audience* for the stories of one's life. Home for *Moon's* Jim Tyrone is not located in a place, but in a person. Josie, though horrified and repulsed by Jim's story about having sex with a prostitute on the train which bore his mother's dead body, accepts his flaws and sends him, at the end of the play, to his death with a blessing rather than a curse, 'May you have your wish and die in your sleep soon, Jim, darling. May you rest forever in forgiveness and peace.'<sup>173</sup> In this, she echoes *Iceman's* Larry, who finds that '*A long-forgotten faith returns to him for a moment*' after Parritt's suicide, causing him to whisper, 'God rest his soul in peace.'<sup>174</sup> These two Catholic blessings – from '*a weary old priest*' and a virgin-mother figure – bookend the late plays cycle, and demonstrate that cultural Catholicism is part of the value-system of all of O'Neill's late plays.

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<sup>173</sup> *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, IV, p. 946.

<sup>174</sup> *The Iceman Cometh*, IV, p. 710.



The kind of unconditional positive regard dispensed by Josie in her blessing is precisely what the Tyrone family seeks in one another and does not find in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. It is why *Moon* is a fitting epilogue to *Journey*, rather than merely an afterthought: the latter provides the formal closure that the former could not. The safety and sanctuary found by the tortured soul that is Jim Tyrone in Josie Hogan may or may not be connected to their shared Irish cultural and ethnic heritage, but in the final reckoning, this is not what is at stake in the two characters' mutual love and connection. Here there is a plain message of hope in a positive sense – not even the 'hopeless hope' with which O'Neill stated he imbued his characters, but the unqualified hope for a better world in *this life* – that in others, there can be found safety and belonging, in the same kind of 'imagined' micro-community of two individuals that was also staged in *Hughie*. By inference, this hope can be extended to wider communities and communal groupings.

## **HUAC**

This message goes against the grain of the dominant national narrative of the 1940s, of the danger of confiding in others, voicing one's thoughts, and telling one's story even if it is unpalatable, which was engendered by the climate of HUAC's America. With the House Un-American Committee at the height of its powers, any other knowing one or hearing one's story was potentially politically and socially catastrophic. *Long Day's Journey* dramatises the damaging and dangerous aspects of self-performance and storytelling which Richard Kearney tends to overlook and as such, it indirectly allegorises its wider surrounding climate. However, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* resolves this anxiety and shows, albeit via its fictionalised remove, the peace that being known, heard and, crucially, understood by another can bestow. In this way, notions of home, belonging, and being known in order to come to know oneself

are opposite and equal in *Moon* and *Journey*, Yin and Yang in just the way that loneliness comes in all of O'Neill's plays to function thematically to figure the silent, alternative twin of American capitalist individualism. No-one in *Moon* achieves financial security and economic success; it is a non-material, metaphysical sanctuary that Jim Tyrone finds in the chaste arms of Josie, not a monetary one. Ultimately, the message of the play is a positive one. Despite the potentially damaging effects of openness in the country that gave such powers of arbitrary judgment and condemnation to a body like HUAC, O'Neill dramatises what he holds to be a fundamentally human truth: above danger and the threateningly negative power which offering one's stories to another can call upon one, there is peace and safety to be found in being both heard *and understood* by another.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, my contention in this chapter has been that the anxious climate which cloaked the second half of the twentieth century in HUAC's America pervades the dramatic form of all the plays under analysis, albeit at an indirect allegorical remove. O'Neill's late plays stage the sad attempts of those who do not belong to the dominant narrative of their nation, to connect and to narrate a new form of community identity. His characters strive to forge a place to be safe from the fear of isolation and loneliness which is the flip-side of all the many versions of the American Dream. This sad desire is staged in the late plays of O'Neill in the context of the damage that being an outsider to the rightwing, homogenised societal norm imposed under HUAC could do to one's character, standing, and even liberty. To attempt to carve a place in the world in which to be, and to feel safe, O'Neill's characters compulsively narrate and re-narrate their own and each other's life-stories in a ritualistic, cyclical way. They insist on being heard, though in reality they are often ignored or only selectively attended to; while

talking, they have an audience, which renders their loneliness bearable. Normand Berlin believes that the regulars in Hope's bar 'belong together and feed off each other; they are family.'<sup>175</sup> By extension, the audience or readership of the plays bears silent witness to the characters' testimonies in the comparatively cloistered, private environment of the theatre, a very different atmosphere to the unforgiving public courtrooms and the clamouring press agents of HUAC. The audience is therefore drawn in and offered a sense of belonging and affiliation with the onstage characters. They are implicated in the alternative community formations being forged and tested onstage, allowing the playwright to forge physically in the performance space a group of sympathetic non-participants in the national hysteria. The telling of stories, therefore, is integral to the establishment of a unified resistance to the negatively unifying principles of McCarthyism.

As this chapter has demonstrated, O'Neill's particular understanding of realism enhances this sense of resistance, and the possibility of including outsiders in community formation. When stories are sympathetically received by onstage listeners, as we see in *Iceman* and *Moon*, for instance, the dramatisation of how badly the storyteller needs this forgiveness brings home to the audience the urgency of the need for understanding and gentleness. This gentleness and acceptance clash formally with the hostile barrage of questions and accusations that increasingly came to characterise HUAC's approach to rooting out "un-Americanness."<sup>176</sup>

Conversely, as the analysis above has also demonstrated, when stories are incoherently rendered, as in *Hughie*, or unsympathetically handled, as in *Journey*,

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<sup>175</sup> Berlin, 'The Late Plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, p. 85.

<sup>176</sup> Eric Bentley's edited transcript of the HUAC trials, *Thirty Years of Treason*, is littered with the "stage direction" noting the 'pounding gavel' of the Committee chairman, hammering the witness into submission.

onstage micro-communities are destabilised, and loneliness immediately threatens. Because of the ritualised, cyclical rhythm of O'Neill's brand of realism, the (offstage) audience is in a position physically to break the spell of claustrophobia and anxiety by bearing silent witness to onstage events – and, of course, by leaving at the end of the performance.

Analysing O'Neill's late plays has involved a close critical examination of the various representations of loyalty, storytelling, loneliness, and community formation, from both positive and negative standpoints. Such analysis will serve as a cornerstone foundation for the ensuing two chapters of this thesis, which exact comparably detailed analyses of the dramatic works of two later American-Irish, HUAC-era playwrights: J.P. Donleavy and Frank D. Gilroy. The intention is to show that it is possible to start to trace a specifically second-generation American-Irish tradition of playwriting; one which deploys loneliness and storytelling thematically, the latter in order to seek relief from the former. My contention is that all the plays under scrutiny strive to show that identity – social, political, familial, national – is performative, which is to say that it requires, at least, a player and an audience in order to work. Increasingly relevant as the argument of the thesis progresses will be the recognition that loneliness is not a singularly negative phenomenon, but that it can protect one from the dangers of being known, and provide respite from the persecutory elements of community function. Chapter 2 will develop the implications of these assertions by addressing two plays by Donleavy.

Loneliness, Storytelling and Community in Performance: The Climate of the House  
Un-American Activities Committee's America in Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill,

J.P. Donleavy and Frank D. Gilroy

**Singular People:**

**The plays of J.P. Donleavy in the mid-HUAC years**

**Introduction**

The first chapter of this thesis has plotted the point on the graph at which my investigation begins by offering close literary analyses of the late plays of Eugene O'Neill. I am looking into how the form and content of second-generation American-Irish playwriting might be shown subtly to echo and critique the spectacular, performative and – increasingly – scripted demonstration of certain stripes of “Americanness,” as demanded by the House Un-American Activities Committee’s trials. My contention across this thesis is that loneliness is the central, key motif to much of the American-Irish drama produced after World War II. Loneliness is the allegorical site on which the individualistic, capitalist American Dream is shown in these plays to fail those very individuals to whom it claims to offer the opportunity for self-betterment. Moreover, the performative nature of national identity and loyalty, demanded as it was by the American government under the tenets of HUAC, posed problems which led to isolation, exclusion and loneliness for artists, and particularly for those arts practitioners of second-generation immigrant stock. Such figures were potentially excluded both from the dominant national narratives of the time, and from their more immediate communities, due to their uncertain position both within and without these communities; this indirectly raises the question of the validity of notions of “Americanness” in its capitalist incarnations.

This sense of exclusion, and the attempts of the three playwrights whose work constitutes my case study to sketch alternative, non-mainstream community formation despite, and even because of, its effects results in a mounting belligerence and social withdrawal into personalised narratives in the playwrights' works. However, this belligerence does not manifest in overt or two-dimensional theatrical rejections of HUAC's demands for publicly-performed loyalty and fidelity to their own versions of "Americanness." Rather, in contrast to O'Neill's self-professedly universalising themes and theatrical metaphors, later playwrights such as Donleavy – and, as Chapter 3 will assert, Frank D. Gilroy – turn away from depicting protagonists who believe in, and demand, recognition and acceptance. Instead, and increasingly, a pre-emptive rejection of presumed social mores comes to thematic prevalence. With this rejection, which may on the surface seem to be positive in intention, the theme of loneliness, exacerbated by frustration with the oppressive and judgmental climate which surrounds the protagonists as much as it surrounded the playwrights that created them, comes to the fore. These are the arguments with which this chapter concerns itself: in sum, to follow is the case that Donleavy's works, as with O'Neill's before him, function as indirect allegorical critiques of the HUAC era.

Because of its preoccupation with chronology and historical context, seen in this sense as the steadily-gathering momentum of the power, influence and activities of HUAC as the era progressed, this "middle period" of this thesis uses as its exemplar selected plays by the lesser-known American-Irish playwright J.P. Donleavy.<sup>177</sup> In order to start to identify a developmental trajectory from O'Neill's late plays to the works of Donleavy, I closely read his plays *The Ginger Man* (1959) and *Fairy Tales of New York* (1960). The intention is to assess the extent to which the two playwrights'

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<sup>177</sup> Donleavy is not unknown as an author, journalist, letter-writer and memoirist, but to my knowledge there has never before been undertaken an extended literary analysis of any of his dramatic works.

preoccupation with storytelling, the construction of identity through ritual narrative performance, and the effects of not belonging to one's dominant national stories and myths, are comparable. To begin I look briefly, in order to contextualise my analysis, at two of Donleavy's "national biographies," a genre which O'Neill unofficially worked within and which Donleavy overtly made part of his oeuvre. These books, *J.P. Donleavy's Ireland* and *The History of the Ginger Man* – the first about Ireland, the second about America – are relevant to this chapter because their content follows on from O'Neill's attempts to create alternative, non-mainstream versions of his nation onstage, and because both volumes taken together clearly demonstrate that "Donleavy" is, in fact, a performative construct. Lastly, this chapter demonstrates that the progression from O'Neill to Donleavy along the trajectory this thesis plots is a largely negative one. In Donleavy's plays, anger, bitterness, regret and frustration are palpable; and yet, the twin claims of hope and aspiration are still alive in them, as they are in O'Neill. My argument is therefore that the effects of the work of HUAC on American community formation, as it is indirectly allegorised on the twentieth-century American-Irish stage, were both long-lasting and, crucially, cumulative.

### **"National Biography" as Self-Performance**

In his part-memoir, part-national biography of his adopted (and ancestral) nation, *J.P. Donleavy's Ireland In All Her Sins and in Some Of Her Graces*, Donleavy's justification for claiming Ireland as his own in the title of the book runs thus:

And who am I to talk. Or explain. Or raise a finger to admonish, point or accuse. Or cast a first stone. Or say this land is not what it could be. Or should remain what it was. Or even murmur about the cunning gombeen man who might desecrate and sell off this nation and bring it to its derelict sorrowful knees. It is

my nation. Mine. Where I am a citizen. Both by blood and convenience. Who became so, entitled as I always was by the Irish birth of my parents.<sup>178</sup>

Donleavy's attempt to assert his right to discuss, and regularly to disparage, Ireland draws together many of the issues with which this chapter concerns itself, and it is worth pausing to attend to what they are. This will prepare the ground for the analysis of his first two plays to follow.

In the above quotation, Donleavy's opening query, 'And who am I to talk,' answers the charge of inauthenticity to which the author feels vulnerable. Also, that he considers himself to be directly addressing an audience in this way points up the issues of self-performance and self-narration which were so central to the concerns of the previous chapter of this thesis. This situates him as a playwright on a continuum that began with O'Neill, and his account of his right to speak, coupled with his awareness of a listening and judging audience which can either offer censure or approval, demonstrate that the author is intent on narrating himself into existence. His reiterated claim, 'It is my nation. Mine,' stakes a double claim to the right to speak out: being of Irish stock, and having chosen to take up Irish citizenship for the very different, and possibly conflicting, reasons of 'blood and convenience.' The reasons conflict because the violence of the imagery implied by Donleavy's choice of 'blood' to refer to his ancestral heritage is undercut immediately by his appending of 'convenience' to the earlier term, rendering his dual claim to "Irishness" weaker.

Donleavy constructs the impression of a lonely and isolated narrator. He projects the alternately plaintive and aggressive tone of one who has been cast out of America and its predominating notions of what "Americanness" should constitute. He

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<sup>178</sup> J.P. Donleavy, *J.P. Donleavy's Ireland In All Her Sins and in Some Of Her Graces* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), pp. 8-9.



seeks a home and a place to belong, though as my later analysis shows, Ireland as a home for ‘returning’ second-generation immigrants is as problematic a place and notion as America can be.

On the matter of “Irishness” in its second-generation incarnation, Stephanie Rains offers the following assessment of the connected issues of belonging and self-creation:

Irish-Americans, then, were placed in a difficult position in terms of identity formation. While, within America, their Irishness was perceived as both too strong an influence and in itself an inherent threat to their Americanness, within Ireland their exposure to American culture was itself seen as inherently threatening to Irish values and therefore, by extension, to the state itself. It appeared that not only were “hyphenated Americans” unwanted, but so too were “hyphenated Irish.”<sup>179</sup>

Rains’ summary succinctly describes the situation that a figure such as Donleavy cuts on the island of Ireland, and in America. It explains why the admission that Donleavy’s Irish citizenship was adopted rather than innate is a political as much as it is an ethnic issue, which he himself underlines by his admission that he ‘became so.’ Despite his parents’ Irish origins, his own nationality as a second-generation American-Irishman is more complex, moot, and requiring conscious performance. Even that this narrator sees his parents’ first-generation Irish identity as unproblematic – innate, simple, and unworthy of note – marks him out in identification with O’Neill, and aligns him with the emerging traditions of second-generation American-Irish literary outsiderism which I am beginning to identify.

Therefore, identity for Donleavy is both a costume which is put on, and a construct which can be manipulated in performance to others. In the light of Rains’

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<sup>179</sup> Stephanie Rains, *The Irish-American in Popular Culture 1945-2000* (Dublin and Portland, Oregon: Irish Academic Press, 2007), p. 199.

assessment of second-generation “hyphenated” identities, the first-person singular ‘I’ in Donleavy’s quote above serves to put the narrator in the position of both authority and isolation. He speaks for himself, for his ownership, his belonging and his experience, when he speaks of his adopted country. This both claims authenticity and authority for the narrator, and simultaneously has the practical effect of dislocating him from his fellow countrymen – in America and in Ireland – as he claims only to speak for himself. In this way, the narrator of *J.P. Donleavy’s Ireland* pre-emptively rejects the possible dual rejections of the dominant community identities in both his country of birth and his country of ethnic origin. He stands himself apart and alone, laying claim to his own story as his sole property, and refusing any easy, “innate” alliance with anyone on national grounds alone.

I have said that the tone of the quotation is ambiguous; this is due to the consistent lack of emphasising punctuation which is one of the defining formal facets of Donleavy’s entire corpus. Because of this grammatical quirk, it is possible to apply the stresses in different ways as a reader. This means that Donleavy’s claim to authenticity – or at least, the claim to be in a valid position to comment on Ireland – can be read either as a plaintive plea for acceptance, or as an aggressive, confrontational invitation to the reader to gainsay the narrator’s right to speak.

In fact, much of Donleavy’s writing, both fictional and non-fictional, has the effect of destabilising and decentering the reader in this way, leaving them unsure whether or not they are excluded from the narrator’s or the protagonist’s trust. In the climate of fear pervading the Cold War era of McCarthyism, which had reached fever pitch with the rise to prominence of Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1954, it is possible to argue in formal terms that this ambiguity could serve to cloak the narrator somewhat. It renders him opaque and means that it is more difficult to situate him ideologically,

which could come to protect him from charges of disloyalty and non-belonging. Transferring this climate seamlessly to Ireland, Donleavy goes on in *J.P. Donleavy's Ireland*, 'But my privilege arises, too, from a voice oft banned and shunned within these [Irish] shores but which has already spoken for more than thirty years, saying a song of at times bitter love, yet of love for this land.'<sup>180</sup> Again, we can see a sense of complaint and grievance, coupled with a sad insistence on the good intentions of the author. It is hard to tell whether the 'privilege' of which he speaks is a blessing or a curse; the image of 'bitter love' echoes in its conflicting tone the 'blood and convenience' of the earlier quotation. These simultaneous and contradictory sentiments are often highlighted by a first-person/third-person slippage in the narratorial voice of his works, and these subtle linguistic quirks serve as traces of evidence that Donleavy is inadvertently, and therefore indirectly, allegorising the era in which he was writing. It is possible to read his prose and infer things from it, against its own seeming grain, because these formal slippages pervade Donleavy's corpus from his earliest writings to his most recent texts. They serve to show that he is alive to both the power and the potential danger inherent in telling one's story, howsoever unconsciously, as was his predecessor O'Neill.

### **Donleavy and Literary Form**

Donleavy's plays, like his memoirs and his novels, wrestle with notions of the self, the other, "Irishness," "Americanness," and loneliness, and they can be read in the context of the dominant cultural and political mores of their time of production. They are part-memoir, part-national biography, and part-grotesque, pantomime depictions of certain styles and trends of national attitudes and views. In a very rare direct mention of Donleavy in academic publishing, the Irish Marxist critic Joe Cleary acknowledges the author's manipulation of such romantic styles and trends, describing his oeuvre as being

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<sup>180</sup> J.P. Donleavy, *J.P. Donleavy's Ireland*, p. 9.

pervaded by ‘the disenchanting, anti-romantic thrust common to Irish naturalism.’<sup>181</sup> It is true that nothing is safe from ridicule and belittlement in Donleavy’s works; and this is certainly intended, as his memoirs attest, to serve as a salutary lesson about the treatment of the artist by twentieth-century America and Ireland. Above all things, J.P. Donleavy’s plays are texts which act out anger – absolute outraged righteous fury – at the exclusion of their protagonists from the communities in which they live. His protagonists are frustrated by finding themselves unable properly to connect with those around them, to be understood and valued, and to be allowed peacefully to co-exist with their peers. This anger bursts out at times in violent scenes, but more often it simmers below the surface of the action, unexpressed and on the brink. This simmering sub-textual rage can be read as an example of the subtle allegorical echo of the effects of the prosecutions of HUAC on the climate of the time, which has seeped into the artworks with which this thesis engages.

### **Formal Sub-textual Rage**

A good example of this dual presence of violence, explicit and implicit, is to be found in Donleavy’s description of his own behaviour when visiting the theatre in which his play *The Ginger Man* should be opening, only to find it in darkness:

I turned away from the darkened theater, my chill and silence turning slowly into a teeth clenched mumbling fury. I had walked but a few steps when there was a sudden flood of light behind me. I turned and looked at the brightness spilling over the street and lighting up the façade of shops across the road. I found myself looking down upon my right hand doubled in a hard fist which I put quietly away in my pocket.<sup>182</sup>

The ‘hard fist’ which Donleavy prefers to ‘put quietly away’ can be read as a metaphor for the raging, and largely silent, lonely anger pervading all his works. The contrast

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<sup>181</sup> Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007), p. 156.

<sup>182</sup> J.P. Donleavy, “Preface,” in *The Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 30.

between the angry inner self and the seemingly polite and reasonable outer self highlights how identity is performative for Donleavy, and that he grasps the import of Goffman's consideration of non-verbal signifiers and their implications for community membership and acceptance. Donleavy shows, by allowing the reader to glimpse his internal narratives and their contrasting external equivalents simultaneously, that the perception and reception of oneself can be mismatched – deliberately or unconsciously – through the power of telling one's stories. This was also seen, for instance, in Erie's 'Wise Guy' posturing in O'Neill's play *Hughie*.

Donleavy is known more for his novels than his plays, the latter of which were all adapted for the stage from the former. The nature of adaptation from prose to stage text pulls heavily on the form of both *The Ginger Man* and *Fairy Tales of New York*, and has implications for their content too. I have chosen to focus on the stage versions of the texts, rather than the novels, for the reason I noted in the Introduction to this thesis: theatrical art, by the nature of its form, is particularly suited to analysis which intends to look at the performative elements of identity and community. Things can be embodied and shown onstage in non- and extra-verbal ways that add a different, complementary dimension to a reading-based literary analysis. Moreover, the versions of the stories specifically designed for the theatre are worthy of critical attention in their own right, because their dramatic form and thematic content serve to indicate the midpoint of an emergent field, which this thesis starts to outline: second-generation American-Irish theatre.

This chapter closely analyses Donleavy's two early plays in chronological turn. It assesses how and why their thematic preoccupation with loneliness, isolation and miscommunication can be understood in terms of Donleavy's unconscious response to, and rejection of, the rightwing climates of both his country of birth, America, and his

country of choice, Ireland. All Donleavy's texts, to some extent, seem to react against the dominant narratives of oppression, religious domination, censorship and a desire to apoliticise the arts which characterised both these plays' surrounding climate. Lastly, consideration will be given to Donleavy's position as a post-O'Neill playwright, reflecting on the extent to which he may have been influenced by, or rejected, the themes and forms evident in O'Neill's late plays. It concludes with an examination of the formal function of pseudo-autobiographical figures in the work of both playwrights, and sets the stage for the next chapter's discussion of the later American-Irish playwright Frank D. Gilroy.

#### **'What They Did in Dublin with *The Ginger Man: A Play*'**

In 1959 J.P. Donleavy decided to move the stage version of his masterwork, *The Ginger Man*, from London to Dublin, to be staged in the city in which it is set. The reasons behind this curious decision are complex; reading the play today, it is difficult to believe that he even tried to stage the piece there. The essay which Donleavy wrote about the attempt to garner critical and public acclaim for his play in 1950s Ireland conflicts deeply within itself in terms of its description of the play's reception – it was closed down by the Archbishop of Dublin after three days – and in terms of its author's feelings towards Ireland and the Irish. Understanding these feelings is important to continuing the work of plotting thematic and formal preoccupations regarding issues of community and belonging which, I contend, persist from the time of O'Neill's *Iceman* all the way to Gilroy's *Any Given Day* (1993).

Therefore, in the following section of this chapter, it is worth paying close attention to this essay, 'What They Did in Dublin with *The Ginger Man: A Play*.' Such analysis can contribute to a conceptual framework from which to extrapolate its author's

understanding of notions of community, loyalty, and the identity as they may be rooted in identification with others. Donleavy is an outsider inside Ireland, as O'Neill was an outsider to the dominant national narratives of 1940s and 1950s America, and this chapter deals with why. The protagonists of both playwrights' works struggle for recognition and acceptance, and although in the main they do not find it, their *attempts* to do so are what come to define their performative identity, howsoever unstable it is. This is as true of the two playwrights' purportedly semi-autobiographical self-portrait characters as it is of their fictional protagonists.

For instance, what is immediately noticeable about the account given by Donleavy in this essay is his uncertainty whether, in the climate of the country in which he was attempting to stage his play, he classifies himself as an American or an Irishman. This is a centrally important issue in coming to understand both the essay, and the play itself, because the performativity of identity in terms of national definition is crucial to the understanding of the twentieth-century American-Irish plays with which this thesis concerns itself. Donleavy's essay, at base, is a story about the ambiguities of identity which he believes to pervade any attempt to produce a creative document; and indeed, any attempt to appeal to the wider cultural community to accept such creative documents as valid works of art. He attempts to call himself – or rather, one version of himself – into being by telling the tale of staging his play in Ireland, but the self he creates in the piece is not solid or clear at all. He seems to become “American” in his mind when feeling begrudged and hard done by in Ireland, and to switch to “Irish” when attempting to garner favour and hoping for acceptance.

Such shifts from pole to pole, often highlighted by the narrative slippage I have mentioned above, is fundamental Donleavy territory, in conceptual terms. His narrators are so ephemerally unfixed, unclear and contradictory that the reader can never be sure

whether he hates and rejects glib, uncritical national identity categories, or in his deployment of them, accepts them in all their unsatisfactory ambiguity. Cleary, for instance, believes that for Donleavy and his peers, ‘the object is no longer to deliver a savage critique of society so much as to parody the conventions of romance and of naturalism alike by pushing them to absurd or zany extremes.’<sup>183</sup> I would argue, not exactly against Cleary but not quite with the thrust of his assessment either, that a strong parody of national and ethnic characteristics need not automatically bar itself from also achieving a ‘savage critique of society,’ particularly as can be seen in the works of J.P. Donleavy, of whom he speaks. For Donleavy himself, national identity is defined wholly negatively: that is, in confrontational terms, whereby his self-performed nationality becomes part of his belligerent reaction to the rejection he constantly fears is imminent. He angrily seizes and projects “Irishness” when in a situation in Ireland that he resents; yet he becomes seemingly authentically “American” when success or failure beckons and the struggle has, one way or another, momentarily abated. Speaking of the novel version of *The Ginger Man* in a very rare direct academic address to the writing of Donleavy, Thomas LeClair notes, ‘The poverty of Ireland is not, however, a simple economic problem; it is bound up with the spiritual malaise hinging on a [...] repression Sebastian [Dangerfield, the book’s protagonist] finds appalling.’<sup>184</sup> The ‘spiritual malaise’ against which Donleavy pits his various “Donleavy” protagonists, of which Dangerfield is but the first, enrages these protagonists. The piety and judgmentalism of, for instance, the Irish people whom Dangerfield encounters in *The Ginger Man*’s Dublin present as flat, two-dimensional types precisely in order that their flatness and interchangeability highlights how the repressive climate in which they live has stymied

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<sup>183</sup> Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, p. 156.

<sup>184</sup> Thomas LeClair, ‘A Case of Death: The Fiction of J. P. Donleavy’, *Contemporary Literature*, 12 (3), (1971), 329-344 (p. 330).



the development of their characters and personality. Therefore, LeClair is convincing when he argues that Dangerfield ‘finds appalling’ the claustrophobic atmosphere of Dublin in the 1950s, and we can infer that Donleavy employs stereotypical national traits critically, rather than unconsciously, in order to critique the societies from which he draws such parodies.

For instance, in an example taken from Donleavy’s autobiographical essay ‘What They Did in Dublin,’ when Donleavy and his agent Philip Wiseman are summoned to the Gaiety Theatre, where the play version of *The Ginger Man* was being staged in Dublin, the narrator is on edge, having learned that the first night’s audience had largely comprised plainclothes policemen. In preparing himself for battle, he squares up to the theatre’s manager thus: ‘I suppose, breaking down the facts, it was a strange little meeting. An Irishman and a Jew against an Irishman and a Jew. The Irishmen it seems were the seconds. Mr Wiseman and Elliman meeting head on.’<sup>185</sup> Within a little over a page, Donleavy has gone further to alienate and detach himself from the possibility of being hurt by the exchange of views in the meeting. As a narrating voice, he steps outside the account of the meeting, presenting ‘Donleavy’ in the third person, rather than the first person he had largely favoured until this point in the essay:

Mr Donleavy talked easily about the history of the play. [...] Mr Donleavy, having always been fascinated by people without a pot to piss in, has always been a great one for handing out the pot. So back in Dublin in that office and after Mr Donleavy’s little tale it was obvious all were touched and the group nearly came to handshakes before being led out by the manager to seats to view proceedings on the stage.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Donleavy, “What They Did in Dublin with *The Ginger Man*,” *The Plays*, p. 43.

<sup>186</sup> Donleavy, “What They Did in Dublin with *The Ginger Man*,” pp. 44-45.

The slippage of the narrative voice, illustrated by the quote above, draws sharp attention to the fact that the narrator is storytelling in this essay; that a narrative is being invented and manipulated by the writer. In the political climate of the mid-1950s Cold War world, the effects of inventing and manipulating a narrative came to have significant consequences for many “friendly” and “unfriendly” witnesses to HUAC. The very fact that the decision about whether or not to inform to HUAC was characterised in terms of camaraderie and allegiance by the use of “friendly/unfriendly” to describe the choice people made is telling. It is indicative of issues of community belonging, communal and individual identity, and the danger of exclusion, all of which were at stake in this play’s surrounding socio-political climate and all of which, howsoever indirectly, acted upon it.

### **Storytelling**

The narrative slippage described above serves to make ‘Mr Donleavy’ both an outsider, and a seemingly objective observer of events, in the tale he is telling. Indeed, this status of being outside the events under discussion, despite being in the room where the discussion was taking place, serves clearly to stimulate the formal construction of the essay. That is to say, if Donleavy were unable or unwilling to write himself out of the action in this way, and reflectively to observe himself playing the role of himself, he would not, it seems, be able to tell the story he is relating. This achieves more than merely rendering the narrator opaque in order to protect the author from having to answer for the contents of the piece at a later date. It both adds an air of fiction to the narrative, and conversely, romanticises the meeting in just the way that Cleary believes Donleavy’s anti-naturalism could not function to do. Because the “Donleavy” figure has slipped out of the narrative, he is safe from being demonised for it – and yet, he controls

it as a story he is telling, and thereby lays claim to its content and its message. The meeting therefore becomes indirectly allegorically comparable to a microcosmic version of a HUAC hearing, wherein the artist is publicly tested and must assert his sense of himself and his identity to others, in the form of telling a tale. However, in this instance, Donleavy the author tells a tale *about* telling a tale to the panel, removing his narrative self to the third person in order to preserve it, rather than to conceal it.

Later, when Donleavy is told that the play is being closed, he reflects on the moment when he had to stop fighting and accept that the Archbishop of Dublin had shut the show down: ‘A brief moment of silence and these two American figures withdrew. [...] I saw John Ryan lurking on the staircase to see that I was not molested, which chilled me somewhat. Surely the Irish public would never attack a visitor.’<sup>187</sup> Immediately, ‘the Irish’ have become the other, viewed from the angry and frustrated perspective of an American outsider: Donleavy, who only a dozen pages earlier had made up one of the ‘Irishmen’ in the meeting with the theatrical management. Now, having been rejected by the country of his ‘blood,’ he becomes an American ‘visitor’ to the land which, in other writings, he has repeatedly claimed as his own. Thereby, the story he tells becomes that of a visiting foreigner persecuted in an alien land.

What is fascinating about this representation is how it problematises and critiques the notion of Ireland as a “home” for “returning” second-generation émigrés such as Donleavy. In the angry story he tells about his experiences of trying to stage *The Ginger Man* in Dublin, the author contradicts the warm stereotypes of Irish hospitality and the general nostalgic romanticism widely associated with the American-Irish diaspora’s perceptions of the Irish race. It is not a “homecoming” that Donleavy experiences and describes in this essay. It becomes a forced, and failed, attempt to

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<sup>187</sup> Donleavy, “What They Did in Dublin with *The Ginger Man*,” pp. 49-50.

“invade” his ancestral homeland with his jarring and disturbing play, which itself is also thematically preoccupied with de-romanticising the Irish. In this analysis, I am fulfilling the hope of Stephanie Rains, when she posited early on in her book *The Irish-American in Popular Culture* that by ‘focus[ing] upon moments of contact, both literal and imaginative, between Irish America and Ireland,’ it may be possible ‘to attempt an examination of the tensions which exist between these two cultures.’<sup>188</sup> J.P. Donleavy’s essay ‘What They Did in Dublin With *The Ginger Man: A Play*’ is a textual embodiment of such tensions.

### ***The History of the Ginger Man: Telling Stories about Belonging***

*The History of the Ginger Man* is Donleavy’s equivalent American tome to pair with *J.P. Donleavy’s Ireland*. *The History of the Ginger Man* is a similarly blended text of part-autobiography and part-national memoir of America, and throughout it the narrator struggles in a similar way with the contradictions of his national characters and identities. His feelings about the Irish race – or, at least, some of his feelings about some of the Irish – flare angrily and suddenly in the text, just as they do in the much earlier essay, ‘What They Did in Dublin.’

For instance, when attempting to make his way in the world as a painter in Ireland in the 1950s, the young Donleavy’s frustration with the art world’s refusal to accept his self-professed genius is regularly focused on the Irish populace itself, rather than on the Irish art establishment’s handful of representatives:

[...] [I]t was quickly dawning on me that Ireland, with its small inbred population of highly active begrudgers, was no place to expect to survive long enough to become rich and celebrated, as I innocently enough planned to do.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Rains, *The Irish-American in Popular Culture*, p. 9.

<sup>189</sup> J.P. Donleavy, *The History of the Ginger Man* (London: Viking, 1994), p. 43.

Such anger serves to demonstrate Donleavy's frustrations with the attitudes of the two nations, America and Ireland, to which he lays claim to belonging, and their refusal to accept him as they find him. It shows that he does desire to change the political landscape, rather than merely wishing to parody it, as Cleary argues is his sole intention; or at least, that his theatrical output resists bending to the dominant political narratives surrounding it. However, Donleavy only wishes for change insofar as he desires his world to accept *him* unchanged, in the full awareness of the ambiguities and contradictions that comprise his multiple, "hyphenated" identity.

### **Loneliness**

Donleavy's ridiculing and belittlement of both the Irish and the Americans, therefore, and his chronicles of frustration at their limitations and shortcomings, offer the reader a "Donleavy" who revels in his outsiderism and embraces the ambiguities of his identity. For him, as for O'Neill before him, loneliness is on occasion a positive phenomenon; it is safer for one such as himself not to form allegiances and become subsumed in an homogenous community identity, for fear of losing or endangering his sense of self. His national pastiches are deployed critically and selectively, in order to manipulate his self-representing narratives and the audiences that receive them. LeClair argues that Donleavy's protagonist Dangerfield 'doesn't choose between authentic and inauthentic existence.'<sup>190</sup> He means that instead, for Donleavy, and for the various "presentations of self" which his lead characters constitute, everything is authentic – or everything is inauthentic – because self-performance is everything: the *act* of telling one's story is the thing, rather than the *effects* of it. This is why the author slips seamlessly from American to Irish and back again in his own accounts of his encounters

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<sup>190</sup> LeClair, 'A Case of Death,' p. 332.

with both peoples. This slippage, like the first person/third person narrative slippage described above, shows that he views his self-construction as being conscious, performative, and in constant negotiation. He delivers himself of his performance in order both to seek an accepting audience, and simultaneously to dare the reading public to reject him. Like O'Neill before him, he is concerned to forge an alternative community from those who accept his life-stories, and pre-emptively to react against possible censure and rejection by his peers.

### **Oppression as Artistic Stimulus**

According to his own account of attempting to stage *The Ginger Man* in Dublin, it is clear that on one level, Donleavy thrived on the various – and largely successful – efforts to censor and molest his play. It seems that the repression, conflict, rejection and frustration of his artistic endeavours he endured in Ireland spurred him on to develop his art further. His uncritical, abstract commitment to his singular artistic vision was concretised by his difficulties in achieving acceptance and acclaim for his work. Curiously, it seems to follow that in Donleavy's version of events, the oppressive and censorious climate in which he lived and worked stimulated, rather than stymied, his artistry and creativity. Indeed, the belligerence and bloody-mindedness of the narrator of 'What They Did in Dublin with *The Ginger Man: A Play*' became in essence the central motif of all J.P. Donleavy's literary works, both fictional and non-fictional.

The concluding lines of his American autobiography, *The History of The Ginger Man*, sum up the effect of a repressive and claustrophobic, rightwing climate on his life and works:

My fist had steadily grown strong to raise against sneaks and bullies. Shaking my knuckles in the mealmouthed faces brought silence to the slurs and sneers.

[...] But the fist I shook and the rage I spent has at last blossomed. And before it should fade, I'd like to say that I am glad.<sup>191</sup>

If Donleavy was spiritually strengthened as a writer by the offences he perceived against his person everywhere, in a more practical sense the 'fist [he] shook and the rage [he] spent' also came to be woven throughout the themes and forms of his whole body of literature. He wrote multiple memoirs, as well as dozens of shorter articles and essays, chronicling his personal battle to achieve professional and social recognition for the masterwork which he clearly feels his novel *The Ginger Man*, and its stage adaptation, to be. The battles he fought became the story he tells the world about himself in his literature. As I have outlined above, there are identifiable "Donleavy" character types in nearly every single one of his works. This self-narrativising is necessary for the author, both to create and to project his sense of his self-perception onto the world. The aim is to leave behind a body of work which will continue to "fight" on his behalf once he is dead. I hope that this thesis serves in some respects to further this aim by tracing elements of resistance to the twin pervasive climates of America and Ireland in which this playwright produced his best work, notwithstanding that this resistance figures at a further allegorical remove than was perhaps intended.

### **Storytelling as Self-Performance**

Donleavy's awareness that it is a story he tells in his various memoirs – with all the associated implications of fictionalisation, ambiguity and misrepresentation contingent in defining the texts as memoirs – is encapsulated in the final paragraph of *The History of The Ginger Man*:

But come here till I tell you. Of a further word I have to say. Out here in the windy, wet remoteness of the west. Where the dead are left to be under their

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<sup>191</sup> Donleavy, *The History of the Ginger Man*, p. 517.

anonymous stones. So quiet in their unmarked graves. The grass growing long above their tombs in the salty Atlantic air.<sup>192</sup>

This quotation draws together all the key themes of this chapter, and creates an appropriate point of departure from which to view the plays of Donleavy. The construction of the first sentence, ‘But come here till I tell you,’ is a self-consciously Irish way of starting to tell a tale. It is conspiratorial and playful in tone, though its presence jars the reader because it is more traditionally a way of beginning a story, rather than ending one, as Donleavy uses it. The presence of death thrust into a paragraph which has such a playful beginning raises the spectre of loneliness as the pervading atmosphere of the narrator’s tale, and his unfixed sense of self in any permanent understanding of the term, though as I have argued above, this is not necessarily or solely a negative position in which to be.

Furthermore, whilst shaping the tone so that it is clear that he is narrating himself into being – or a version of himself for public consumption, at least – this “Donleavy” turns himself into a saleable commodity, or rather, he collapses the boundaries between himself, his literary works, and his cultural location. This could be seen as an indirect response to the commodification of “Irishness” as it is sold to “returning” second-generation Irish émigrés such as himself. This commodification, as David Lloyd attests, too often manifests as flat, two-dimensional ‘kitsch’ – itself a kind of parody of authenticity.<sup>193</sup> Thus, Donleavy’s writing is designed to project an embodiment of the man himself, howsoever romanticised and distorted. Shaking an angry fist, this character is a grotesquely violent and self-contradictory narrative protagonist, raging against rejection and oppression by ‘the mealy-mouthed’ of all

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<sup>192</sup> Donleavy, *The History of The Ginger Man*, p. 517.

<sup>193</sup> David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993) p. 151.



stripes. This “Donleavy” compulsively narrates and re-narrates himself throughout the author’s whole corpus, just as O’Neill and his characters do. In the process, Donleavy throws an alternately loving and disparaging eye over the two lands that produced him, without ever succumbing to the desire of fully belonging to either.

Next, having situated Donleavy and his protagonists firmly within his multiple national and cultural contexts, I will turn to two of his plays. The close reading of *The Ginger Man* and *Fairy Tales of New York* to follow intends to crystallise the thematic significance of loneliness for which I have hereto argued. An examination of form and content will allow me to evince that Donleavy’s theatrical works belong within a tradition I am beginning to identify. This tradition, as I claimed of O’Neill in Chapter 1, is one of subtle, allegorical rebuttal of the increasingly oppressive and isolatory climate of McCarthyism. It is a critique rooted in the cultural Catholicism shared by Donleavy and O’Neill and moreover, it is coloured by both playwrights’ understanding, and critical deployment, of traits of “Irishness.” It emerges that the silent twin of loneliness is the desperation to construct and perform a community within which to be heard and understood, which concern, as I have demonstrated above, also echoes across the late plays of O’Neill. Analysing two of Donleavy’s plays yields evidence that Donleavy belongs on a continuum, the starting-point of which is O’Neill, of specifically second-generation American-Irish playwriting. The structure of this work subtly reacts, often against its own grain, to the exclusion and isolation the playwrights perceive to be gathering during the Cold War era. It stakes, in increasingly angry tones, a claim for the existence and validity of alternative communities, forged by stories and by the self-performance of its members – albeit at the remove of purporting to stage strictly personal, one-to-one connections between individuals. The earliest, and probably the

best, of Donleavy's plays to take on these themes and concerns is *The Ginger Man*, and my theatrical analysis starts there.

### ***The Ginger Man: A Play (1959)***

*The Ginger Man*'s action is set in two houses: One Mohammed Road, which is in the heart of the Dublin slums, and Eleven Golden Vale Park, which is in a much less socially deprived area. Sebastian Dangerfield, the play's protagonist, is the originator of the typical "Donleavy" figure. Donleavy has a tendency to universalise his very singular and isolated observations; his plays are peppered with characters reminiscent of the styles of person he describes himself as being throughout his memoirs. These types – these Donleavys – are usually physically strong and imposing, but shy, awkward loners. They are always reluctant participants in humorous and/or violent incidents and scenes. Often they are implicated only by their presence, by the perceived intention of the perpetrators to cause moral offence to the protagonist – no Donleavy hero can stand to be insulted – or simply because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So, these "Donleavys" are victims of society and of circumstance, but they do not passively accept their victimhood. They prefer to mete out 'two-fisted justice,' or to respond in other ways to protect their integrity, honour and sense of self. They rage against their exclusion, against rudeness and thoughtlessness, and against those who physically or emotionally threaten any companion of theirs, even if they are not fond of the companion who is under threat. These displays of loyalty and duty to one's immediate peers prevail, regardless of the actual emotional connection between characters, which hints at unconscious thematic echoes of preoccupations with fidelity and community responsibility that are commensurate with the climate of HUAC's America. As with O'Neill's "outsiders inside," this twin loyalty towards, and irritation

with, one's peers stakes a claim for the possibility of forging a community – in a positive or a negative sense, between which Donleavy tends not to distinguish too strenuously – that is situated outside the narratives describing the dominant social mores of the world in which his protagonists find themselves.

### **“Typing” as Self-Performance**

Because Dangerfield is the originator of the “Donleavy” archetype, he is also something of an anomaly to it. For instance, although many Donleavy protagonists tend only reluctantly to become embroiled in violent and ridiculous events, Dangerfield seems to revel in them. For instance, at the play's opening, in a clear formal echo of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Dangerfield is constructing a sundial of sorts by moving a row of three chairs to catch the ray of sun coming through the window. Three times of day are written on pieces of paper and propped on the chairs, and Dangerfield is watching them, waiting to adjust their accuracy based on the ringing of the Angelus bells. In formal terms, this scene neatly combines elements of Catholicism and paganism. The stage business with the sundial communicates to the audience several key notions about the character of Dangerfield: he is at leisure during the day; he is poor (he does not own a clock, and we soon discover that he has pawned virtually all of the possessions in the house, whether belonging to him or not); and he is odd.

That Dangerfield does not own a clock takes a formal step towards an O'Neill-esque attempt to render his situation seemingly timeless. However, in a typical Donleavy reversal, the timelessness of the opening scene is undermined by the intrusion of the Angelus bells. They situate the play socially and historically, and serve very subtly to allude to the many ways in which Catholicism intruded on the private lives of the residents of 1950s Dublin. In the light of Brenda Murphy's insightful analysis of the

intrusive nature of rightwing repression on the private lives of American citizens in her book *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film and Television*, I will discuss in more depth later the ways in which a repressive, claustrophobic external community atmosphere can seep formally into dramatisations of the home and of the personal lives of the fictional characters depicted in plays such as Donleavy's.

### **Notions of Community**

The first scene of *The Ginger Man* serves less to establish its protagonists in their immediate socio-economic world than to mire them in it. The eye-piece of Dangerfield's prized possession, a telescope, points into the room, meaning that if one were to look down the lens from outside the house, a microcosm would be seen. This is reflective of Donleavy's tendency, mentioned above, to universalise his singular observations and characters. Formally, he is asserting that the world seen within the walls of One Mohammed Road is not limited to that space and the characters spending time there. The tiny microcosm can be read as being indirectly allegorically representative of the lives of many outsiders who have been cast out of the dominant community narratives surrounding them in the Ireland of the 1950s.

One such isolated and lonely individual, Dangerfield's friend O'Keefe, is shortly introduced to the scene and has an American accent. Dangerfield immediately shows his credentials as a visitor to Ireland, rather than one who was born there, with his 'mock'<sup>194</sup> impression of an Irish brogue: 'You wouldn't be knowing now what that was, now would you offhand.'<sup>195</sup> Throughout the play, whenever O'Keefe appears Dangerfield is always glad to see him, offering to share what food and alcohol he has, and discouraging him from leaving. Their relationship, despite disagreements and despite

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<sup>194</sup> Donleavy, 'The Ginger Man,' in *The Plays*, pp. 59 - 138, I, 1, (p. 59.)

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 1, p. 59.

O’Keefe’s resentment of Dangerfield’s success with women, is a close and, in its way, mutually supportive one. They tell each other about their lives, their pasts and hopes, their disappointments and dreams. As the Night Clerk and Erie Smith in *Hughie* establish a micro-community of two excluded and isolated individuals merely by spending time together, regardless of whether one or the other is actually listening to his peer, so O’Keefe and Dangerfield stem each other’s loneliness by sharing what little they have. They co-exist, sharing stories, and trying to believe each other’s aspirations and hopes.

### **“Irishness” and “Americanness”**

Formally, O’Keefe serves to dramatise the superficiality of simplistic national identities as they are constructed and performed within the community. He firmly believes that merely by altering the way he speaks, he can change his whole socio-economic situation for the better, as is shown when he tells Dangerfield, ‘I’m crippled by my accent but once I get my vowels taped, watch my smoke.’<sup>196</sup> However, in practice, everything O’Keefe does fails. In turn, he blames his failures on his accent and his background; he blames the Irish people, and the misapprehension that all American students in Ireland are rich; he blames his own tastes, for making the right woman and the right career opportunity impossible for him to capitalise upon; he even blames his friend Dangerfield. He does not, however, despite extensive soul-searching, ever blame the wider socio-economic system for his plight. This failure to identify the probable cause of his woes and to reflect on how his situation might be improved upon marks him out irrefutably as embodying a certain kind of stereotyped, uncritical “American” belief in the system, despite his perception of himself as essentially Irish. As Brogan has said, ‘Disgruntled Americans had never been content, when feeling unduly poor, to rely

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<sup>196</sup> *The Ginger Man*, I, 2, p. 76.

on sweet reason and mere social or economic action.’<sup>197</sup> Here, Brogan highlights the uncritical, unreflective belief that American capitalism is permanent, perfect and inevitable. This kind of constructed “Americanness,” far from the lived reality of many of the nation’s citizens, leads, according to Brogan, to an inability to see clearly *why* the economic situation fails the needy and excludes many more than it includes. Donleavy, consciously or unconsciously, parodies these negative, constructed senses of “Americanness” in its uncritical and unreflective incarnation through O’Keefe. This is dramatised in O’Keefe’s desire for money and prestige for himself, rather than a desire to change the system in order to help himself and all those like him.

Yet, conversely, despite hating the Irish race in general and his own Irish relatives in particular, O’Keefe tells stories to Dangerfield at certain points in the play in which a deep-seated love of Ireland surfaces unexpectedly and movingly. The complicated and ‘bitter love’ that Donleavy himself, as a “returning” second-generation Irish émigré, described in his memoirs as haunting his writings throughout his career, is deeply within O’Keefe too. It is as though he tries to complain enough about the country and its inhabitants to convince himself to leave, yet remains desperate to stay. He sees Ireland, rather than his country of birth, America, as a land of opportunity in which he can fulfil his dreams. His stories, which usually start in his determination to become rich and successful and then to show off to people who have slighted him in the past, always peter out into frustrated paeans of love for Ireland. Far from the only example of this narrative tendency, the scene in which O’Keefe imagines paying a future visit to an ex-girlfriend is an exemplar.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Hugh Brogan, *The Longman History of the United States of America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Edinburgh: Longman, 1999), p. 425.

<sup>198</sup> In Act I of *The Ginger Man*, O’Keefe describes visiting ‘her’ in future years in his expensive car when he has returned to America, ‘knocking the kid’s toys out of the way [*Raps wall*] with my walking stick

Here, with a characteristic shift from one pole to another, Donleavy asserts the kind of innate, ancestral “Irishness” of the mind in which O’Neill also believed. This “Irishness” is in contradistinction to the pastiche of uncritically positive, and economically ill-informed, “Americanness” which he offers through his depiction of O’Keefe. Donleavy thereby stages the pervasiveness of the desire for the kind of ancestral sense of belonging that the second-generation figure tends to impute to the first. Because O’Keefe’s “Americanness” is shown to be a construction of his narrative and his society, however, the contradictory authenticity imputed to his “Irishness” is destabilised. This means that what is actually shown is a figure with a multiple community identity which is in negotiation, in process, and in construction, rather than one who can find a precisely suitable and ancestrally appropriate “home.” And yet, in this and paradoxically enough, it may be that second-generation American-Irish playwrights such as O’Neill and Donleavy are unconsciously adhering to Kearney’s endorsement of ‘the Irish Mind,’ in his tellingly-titled book of the same name, that modern-day Irish thinkers should abjure ‘the orthodox dualistic logic of *either / or*,’ in order to ‘favour a more dialectical logic of *both / and*.’<sup>199</sup> The lack of fixity and certainty in evidence in the lead characters of *The Ginger Man*, as thus understood, can be read as an indirect allegorical nod to the traditions of understanding “Irishness” that have influenced so many.

### **Outsiders and Insiders: Notions of Belonging**

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and give the door a few impatient raps. She comes out. A smudge of flour on her cheek and the reek of boiled cabbage coming from the kitchen. I look at her in shocked surprise. [...] I spin on my heel, give her a good look at my tailoring, knock another toy aside with my cane and roar away.’ Within a page of dialogue, he is back to simultaneously disparaging and eulogising Ireland, ‘This sad room. Dark gloom. We live like beasts. Patience [...] We’ll see the green grass some day.’ (pp. 65-66).

<sup>199</sup> Richard Kearney, *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), p. 9.

Dangerfield is an outsider in Ireland as much as O’Keefe is, and he is a comparably unconscious optimist too. However, as a more psychologically developed character and less, perhaps, of a “type” than O’Keefe, he struggles more with the contradictions and perplexities inherent in his situation than does the latter. Below Dangerfield’s optimism, at every turn of his attempts to be positive and forward looking, the motifs of death and insanity lurk. For instance, in Act I Scene II, Dangerfield encourages O’Keefe to look on the bright side: ‘One manages. Be better days. I promise you that.’ However, when O’Keefe responds noncommittally, Dangerfield responds immediately with, ‘Did you know, Kenneth, that Trinity undergraduates get preferential treatment in Irish mad houses.’<sup>200</sup> Both Dangerfield and O’Keefe are students of Trinity, which is why this ‘preferential treatment’ is relevant to them. Therefore, the simmering, largely unacknowledged fear of insanity that this exchange illuminates directly echoes the formal function of madness in O’Neill, discussed in reference to *The Iceman Cometh*, and in particular the figure of Hickey, in the previous chapter of this thesis. The argument there was that insanity is to be feared for characters without a place to belong, as without a proper context in which to exist, there is the danger that too much self-knowledge, unmediated by a sympathetic – or, indeed, empathetic – community audience, could lead to insanity.

### **Storytelling**

Both Donleavy and O’Neill invest in the power of storytelling both to self-create, and to guard against the loneliness which threatens madness to the sufferer, because stories, as Kearney has said in *On Stories* and as I have cited in the Introduction to this thesis, presuppose both a storyteller and an audience. This thesis concerns itself with the performative nature of identity; the argument stems from the position that

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<sup>200</sup> *The Ginger Man*, 1, 2, p. 71.



national, regional, ethnic and community identities are in negotiation, contested and, crucially, constructed. As they are artificially constructed and superficially projected, rather than being pre-existing and innate, such performances can be manipulated and even faked; they can be reflected upon, and they can be changed. Because of this, the physical manifestation of a character as it is embodied onstage, rather than merely being read on the page, is as significant to the analysis of plays' dramatic forms as is the examination of their content.

Dangerfield is the most physically demonstrative and mobile character of *The Ginger Man*, though his physicality is not fully described in the stage directions, but is rather to be inferred by the twists and turns of the dialogue. For example, during an argument with his wife Marion, she abruptly asks him, 'What are you doing on the table,' to which he replies, 'Goat dance.'<sup>201</sup> *The Ginger Man* is described as a 'bawdy, blasphemous, rich, ragged, monstrous masterpiece' on the dust-jacket of the 1974 edition of *The Plays*, but much of the bawdiness – including the physical comedy and the stage business – is left to be inferred. This leaves the play's physical delivery radically open to interpretation by those staging it. In the censorious, disapproving, small-minded community in which *The Ginger Man* is set, Dangerfield's character is largely depicted through what others *say* about him, rather than through what he succeeds in projecting outwards. His identity is partially constructed by others, those outside himself – his audience.

### **Self-Performance and Community: The Dangers**

Thematically, this situates Donleavy's preoccupation with self-determination and individualism as part of a developmental trajectory, the starting-point of which is

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<sup>201</sup> *The Ginger Man*, I, 1, p. 67.

O'Neill. Donleavy is caught in the same philosophical and technical contradiction as his predecessor. For Dangerfield, he desires to bring to the stage a timeless, singular, utter individual who pre-exists in his own head, who is unaffected by the world in which he lives, and who violently resists any censorious or judgmental invasion by the local community. However, by having other characters in the play report that Dangerfield is the talk of the town, as we see when O'Keefe tells him, 'It's all over Dublin that you've been dancing in the streets,' what Donleavy actually succeeds in demonstrating is that no-one can exist outside their social and political context.<sup>202</sup>

However, in contrast to Dangerfield's explosive, sometimes violent and always vigorous physical presence onstage, Marion Dangerfield's stage directions are by turn inadequate and, on occasion, are designed to convey an atmosphere or impression rather than to help the actor and audience to understand her formal function onstage. For instance, in Act I Scene II when she has once again returned home to find Dangerfield drunk, her stage direction as she busies herself in the house and prepares for the fight which is to ensue merely says, '*Rattling with the pots, the nervous vein flames on her neck.*'<sup>203</sup> For the purposes of coming to understand Marion's character, on the basis of esoteric stage directions such as this, I would venture that reading the play, which allows examination of the sparse and strange stage directions which accompany her onstage presence, helps us to understand her more than watching a performance of it would do. Again, as with Dangerfield, her character is constructed largely through what she *says*, as opposed to what she *does*; therefore, her identity is created through self-narration and in dialogue with others – with her audience.

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<sup>202</sup> *The Ginger Man*, II, 3, p. 131.

<sup>203</sup> *The Ginger Man*, I, 2, p. 77.

Marion's relationship with this audience, however, is a singularly negative one. She hates the Irish, she increasingly despises Dangerfield and his friend O'Keefe, and being known and heard by her peers only brings her further isolation from the world in which she lives. Unlike many of O'Neill's characters, she does not yearn for a sense of belonging and acceptance from those with whom she mixes. She desires only to escape from them, and to find another kind of community entirely, in which one of her class and background can belong – or, failing that, to be alone. Her identity, therefore, is defined in a negative sense by the community in which she lives, insofar as she consciously separates herself from it and understands her own motivations by experiencing their antithesis in Dangerfield's chosen way of life.

### **Loneliness and the Position of the Audience**

Marion is the loneliest character onstage, but Donleavy does nothing with her to convey a deeper social question or reflection. Formally, she functions only as another tool of unreasonable repression and judgment acting upon Dangerfield; she is an external contributor to the play's internal focus upon the situation with which Dangerfield must cope. Despite the irrefutable facts of her horrible situation, it is oddly difficult, due to the way the couple are realised in the dialogue and where the formal focus of the play is, to feel any sympathy for Marion. We only ever see her ranting, shouting, complaining, and being deeply snobbish and unpleasant about a range of issues and people. There seems to be no tenderness in her; we never see her nurse her baby, or do or say anything kind, gentle or even sad, which might help the audience to connect with her. It is as though she is haranguing the audience when she attacks Dangerfield, because he is so much the central focus of the play's action and sympathy; all the other characters turn on his axis. In the scenes wherein Marion has the most

difficult and stressful of times, without fail she says something so monumentally racist or priggish that any sympathy of which she may be deserving evaporates abruptly.

For instance, when she fixes Dangerfield with '*the housewife eyes*' at the beginning of Act I Scene II and informs him, 'And I can't bear much more,' the audience's sympathy is stirred because immediately that she leaves the house, O'Keefe arrives and Dangerfield commences to get drunk.<sup>204</sup> However, when she begins to complain about the situation on arriving home, her hatred is focused more on the Irish and Ireland, at least at first, than towards her husband. She says, 'The foulness of this place,' and though she seems to be referring to the stinking plumbing of her rented house, it becomes immediately clear that she is thinking more of the Irish nation as a whole. Batting away Dangerfield's trademark optimism and strong belief in better times to come later, which itself tends to echo the blind and unfounded hope for a better future seen in characters like O'Neill's Jimmy Tomorrow, she ignores his encouragement 'to get used to it here,' and says,

Children running barefoot in the streets in the middle of winter and men wagging their things at you from doorways. [...] You weren't like this before we came to Ireland. This vulgar filthy country. [...] I know now why they're only fit to be servants. [...] O'Keefe's been here. I can still smell him. America doesn't seem to help them. He's not even fit to be a servant.<sup>205</sup>

Her stage directions during the extended list of grievances which the above excerpt frames are sparse almost to the point of non-existence; in three pages of dialogue, her only direction for movement is a single '*Cooking*,' until she is '*Wearily arranging foodstuffs, bread, salt, sugar and tea*,'<sup>206</sup> presumably having cooked something to eat

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<sup>204</sup> *The Ginger Man*, I, 2, p. 69.

<sup>205</sup> *The Ginger Man*, I, 2, pp. 78-79.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 2, p. 79.

using them.<sup>207</sup> Furthermore, Marion's characterisation of O'Keefe as one of "them" – the Irish, a term she only ever uses pejoratively – despite having been born in America points up the specifically second-generation terms in which Donleavy's characters grapple with their place in the world.

By contrast to Marion, Dangerfield is sensitively, delicately and comprehensively chronicled in this scene, as is often the case throughout the play's text, albeit with strange stage directions which do not always convey the full import of what he is actually doing: '*Pink hands in prayer*'; '*Head to heaven*'; '*Outstretched arms of innocence*.'<sup>208</sup> Once these physical supplications do not result in a cooling of Marion's temper, he slips into the kind of extreme, pantomime physicality which makes it impossible for her to continue due to its, and therefore his, performed lunacy:

DANGERFIELD [*Laughing*] Woo hoo.

MARION You can laugh, but I think there's something serious at the root of it.

DANGERFIELD [*Doing spider dance*] What's at the root. Can't you see I'm mad. Can't you see. Look. See. Madness. E. I'm mad. [*Ogling and wagging tongue*]<sup>209</sup>

Dangerfield's demands that Marion 'Look' and 'See' underpin the way in which he is performing his presumed madness, and also demonstrate that such performance is not necessarily the less true, for all its constructed nature. Whatever his state of mental health and however much he hates his wife, he desperately needs an audience to bear witness to his presence and his experiences. Without such an audience, it is more than loneliness that threatens him; he must be seen, in order to exist at all – and therefore, whether the audience is an approving one or not is immaterial. In turn, this shows that

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<sup>207</sup> It is clear that there are gendered implications which are present in stage directions like '*the housewife eyes*' and '*Cooking*'; I am leaving them aside whilst arguing this specific point about Donleavy's intentions, but I am aware of them.

<sup>208</sup> *The Ginger Man*, I, 2, pp. 78-79.

<sup>209</sup> *The Ginger Man*, I, 2, p. 79.

he has no innate or individual identity, despite strongly believing that he does; he is a product of his time and his place, despite his creator's attempts to lift him out of his context. In this, he shares the fate of O'Neill's characters, upon whom the world intrudes, howsoever they attempt to hide from, to avoid, or to pre-exist it. Both playwrights' works can therefore be plotted on the beginnings of a continuum from one to the other, without either playwright necessarily being aware of their correlations.

### **Catholicism and "Irishness"**

The censorious, disapproving wider community which inspires both Dangerfield's anxieties, and his wild attempts to resist its molestations, is signified in *The Ginger Man* by his wife's boarder, Miss Frost. When, shortly after her arrival, a debt-collector visits and he plunges the house into darkness and silence, Marion asks Dangerfield, 'And you tell me how we're going to explain all this hiding and not answering the door and things to Miss Frost.' He replies,

You're forgetting Miss Frost is a Catholic. How do you think they survive in Ireland. [...] She'll understand. The whole of Ireland lives that way. They all hide out from each other in the back room. It's the custom.<sup>210</sup>

Through allowing Dangerfield to vent his bigoted opinion of the Catholic Irish in this assessment of Miss Frost and her community, Donleavy succeeds in drawing attention to the negative aspects of community formation, and the dangers of the quest to find an understanding audience for one's stories. Whether first-generation Irish, like Miss Frost, or immigrants to Ireland, like the Dangerfields, *The Ginger Man*'s protagonists are excluded – or wilfully exclude themselves – from the prevailing social mores of their cultural and social contexts. "Irishness" comes in Donleavy to be characterised wholly negatively by a culture of secrecy, social hypocrisy, judgment and condemnation. This

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<sup>210</sup> *The Ginger Man*, II, 1, pp. 98-99.

last, the resistance to the condemnation of those unwilling or unable to “fit,” constitutes Donleavy’s subtle allegorical depiction of the function of self-performance to self-determine one’s social and ethnic identity.

### **The Seeping-In of One’s Social Context**

In dispensing this allegorical warning Donleavy shows that, like O’Neill, he believes that identity is rooted in the mind and must be preserved from potentially damaging outside influences. Yet, analysing the character formation of his protagonists proves otherwise, because their identity is constructed reactively, in opposition to the suffocating climate constructed around them. Donleavy’s intentions, and the way the dramatic form of his play tends to undermine them, are best to be understood in the playwright’s own socio-political context: HUAC’s America. Therein, the censoriousness of the wider community, which was nearing its apex as this play was in composition, weighed disproportionately heavily on artists because, as Arthur Miller has mooted, the purpose of art should be to challenge conventions and to problematise uncritically-held beliefs. Miller argues,

The artist is inclined to use certain rights more than other people because of the nature of his work. Most of us have an opinion. We may have a view of life which on a rare occasion we may have to speak of. That is the artist’s line of work. That is what he does all day long and, consequently, he is particularly sensitive to its limitations.<sup>211</sup>

Donleavy’s protagonists exemplify a response to Miller’s call-to-arms, demonstrating the playwright’s resistance to being shaped and changed by the community in which he lives, and the failure of his attempts to set himself apart in this way, contributes to shaping the wider story being told, which is about the effects of the social world upon

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<sup>211</sup> ‘Arthur Miller’ in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-1968*, ed. by Eric Bentley (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/ Nation Press), pp. 791-825, (p. 809.)

the individual. However, they do not do this directly; the confrontation, and the belligerent resistance to being silenced, manifest only by indirect allegorical inference.

More evidence of the pervasiveness of one's climate is to be found in Miss Frost's experience of living in Ireland, which surfaces in the stories and anecdotes she shares with Dangerfield once they have started sleeping together. Her Ireland is a miserably claustrophobic and stifling place. Because she is devoutly Catholic, she is desperate to confess her "sins" of adultery and extra-marital sex, to Dangerfield's horror. However, under questioning she reveals that she once did just this, and the priest came to speak to her mother at home, thus breaking the sacred confidentiality of the confessional booth and thereby discrediting himself utterly, in the context of this incident's portrayal in the play. Worse still, the clear indication is that not only did the priest speak to her mother, but that her transgression of the community's stifling mores was well-known around the town in which she lived. In this respect, Miss Frost's experience of living within and being accepted by a community is a wholly negative one. She says, "The priest said he wouldn't give me absolution till I gave up his name. [...] Please, please. If word ever gets around. They'll drive me out of my job."<sup>212</sup> Here we see in the text of the play an unexpected echo of the "They" who molested Donleavy's production of the play, which he wrote about in his essay, 'What They Did in Dublin with *The Ginger Man*' – the silent, judgmental, narrow, unforgiving eyes and ears of the community in which the play was so briefly staged. The "They" of whom Miss Frost speaks, albeit not really much more specifically than alluding to "them" in this way, haunt *The Ginger Man: A Play*.

My assertion, here and throughout this thesis, is not that this play, with its mentions of various types of shadowy "They," is a direct or straightforward allegory of

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<sup>212</sup> *The Ginger Man*, II, 2, p. 122.



either 1950s Catholic Ireland, or of the comparably repressive climate of HUAC's 1950s America. Rather, the "They" figures in *The Ginger Man* show that the twin climates Donleavy experienced – and he was oppressed and censured by both – have seeped into the thematic and formal concerns of the text, whether or not he intended them to. His first play is haunted by ill-defined antagonists, "Theys" who would control people possessed of narratives which do not fit the communities in which they are performed and heard.<sup>213</sup> In this, *The Ginger Man* can be placed in line to follow O'Neill's themes. It is therefore possible to begin to identify a specifically American-Irish, second-generation playwriting preoccupation with staging individuals and micro-communities which reactively define themselves against, rather than in line with, the climate of their era. Because both playwrights' protagonists are outside the dominant narratives of their time, either by choice, by accident, or by external censure, loneliness emerges as the predominant theme in both playwrights' works.

### **The Failure of "Nation-ness," Or, Loneliness**

In the case of Donleavy, *The Ginger Man* is so critical of all the nationalities appearing onstage that it ultimately comes to be critical of the whole *notion* of nationality being bound up with personality and socio-economic fortunes. Conversely, with the kind of internally contradictory shift from pole to pole that characterises Donleavy's output, the play also seems unconsciously to reinforce the message that these things *are* combined from time to time, too. At the very least, it makes a mockery

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<sup>213</sup> Interestingly, there are examples of these shadowy "They"s to be found in O'Neill's late plays, too. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, when Cathleen collects Mary Tyrone's prescription for morphine, she says, 'There was only one thing I didn't like. [...] The way the man in the drugstore acted when I took in the prescription for you. (*indignantly*) The impudence of him! [...] He gave me a long look and says insultingly, "Where did you get hold of this?"' (III, p. 776.) There are also hints of a gossiping, self-interested and untrustworthy background cast of "They"s in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*; on the vexed subject of Josie's virginity, Jim says, 'You pretend too much. And so do the guys. I've listened to them at the Inn. They all lie to each other. No one wants to admit all he got was a slap in the puss, when he thinks a lot of other guys made it.' (III, pp. 923-924.)

of the idea that the way a person speaks is the only criterion by which one should be judged. Dangerfield's "English vowels" only serve to help him to acquire more credit when he is already desperately in debt. Because of them, he is often mistaken for a courteous and affluent gentleman (he is none of these things), but ultimately, the way he speaks does not improve his situation or help to realise his hopes at all. This is significant because Donleavy seems to posit the conclusion that all markers of national and individual identity are superficial and performative. Dangerfield is left lonely at the end of the play, '*stand[ing] stony, feeling the loneliness, touching the little pieces of air, gathering it in little roundnesses in his hands,*' which is much the way he started it.<sup>214</sup> However, his later state is more abject because his reputation is tarnished, so the wider community will censure him and he will not be able to acquire any more credit. His wife has left him, as has Miss Frost; Kenneth O'Keefe has had himself deported back to America in despair. Dangerfield concludes, 'My dream was all lament,' but his closing poems about the beauty of the Irish landscape resist the implications of this, and he asks for 'God's mercy / On the wild / Ginger Man.'<sup>215</sup> Here, there is in evidence more of the "hopeless hope" with which O'Neill famously imbued his characters. This demonstrates that Donleavy's plays, like O'Neill's, are not merely nihilistic chronicles about failure and exclusion, but that they offer something like hope, in their implicit resistance to the pervasiveness of an oppressive social climate which has no room for outsiders.

Nonetheless, loneliness pervades *The Ginger Man*, in particular, more than a superficial assessment of it would suggest. The fear of being alone, the desperate attempts to hold on to people in order not to feel alone, and the existential feeling of isolation which comes either from being rejected by the community in which one lives, or from being always an outsider to it from the outset, are everywhere in evidence in it.

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<sup>214</sup> *The Ginger Man*, II, 2, p. 104.

<sup>215</sup> *The Ginger Man*, II, 2, p. 138.

It is both an angry play and a self-righteous one. The various kinds of “They” who dispense rejection, suffering and condemnation are either shadowy, ill-defined figures to be feared and avoided, or when they are named, as in the case of Miss Frost’s corrupt priest-confessor, they are utterly reprehensible figures. The answer to Dangerfield’s shocking question to his wife, not mitigated even slightly by the jokey tone of its delivery, ‘Marion, do you think God will ever forgive the Catholics,’ seems, for Donleavy, to be an emphatic No.<sup>216</sup> The anger in the text stems from the play’s rejection of the notion that it is imperative to “fit,” to be accepted and even lauded. This rejection is mitigated, in a typical Donleavy reversal, by the fact that Dangerfield, O’Keefe and Miss Frost all separately, and in different ways, yearn precisely for this acceptance, and the outward trappings of success which would prove they have attained it. In this way, as with O’Neill’s plays before it, *The Ginger Man* becomes an innovative kind of “national biography” of the excluded, the isolated, and the disenfranchised.

### ***Fairy Tales of New York (1960)***

To this point in Chapter 2, I have examined community formation, its oppressive and stultifying potential, and the search for the acceptance which could stem loneliness in *The Ginger Man*. It is now worth turning to the play with which Donleavy followed it, *Fairy Tales of New York* (1960). This analysis serves to demonstrate that the indirect allegorical functions of storytelling, and the public performance of allegiance, when seen in the context of the climate of HUAC’s America which had influenced the playwright, more than he realised, were forced further to develop, thereby coming to influence the concerns of *Fairy Tales* too.

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<sup>216</sup> *The Ginger Man* II, 1, p. 94.

*Fairy Tales* is a more dramatically confident and assured performance than *The Ginger Man*, though its more measured pace and constructive stage directions somewhat mute its transmission, in contrast to the earlier play's raw and exciting roughness.<sup>217</sup> Formally, *Fairy Tales* is separated into four titled acts which are episodic and semi-self-contained. They all feature the play's main protagonist, Cornelius Christian, but each Act tends to stand alone, and incidents from earlier scenes are only very rarely mentioned in later ones. This stuttering formal structure well-suits the social awkwardness of the protagonist, who is an elaboration of the "singular man" Donleavy-esque character trope I have outlined above.

### **Autobiographical Echoes**

Like the "Donleavys" of his memoirs and much of the author's other fiction, Christian has ready fists, is afflicted by awkward social outbursts, is possessed of a refusal to countenance being insulted, and harbours a deep-seated desire to be accepted and safe in a society filled with strange, hostile people and situations. As usual, the lead character is a charismatic, optimistic and lonely individual, striving for a place in the world, but often finding that he must perform a false sense of self, one which he knows is a necessary part of becoming successful. Though he craves success, he is always reduced to rejecting his false projection of homogenised social bonhomie in order to be true to himself, whatever the costs to his professional and personal betterment. He is an American, through and through, in Donleavy's understanding of the term. In his depiction of Christian's brashness, ambition, unshakeable self-belief and unwavering

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<sup>217</sup> By describing it as "rough," I do not mean to say that the version of *The Ginger Man* intended for the theatre is unpolished or incomplete. It is only to observe that by comparison with Donleavy's later theatrical works, it is less dramatically assured, as I have argued in detail earlier in this chapter: on occasion, for instance, stage directions surface unnecessarily as dialogue. By contrast, from the first page, *Fairy Tales of New York* looks much more like a play than it looks like the novel from which it is adapted.

courage, the playwright shows his audience a stereotype he has constructed and thrust onto the stage. As with *The Ginger Man* and as with O'Neill, this deployment of a recognisable character type is a critical ploy to draw attention to such stereotypes, and the way in which they are, deliberately or unconsciously, performed. The intention is therefore to problematise them. Christian's indefatigable optimism is placed in the context of the death of his wife with which the play opens, and throughout the play, his positivity jars with the oppressive loneliness that characterises his experience of being in the world.

### **Loneliness and Community**

In *The Ginger Man*, various motifs of death and insanity lurk below the text; *Fairy Tales of New York* thrusts the themes of death, loneliness, isolation and insanity to the fore from the very beginning of the play. Act I is titled "HELEN." Cornelius Christian stands on the docks in New York and amid the chaos, the body of his English wife is lifted off the boat on which he has lately travelled. The stage directions have him standing 'apostate under the letter C,' with two bags: his own and his wife's. Immediately, then, Christian is perceived as isolated, lonely, sad and, importantly, 'apostate,' though which "faith" he has forsaken is not immediately clear.<sup>218</sup> The reader quickly comes to suspect that it is "Americanness" from which he is excluded, despite being an American citizen. When a stevedore speaks to him while they wait for the pier to clear, he is swiftly charged with his foreignness despite having said very little: 'That's a funny name, Christian. You got a bit of a funny voice too, you English. Learn to speak at college. [...] That ain't the accent you were born with.'<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> J.P. Donleavy, 'Fairy Tales of New York,' in *The Plays*, pp. 145 – 211, I, 1, (p. 145.)

<sup>219</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, I, 1, p. 148.

This stevedore, whom the character list persists in calling by his profession despite the fact that he proffers his actual name, Steve Kelly, makes a number of pre-judgments of Christian based solely on his clothes, his carriage and the way he speaks:

A boarding house for a guy like you. You don't look the kind of guy stays in a boarding house, don't sound it either. You come all the way here without having a place to go. None of my business. OK. Maybe you got no friends. Takes all sorts of people to make a world. Keep telling my wife that, she don't believe me. Thinks everybody's like her.<sup>220</sup>

It is clear that the stevedore is in conflict as to whether he loves or hates America, and of course regarding whether he loves or hates his wife. However, what his tale, which is mainly one of woe but which contains several brave attempts at positivity despite his difficult situation, serves actually to do is not simply to flesh him out as a character – the first scene is his only appearance in the play – but rather to emphasise the total isolation of Christian by contrast with the stevedore. The dialogue draws sharp attention to his separateness when the stevedore suddenly asks Christian, a man whom he does not realise is watching the coffin of his wife be removed from the ship upon which she died, 'Don't you get lonely,' to which Christian responds noncommittally, 'No, don't mind being alone.'<sup>221</sup> It is possible to read this claim as the defensive posture of one who feels himself to be wholly alone, and whose sense of isolation is sharpened, rather than dulled, by engaging in conversation with another.

The stevedore himself seems throughout his meeting with Christian to be attempting to reach out and to connect; telling details of his life to a stranger helps him to see it himself; he calls this particular version of himself into being by constructing it for Christian. In turn, Christian sees in the glass of the stevedore's tale a clearer picture of himself and his own shortcomings, which leads indirectly to the soul-searching

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<sup>220</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, I, 1, p. 147.

<sup>221</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, I, 1, p. 147.

soliloquy he delivers at the beginning of Act I Scene II. Through his social connection with the stevedore, he recognises his position in contrast to him, as a widower with little to no income, and no fixed destination or plan. The stevedore still dreams of ceasing employment on the docks and either re-opening his pet shop or perhaps beginning a new entrepreneurial venture. He is subject to the advice of his ever-troublesome in-laws, who tend to twist his little dreams into nightmares, but from whom he can never escape. Formally, the disjointed and episodic structure serves, in this instance and at other key points in the play, to underline the rootlessness and lack of concrete ambition which is part of what marks Christian out as ‘*apostate*’ of his own understanding of what his American Dream promises. Both men in this scene are trapped, but for one, Hell is other people – though he cannot nonetheless help but try to connect with strangers anyway – while for the other, a loneliness bred of his singularity is the order of his life, despite a secret desire for it not to be thus.

Therefore, his and the stevedore’s attempt to forge a kind of micro-community of two fails – not because each has failed to find a listening and understanding audience; but rather because the two men are set asunder by their different ambitions and dreams. This means that their individualism comes to alienate them, rather than empowering them to follow their dreams, and even problematises the validity of these dreams. This shows that when read in line with, for instance, O’Neill’s *Hughie*, Donleavy’s plays stage a diminishing faith in the salvation that might be found in being heard and understood by another. The gathering melancholy in the onstage atmosphere of Donleavy’s texts can be read as subtly and unconsciously referential of the cumulative effects of the HUAC operation as its era progressed.

### **Stories of “Americanness”**

In the second scene of *Fairy Tales*, after his fractured and rambling opening soliloquy and in an echo of his interaction with the stevedore in Scene I, we again see Christian treated to the extensive life-story of a stranger, in this case the funeral director, Mr Vine. Throughout the scene, Vine talks candidly about his past, his upbringing and schooling, his dead wife, and the development over the years of his funeral business and its ethos. The fact that Vine's wife is dead and Christian's is too highlights a strange detail about *Fairy Tales*. In its title, it must refer to such fairytales as those by the Grimm brothers, because a disproportionately large number of the offstage characters are dead. This serves to enforce an atmosphere of fragility and insecurity which pervades the play from beginning to end, despite the playwright's seeming attempts to pitch characters that are, in a typical internal contradiction, secure in themselves and their place in the world. This simmering precariousness is evident despite the playwright's several attempts to lighten the mood with humorous cameo characters, and with light-hearted scenes which are designed to be funny rather than sad and reflective.

This unstable and threatening atmosphere undermines Donleavy's attempts at levity in the main. It functions to make the audience feel rather more frustrated and impatient than amused by the lighter scenes, and curiously empty at the culmination of the action, with what should be a triumphant appearance in a restaurant for the protagonist at the play's conclusion. These kinds of inter-textual self-contradictions come increasingly to pervade Donleavy's plays as they are read in chronological order. Their lead characters become increasingly passive, neurotic and frustrated victims of shadowy persecutors and absent, often dead, relatives, ex-wives and business associates. Loneliness is, at base, the key defining theme of these plays, as it was in O'Neill's late plays and as my previous chapter has shown. Moreover, and importantly to this thesis, it is possible to see a development between O'Neill and Donleavy: one of gathering anger



and the gradual diminishment of hope. Donleavy's protagonists continue to hope for a better life, and yet they find connection and solace even harder to come by than O'Neill's 'fog people.'

### **The Diminishment of Hope: HUAC's Ongoing Effects**

It is worth pausing here to note that *Fairy Tales of New York* was written and produced in 1960, nominally after what many commentators on post-World War II America hold to be the apotheosis of the work of the House Un-American Activities Committee and its affiliated panels: namely, the period between 1954 and 1957 which has come to be known as McCarthyism.<sup>222</sup> Caute describes the post-McCarthy climate and the lasting effects of the Senator's influence as:

a desperate time, a time when the words "democracy" and "freedom" resembled gaudy advertising slogans suspended above an intersection where panic, prejudice, suspicion, cowardice and demagogic ambition constantly collided in a bedlam of recriminations.<sup>223</sup>

As with my earlier comments about O'Neill's late plays, and as I will argue in the next chapter about Gilroy, this climate – impossible as it was to ignore, as is clear from Caute's evocative description of 'a bedlam of recriminations' in the quotation above – cannot but have crept into the themes and form of the various plays under consideration. In the case of Donleavy, the diminishment of hope and the rising tide of loneliness stimulated by the fear and the danger attached to telling one's story to another is more evident in *Fairy Tales* even than it was in *The Ginger Man*, which was written and produced only a year earlier. To demonstrate what the implications of this diminishment are, the analysis turns here to the funeral parlour owner Vine, who makes a candid

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<sup>222</sup> David Caute has uncompromisingly dubbed this era "The Great Fear."

<sup>223</sup> David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978) p. 11.

attempt to connect with the play's protagonist, Christian. This attempt is tinged with the desperation of one who seems to sense that his story, and the micro-community of two which its telling attempts to engender, is unwelcome.

### **Dreams and Stories**

Vine is the quintessential self-made man, for whom one version of the American Dream seems, at least in monetary terms, to be within reach. It is a constructed and stereotypical form of "Americanness" which Vine lives; his is a down-home, self-taught, self-made success, coupled with a down-to-earth attitude, and an awareness of his humble roots. The figure he cuts is thus as awkwardly constructed and performed as the "Irishness" seen in O'Neill's late plays: Larry's poor hygiene, the Tyrone's alcoholism, and so on. Moreover, like these characters, Vine's freedom to self-invent does not provide him with protection from loneliness: on the contrary, in fact. He harbours great sadness and regret about his lack of formal schooling and his rough-around-the-edges way of speaking. He is troubled by his loneliness since the death of his wife, and curiously, he also has doubts about having to take money from grieving people in order to be successful at a profession which he considers in every way to be a vocation. This shows that both playwrights subtly imply that there is little sanctuary to be found in hiding behind, or within, an ultimately appropriated and artificial national identity. Moreover, these doubts and regrets as they are evinced in Vine's extended self-narration serve to cast a shadow over his successes, making them seem hollow and pointless in his own reckoning. This means that the dreams of which he speaks at such length come to seem equally empty; again, here is evidence of the progressive diminishment of hope which is clear to see as this case-study of American-Irish drama proceeds. Even though he is not a "fog person" – he is not one of the rootless drifters

and outcasts populating O'Neill's late plays – Vine is the loneliest character that this thesis has yet examined.

Like the stevedore in Act I Scene I, Vine attempts to call himself into being by narrating the story of his life to Christian, whom he has also decided is a well-educated and cultured man based solely on his accent and manners, which, as with Dangerfield, is quickly shown to be a superficial and imperfect assessment. He is trying to reach out to another person whom he hopes will understand and support him, in listening to the stories of his past and helping him with his present burdens. There are clear echoes of O'Neill's *Hughie* here, in that the formation of a micro-community of two is largely forced on one by the other. However, in *Hughie*, the Night Clerk eventually comes to see the mutual benefits of solace and connection, and he reaches out to Erie. In *Fairy Tales*, Christian is persecuted by others and their stories, and they only serve to underline his isolation, rather than helping to alleviate it. This again shows a progressive deterioration in the levels of hope and promise in the plays of Donleavy when compared with the late plays of O'Neill, which implies that the wider political and social context which cannot but creep into the themes and form of plays written within it was also deteriorating.

We can see the effects of this deterioration in the relation of Vine's life-story, which is interspersed every twelve or so lines with a noncommittal linking comment from Christian, such as 'That's nice of you,'<sup>224</sup> 'No, it's all right,' and 'Yes, it does.'<sup>225</sup> In technical terms, these passive comments show Donleavy's increased competence as a dramatist. He is aware that it is hard on the performer, and on the audience, if a character speaks for excessively long periods without alleviation in the form of a

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<sup>224</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, I, 2, p. 150.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 2, p. 153.

feeding-line to break things up. Christian's comments also serve to make him a captive audience for Vine's narrative, which captivity stems from his efforts not to cause offence or difficulty to others. In this, he is a vintage "Donleavy" lead character. Moreover, the way Christian is formally entrapped by Vine's claustrophobic narrative, and his correlative physical captivity in Vine's equally claustrophobic funeral home, hints indirectly at the increased charge of danger and anxiety contingent on bearing witness to the story of someone's – anyone's – life. In this charge, it is possible to find the indirect allegorical traces of the post-McCarthy HUAC climate.

This charge may also indicate why in the latter part of the scene, which is the day of his wife's funeral, Christian's tolerance towards Vine finally expires. He snaps out of his passive nodding-along to the funeral director's life-story with a rejection of the notion that they are kindred spirits, as Vine seems to think:

CHRISTIAN Mr Vine, I think maybe you're telling me too much about your business. I don't want to say anything but it's getting me down.

VINE Don't get sore, Mr Christian. I forget sometimes, I try to make everyone feel at home and not treat the funeral business as something strange. [...] You're not alone in this, remember that. [...] Come on, I like you, be a sport.

CHRISTIAN My wife's dead.

VINE I know that.

CHRISTIAN Well, what the hell do you mean, sport.<sup>226</sup>

Although neither the stage directions nor the punctuation give any indication that Christian has finally snapped out of his passivity and is becoming agitated, by strongly rejecting Vine's assumption of camaraderie and fellow-feeling, he also turns his back on the other things that Vine is offering: a place to 'feel at home' and a chance to feel that he is 'not alone in this.' He therefore reinforces his total existential isolation, and leaves Vine to his own loneliness, which unmistakably colours his speechifying sections. This means that both men have failed in their attempts to connect – Vine by telling his story

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<sup>226</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, I, 2, p. 157.

and being spurned for it; Christian by attempting passively and politely to absorb Vine's story, and failing so to do. In this, it is possible to see Donleavy's conviction that loneliness is not a singularly negative phenomenon. For Donleavy, loneliness is often preferable to the riskiness of spending time with another or others. This is not necessarily a negative development of the theme of loneliness as it appears in O'Neill, because the inability to escape one another and to sustain oneself alone, without a community, is often the curse of his characters too. This predicament can be clearly seen, for instance, in his most consummate depiction of a failing community, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Donleavy grasps the nettle of the positive potential of loneliness by repeatedly staging Christian's mounting desperation to be left in peace throughout *Fairy Tales*.

Part of the argument of this thesis concerns starting to situate the playwrights whose works I am analysing on a kind of continuum. In the Introduction I have argued for various connections between the cultural contexts of the authors: they are all second-generation American-Irish Catholics who, for various reasons, have had cause to assert their "Irishness," in the teeth of feeling excluded from some of the dominant national narratives of "Americanness" within which they lived and worked. The various connections and thematic echoes between O'Neill and Donleavy offer some evidence of the validity of this argument, upon which the Conclusion to the thesis will reflect.

### **Dramatic Form**

The nuanced staging of key themes like loneliness in *Fairy Tales of New York* demonstrates that it is a more dramatically assured text than *The Ginger Man*. The stage directions, for instance, much more often tell the reader what characters are actually doing, rather than leaving these details to be inferred by the dialogue, or as the earlier

play often does, simply ignoring the physicality of a dramatic performance altogether. However, it must also be said that although the text is more completely dramatically realised in terms of its form and shape, thematically and performatively it is rather contradictory and tends to lose its way. Its thematic preoccupations conflict and are often unclear. The various attempts to lighten the mood by introducing humour are largely unsuccessful, because of the strenuous use of death and loneliness as the central framing concerns of the play. Therefore, the play rather conflicts with itself, echoing the unstable, multiple positioning of Donleavy, and showing that its form and content match somewhat, in that theatrically, it does not know whether it is a comedy or a tragedy. That is to say, theatrically, it does not really have a “home.”

Developmentally, too, *Fairy Tales*' continuity is fractured because the main concern of the playwright is to turn the audience's attention to the importance of pursuing wealth and social recognition – one begets the other, as far as Donleavy is concerned. However, what actually pervades the play is the quiet desperation with which social acclaim is pursued by Christian. He is a character obsessed with wealth and how to get money, but the reason seems not, ultimately, in order just to live comfortably, as my discussion of the play's final scene will show. What he actually desires is to be accepted by his surrounding community and therefore not to be alone any more. He fails at this, despite his seeming triumph at the play's conclusion, in various social and professional milieux, including the advertising world, the boxing ring, and an expensive restaurant. I will now briefly assess two of these scenes in order to demonstrate why Christian is ultimately unsuccessful, pitted as he is against the grain of the play, as well as against the grain of the society that the play sketches around him. This analysis illuminates the conflicting, contradictory, and shifting messages which characterise all Donleavy's works. The conclusion of this chapter reflects on why these

ambiguities are so manifest: because in the works of Donleavy, as in those by his predecessor O'Neill, national identity – indeed, all identity – is constantly in construction, because it is performed and unfixed.

### **“Americanness”**

Act II of *Fairy Tales* offers a scathing indictment of the world of advertising in Donleavy's capitalism-obsessed America. Advertising is one of the main ways in which America has constructed its sense of itself as a nation. Even laudable aspirations such as democracy and freedom, as Cate has stated above, came in the second half of the American twentieth century to resemble 'gaudy advertising slogans,' which underlines the claim that advertising is connected to constructions of “Americanness.” Act II of *Fairy Tales* constitutes Donleavy's indirect and subtle critique of how national myths are called into being under capitalism, and then deployed for the furtherance of the interests of only a handful of people. Contradictorily, as usual, there is no doubt that his protagonist dearly desires to be one of this handful.

When Christian is interviewed for a job selling spark plugs, his interviewer Howard How states that all he is interested in are facts. It quickly emerges, however, that the kind of facts in which he is interested are only the ones which will clarify for him how the firm can use Christian to make more money. When Christian tells How a story about a Native American burial site being displaced to sink the reservoir which provides the water both men are drinking, How blanches, and barks, 'Boy, you're just full of facts.'<sup>227</sup> One of the “facts” How is interested in is whether or not Christian has a degree. He has not; 'I don't have a degree. O.K. Maybe I was too distracted by human nature in college. I got disappointed in human nature as well and gave it up because I

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<sup>227</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, II, 2, p. 163.

found it too much like my own.<sup>228</sup> Here, Christian makes a strong attempt to draw parallels between himself and his fellow humans, but on the contrary, he also makes clear that those around him disappoint him – not because they are different to him, but because they are similar. This common ground, a subtle and displaced allegory for the ideals of national homogeneity, paradoxically serves to isolate him further from his community, rather than to allow him to count himself among its number.

The way advertising works in capitalist America is rendered clear, and therefore, light is also cast on how the ideals to which the nation's loyal adherents should ally themselves are propagated, when How prompts Christian to think of an advertising slogan:

HOW [...] I know you can do it. Think of the money. Money, boy. Think of the money.

CHRISTIAN I am. Wait. If you've got a heart, you've got a spark that could be a heart by Mott. [HOW *a giant in success*. CHRISTIAN *a sigh, relaxing back*] When you said money, those words just came pouring into my mind.<sup>229</sup>

Here we see what Christian meant when he told an earlier character that his only saleable commodity was himself. We can therefore attribute his success in the job interview to his willingness to expend himself for the furtherance of a capitalist enterprise, in the hope that some of the money thus generated might find its way to him. The idea seems to be that becoming solvent will automatically result in social acceptance and recognition, and this is Christian's motivation; as How says, 'Money is the moment of truth.'<sup>230</sup> In some respects, the dénouement of the play bears out this hypothesis, but as I will now proceed to evaluate, whether Donleavy succeeds in underlining this idea at the end of the play is more ambiguous than it may first appear.

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<sup>228</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, II, 2, p. 164.

<sup>229</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, II, 2, p. 168.

<sup>230</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, II, 2, p. 169.



## Self-Performance and Belonging

In the final scene of the play, Christian goes to an upmarket restaurant with a date, Charlotte Graves. The stage directions describe the waiters in the establishment as ‘*high nosed and sniffing and brow lifting,*’ and Christian as ‘*sad and silent and touches the silver salt and pepper things.*’<sup>231</sup> The Act is entitled ‘PEACH SHOES,’ which plainly states the error which Christian makes in trying to get upmarket society, symbolised by the snobbish waiters, to accept him. Christian tries to defend his ridiculous footwear by describing how his peach shoes give him a sense of power:

I walked along the highway this afternoon really feeling big time. [...] I just looked back at them with that air, that I know somebody who knows somebody who’s something and you better watch out. [...] I passed by, putting an extra inch on my chest and smiled. [*Shooting a shoe forward*] I am proud of these shoes.<sup>232</sup>

However, he has misjudged the situation in the restaurant, and is punished for his indiscretion by being totally ignored by all the staff there. Charlotte tries to wake him up to his predicament and the emptiness of his dream of acceptance and affluence, ‘We come from the same background. Our backgrounds are medium and middle. We can’t be sure we’re right, that’s all I’m saying. The better people are right.’ When he challenges her by asking, ‘We’re not the better people,’ she replies, ‘We may be better than some people. But we’re not the best people, that’s all I’m saying.’<sup>233</sup> There is no doubt that by ‘best,’ Charlotte means “richest”; Christian, despite his resistance to this notion, eventually accepts it and acts upon it in an extravagantly performative way.

Because they cannot get served and Christian is too proud to admit defeat – another quintessential Donleavy male character trait – he leaves Charlotte in the restaurant alone for an extended period and appears again for a spectacular victory,

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<sup>231</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, p. 199.

<sup>232</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, p. 199.

<sup>233</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, p. 201.

which ends the play. While he is absent, the waiters speak to Charlotte, trying to explain why they have rejected Christian and herself:

We have certain unwritten rules. Which it is understood people understand before they come here. We do not mind when persons come where this is not their natural habitat. We try to make them feel at home and not as if they don't belong.<sup>234</sup>

The waiters make clear to Charlotte that, as with How's 'facts,' making people 'feel at home' is a selective process which is dependent on outer appearances. Whatever stories Christian tells himself about his shoes and however powerful they may make him feel, the society in which he lives censures him because he does not fit its representatives' ill-defined notions of decorum. Formally, this censure functions as a very subtle allegorical nod to the climate of HUAC's America, in which Donleavy was living and working. The nod does not manifest as a blunt-instrument, scathing indictment; on the contrary, its implied presence has slipped in virtually unnoticed, and is probably unintended. The instability and subjective basis of even the tiny community of an upmarket restaurant serves to raise a small question mark over the possibility of evolving a social world in which all members have the same perspectives and values.

Like O'Neill's social outcasts in *The Iceman Cometh*, Christian can sense that he is not socially accepted and it makes him feel sad and lonely, but tragically, more determined than ever to demonstrate outwardly that he does belong in society's highest echelons. It is clear that he will never be successful in this ambition, as the truth of the matter is by necessity that positions of privilege and respectability must exclude many more people than they include, otherwise they would not be privileged and respectable.

To prove to the waiters that he is the kind of person to whom they should show deference, at the play's anticlimactic dénouement, Christian reappears in the restaurant,

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<sup>234</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, p. 203.

*in gray topper, tails and white tie, evening cane tucked under his arm, as he waits in the sudden bright rising lights and the fading end of the humming chorus. Bare feet resplendent, a large sparkling diamond on each toe.*<sup>235</sup>

The waiters duly jump to deferential attention, as they are convinced at last that Christian is a man of great material substance; as one leaves the table, he is seen ‘Retreating with the backward step and the genuflecting head.’<sup>236</sup> At face value, Christian’s triumphant reappearance with all the outward signs of great wealth results in the victory of gaining the waiters’ respect. However, the victory has been undermined even before his return in evening dress and diamonds by one of the waiters, who accuses the pretentious and rich guests of being ‘phony’:

FRITZ: [*Apocryphal hand lifted*] You call Mr Van Hearse and his party in there phony.

CHARLIE: Yeah. I call them phony. What the hell is he but some guy who makes rubber goods.

FRITZ: Don’t say that in front of women. Mr Van Hearse is a public benefactor.

CHARLIE: Don’t start giving him titles. He makes rubber goods.<sup>237</sup>

Christian himself is not as wealthy as his new apparel implies: ‘CHRISTIAN *with his silver cigarette case, which looks like platinum for the occasion.*’<sup>238</sup> The cigarette case symbolises Christian with his diamonds; overstated external signifiers of wealth, employed in order to force an exclusive society to accept him as one of its own. Self-performance therefore comes to be everything, in that there is nothing behind it: if one looks rich and successful, and behaves as if he or she is so, then everyone will believe it, howsoever false the projection might be.

This makes the conclusion of the play anti-climactic, in that it is a dark message with which the audience is left: the only way to succeed, to receive acclaim and a place

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<sup>235</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, p. 208.

<sup>236</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, p. 210.

<sup>237</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, pp. 204-205.

<sup>238</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, p. 210.

at the heart of American society, is to buy it. Respect, deference and admiration all come at a price. To attain them, it is necessary not just to be rich, but to show it; not just to possess and to show wealth, but to fit a certain unwritten, homogenised version of society and community. The only way around these tacit, unspoken rules of conduct and appearance is to be so ridiculously and obviously wealthy as to buy a kind of licence to behave and dress in any way at all. This message is signified in *Fairy Tales* by Christian's diamond-encrusted feet. Ultimately, this scene asserts the fallacy of American classlessness, and binds capitalism and "Americanness" up intractably with each other. Its allegorical function, though, is subtle and somewhat tentative. As O'Neill's protagonists tend to in the late plays, Donleavy's leading men still firmly believe in the possibility of finding a home, a place to belong, recognition, and acceptance. The dramatic form of the two plays of Donleavy's which I have examined in this chapter rather problematises this belief, but nonetheless, he shares it with O'Neill, and this makes it possible to start to trace a development from one to the other.

Donleavy's belligerence, and as usual, conversely also his plaintive plea for acceptance of his work and his art by his community, is underlined by the last word of the stage directions of *Fairy Tales of New York*. After '[CURTAIN],' he appends the single word '[Applause].'<sup>239</sup> This is a difficult and ambiguous play, both formally and thematically. It is as preoccupied with loneliness and isolation, storytelling and community as all of Donleavy's works are, but its messages are mixed, and the play is only partially successful as a dramatic text as a result. It fits in Donleavy's canon and adheres to his oeuvre, but it raises problems for the scholar too, as the literary analysis in this section has demonstrated.

## Conclusion

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<sup>239</sup> *Fairy Tales of New York*, IV, 1, p. 211.

Analysing two of J.P. Donleavy's major dramatic works yields the conclusion that despite his Irish heritage and citizenship, the playwright's political and social milieu is wholly American in tone and content. His protagonists are iconoclastic, isolated, aggressive individuals because according to his understanding of America's own propaganda machine, there is no room for failure except on a personal level: the capitalist system is seen as both permanent and perfect. Therefore, for Donleavy, American individuals only fail the system in American drama, rather than being failed by it. Despite the dramatic shortcomings of these two plays, and the personal and social shortcomings of his various "Donleavy" protagonists, his dramatic works are intended to convey the hope underpinning the search for belonging, acceptance, and recognition. Because the American Dream is, for Donleavy, achievable – or failing that, and crucially, *fakeable* – he projects in his plays a seemingly inclusive, classless world of opportunity. In this world, anyone and everyone can rise to the highest social and economic echelons merely by working hard and being ambitious, committed and imaginative. For him, then, those excluded from the highest levels of financial, and therefore social, success are outcasts and failures by their own doing, and theirs alone.

As a dramatic motif, therefore, loneliness becomes the site on which the American Dream of self-betterment, self-enrichment and self-determination is revealed as a failure in and of itself. If the principle is that everyone should and can belong, then outsiders who do not fit the dominant community narratives, for whatever reason, give the lie to the possibility that everyone should be able to fulfil themselves and become successfully self-made. This particular version of the Dream therefore becomes a nightmare for those Americans who fall short of its impossible standards; and yet, paradoxically, its impossibility has always remained integral to its force and challenge.

Donleavy's plays therefore respond to this complex tradition by raising the important question, pertinent to the whole American-Irish theatrical canon of the second half of the twentieth century, of how much of one's sense of self one should be willing to surrender, compromise or betray in order to attain success. When all four of his plays are viewed chronologically, it is possible to see the slow disintegration of the strong male Donleavy lead protagonist into passivity, silence and victimhood, as William David Sherman, one of the rare scholars to have written on Donleavy, argues. Sherman asserts, speaking of the typical "Donleavy" male protagonists whose various attributes I have described in detail in this chapter, that it often seems as though this figure 'is questioning his own existence, trying to capture his postures in back-to-back mirrors to prove to himself that he has an objective identity.'<sup>240</sup> The gathering failure of this archetype to achieve this, for himself and in the eyes of others, as it can be plotted across Donleavy's whole corpus, implies that there is not one single 'objective identity' to be obtained. Rather, each character exists in layers, and only insofar as their stories are heard and understood by another or others which, by and large, they are not. Therefore, and increasingly, these bold, brave, stubborn and determined individuals tend towards disintegration. In the case of the lead role in his fourth play, *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S* (1972), the protagonist is helplessly neurotic and develops a persecution complex.

Donleavy's characters ceaselessly tell themselves and others stories about themselves, their past, hopes, dreams, fears and disappointments. By so doing, they are trying to see themselves clearly enough to work out where in the allegedly classless land of opportunity that is America they might find a place to call home. So, for Donleavy, existential isolation and abandonment by, or outright rejection of, the narratives of the

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<sup>240</sup> William David Sherman, 'J. P. Donleavy: Anarchic Man as Dying Dionysian', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 13 (4), (1968), 216-228 (p. 222).

ethos of the dominant community becomes the flipside of American individualism – the reflection in the second mirror, as Sherman would have it. Success should bring fulfilment and a sense of self-realisation and self-achievement, rather than leaving the lone striver feeling alone, isolated, misunderstood and unhappy. Donleavy's characters all share a compulsion to keep talking, to themselves and to each other, so as not to hear the silence of the reality of their isolation.

This chapter has demonstrated the trajectory it is possible to start to trace from O'Neill's late plays to the dramatic works of Donleavy. By undertaking a close literary analysis of *The Ginger Man* and *Fairy Tales of New York*, I hope to have gone some way towards redressing the fairly consistent omission of Donleavy from the teaching and research fields of English Literature, American Literature, Irish Literature and Cultural Studies. I have shown that his deployment of stage-Irish and stage-American figures is undertaken critically, in order to manipulate them, critique them, and draw attention to their performative elements. Furthermore, and paradoxically, I have shown that in the main, the author appears to hold that such stereotypes are largely accurate. It is this ambiguity, the shifting from pole to pole, and how the playwright utilises such shifts, which is notable about these plays; not, ultimately, whether he actually believes such pastiches as he deploys to be fair or accurate. I have further argued that the ideological climate of HUAC's investigations surrounding the playwright and his work has crept into the themes and the dramatic form of his plays, and Donleavy's cultural context, which like O'Neill's is that of a second-generation American-Irish Catholic, serves to frame them.

Having exacted analyses of some key dramatic works by Eugene O'Neill and J.P. Donleavy, the final chapter of this thesis turns to the plays of the later, and relatively unknown, second-generation American-Irish playwright Frank D. Gilroy. He

is the most contemporary of the three playwrights whose work comprises my literary focus. Chapter 3 scrutinises a selection of his full-length plays, engaging with the same conceptual framework and thematic preoccupations as the two preceding chapters. I examine storytelling, its power to allow the teller to self-create, and the dangers of its practice, because self-performance to an audience, however small, is as important in the works of Gilroy as it is in those by Donleavy and O'Neill. I scrutinise traits of "Irishness" and "Americanness" as they feature in Gilroy's plays, in order to compare their deployment with the execution of critical national portraits and pastiches in the work of the two earlier playwrights. Again, I suggest that – as with O'Neill and Donleavy – this American-Irish playwright offers work which functions as an alternative "national biography" of the disaffected and the excluded. Lastly, I reflect on loneliness as a framing thematic concern, as it is staged in Gilroy. Overall, the analysis strives to situate Gilroy's work on a specifically second-generation American-Irish developmental trajectory, in line with his two predecessors; one of a gathering, and subtle, indirectly allegorical critique of the work of the House Un-American Activities Committee on the formation of communities and the demonstration of loyalty.



Loneliness, Storytelling and Community in Performance: The Climate of the House Un-American Activities Committee's America in Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill, J.P.

Donleavy and Frank D. Gilroy

**Saints, Sinners and Symbols:**

**The plays of Frank D. Gilroy in the late- and post-HUAC years**

**Introduction**

This chapter leads the thesis towards its conclusion. It builds on the close textual and contextual analyses of the previous two chapters, which focused on the late plays of Eugene O'Neill and the dramatic works of J.P. Donleavy, by assessing the output of the almost wholly unknown American-Irish playwright Frank D. Gilroy, who was born in 1925.<sup>241</sup> Despite winning an Obie for his first full-length play, *Who'll Save the Plowboy?* (1962), and a Pulitzer Prize for his second, *The Subject was Roses* (1964), professional acclaim and financial security still yet elude this writer. Although this is partly due to the inconsistent quality of his dramatic output, he has nonetheless produced more than enough strong full-length works to merit academic attention. I intend to use this chapter to start to stimulate debate in critical circles about his three best plays: *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, *The Subject was Roses*, and *Any Given Day* (1993), the last of which is a prequel to *Roses*. Indeed, the analysis to follow demonstrates that even the slight weaknesses and tensions in the form and the content of these three plays function sub-textually to critique the climate in which they were produced and staged.

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<sup>241</sup> As with Donleavy, Gilroy is a more notable figure in other print and arts media; he is a successful film writer and director, television writer and novelist. Like Donleavy, his professed first love is to write for the theatre, but despite a consistent output spanning over fifty years of both full-length and one-act plays, Gilroy has never succeeded in achieving the breakthrough that early successes such as *The Subject Was Roses* seemed to promise. However, as he says himself in the Introduction to his *Complete Full-Length Plays 1962-1999*, "we're not through yet." p. vii.

Above the question of minor and occasional dramatic awkwardnesses, at which I look closely and critically below, there is a somewhat darker shadow cast by the symbolism consistently deployed, in one form or another, across all three of the plays under scrutiny in this chapter. For Gilroy, it seems that children – one’s own, particularly – are dangerous. They threaten the unity of marital partnerships in various ways; worse, when they have things “wrong” with them – ill health, hypersensitivity, a range of disabilities, and cot death all afflict the children of Gilroy’s plays – their deficiencies are, it is heavily implied, a judgment on the couple to whom they belong. This tends, in all Gilroy’s plays, to lead to just the kind of cyclical guilt, blame, recriminations, outbursts, and frustrations at failing to find a sympathetic audience for one’s stories that we are accustomed to watching in O’Neill’s late plays.

Furthermore, and importantly, the kind of cultural superstition and ill-informed guilt and blame surrounding Gilroy’s characters’ responses to disability and premature mortality, problematic as they are in many ways and particularly from a disability studies perspective are, I will argue, themselves indicative of a deepening malaise that pervades the plays. Specifically, it seems that such pervasively negative internalised messages, as they are experienced to varying degrees by Gilroy’s characters, are the darkest indirect allegorical echoes of the lasting legacy of the investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Chronologically, Gilroy’s plays are the most contemporary of those under examination in this thesis, and despite what appears to be strenuous efforts by the playwright to buoy his characters and themes with a bright, breezy, knockabout positivity, I will argue – against the grain of these efforts – that he actually stages the *least* faith in hope and redemption through connecting with others by storytelling of the three playwrights herein considered. In the works of Donleavy, as the previous chapter has shown, there is in evidence a gathering

diminishment of hope and trust and a foundering, though still determined, faith in justice and loyalty. To complete the picture of the climate of HUAC and the post-HUAC era which this thesis has begun to sketch in around these playwrights, I will now look at Frank D. Gilroy's plays in the light of their place on this specifically American-Irish, Catholicism-tinged downward trajectory, and reflect on the work of all three playwrights as muted, indirect allegorical critiques of the time and place in which they were produced and staged.

Gilroy's chosen themes are certainly commensurate with the two earlier playwrights whose work I have discussed, meaning that I can tentatively indicate the existence of a tradition of second-generation American-Irish playwriting which has been indirectly influenced by the climate of McCarthyism. I will show that Gilroy does battle with what Margaret Lofthaus Ranald astutely observed to be O'Neill's great formal difficulty: trying to create inarticulate characters who can nonetheless communicate important ideas. In the case of Gilroy, this difficulty leads on occasion to stilted dialogue and rather contrived emotional climaxes, but as with O'Neill, this is not due to formal or dramatic laziness on the part of the playwright. Gilroy explores the power of language and self-performance, particularly to entrap the storyteller in a narrative which, once uttered, can become forever fixed, however damaging it is, which is pertinent to the effects of some people's testimonies to HUAC. He also examines the shortcomings of self-performance and self-narration; or rather, he dramatises the ways in which stories can act as the glue which holds a community together, and can permanently separate and alienate people from one another too. The limits of plausibility for a self-performance to peers, at which Goffman hints when he observes, 'While we can expect to find natural movement back and forth between cynicism and sincerity, still we must not rule out the kind of transitional point which can be sustained

on the strength of a little self-illusion,' are definitely strained in the work of Gilroy, and I will look at how and why this comes to be the case.<sup>242</sup>

### **“Irishness” and “Americanness”**

As with the other two playwrights whose work this thesis addresses, Gilroy was born in America to Irish immigrant parents. Like them, his best work is self-professedly semi-autobiographical, and like them, his plays are steeped in themes of self-performance, the desire for belonging, the compulsion to tell one's stories, to be heard and to be understood, and the struggle with loneliness that is occasioned by the failure or frustration of one's personal dreams and ambitions. The meticulous Eugene O'Neill scholar Travis Bogard said of O'Neill's post-1934 dramatic works,

he began to explore [...] the sickness of his world; at the same time he explored himself, as if instinctively he knew that his answer to the larger social question was to be found only through unrelenting self-analysis. The two problems of society and the self had a single answer, for they were the same sickness.<sup>243</sup>

'The two problems of society and the self' are as much a preoccupation for Gilroy as they were for O'Neill before him. Indeed, these twin concerns obsessed J.P. Donleavy too, as my second chapter has shown. Because of this, self-narration – howsoever selective and flawed – on the part of each of these playwrights comes to function theatrically as a subtle, indirect allegorical account of the 'society' in which their various 'selves' existed at the time.

Moreover, all three playwrights' interest in 'the sickness of [their] world' seems to be curiously interwoven with their Irish heritage, in that the world in which their characters exist and stage themselves is centred rather on the immutable past than on the

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<sup>242</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 31-32.

<sup>243</sup> Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, revised edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 367.

malleable future. There is a thematic obsession across these playwrights' work with things that cannot be changed or forgotten. These points of contention must be forever obsessively revisited, autopsied and re-trodden in an ultimately futile attempt to accept and to be accepted, and in the determination to create and preserve a communal identity. William V. Shannon, not a recent critic but a useful one nonetheless, argues that such obsessions were engendered more than two hundred years ago in the Irish national consciousness. Moreover, he asserts that Irish immigrants transplanted these attitudes to America when they came to settle there. To his mind, the Irish:

developed inwardness and stubbornness. [...] The long losing struggle to lead their own life free from English interference rubbed into every Irish mind a primitive tragic sense. From childhood, each generation learned of these old defeats and heard retold these tales of lost battles and fallen heroes.<sup>244</sup>

If we are to agree with Shannon, storytelling, and the mythologising which tends to come with it, is manifest in the stories which the characters of the plays this thesis considers tell each other. It is not necessarily that the homogenous 'national genius' of the Irish that Shannon asserts actually exists. It is rather that all three of these American-Irish playwrights desire to draw on traditions of "Irishness," in the context of the climate of HUAC's America, in which any material identity which strayed from the narrow and artificial, externally-imposed "norm," was under threat. Indeed, the very desire to stand contrary to the pervading atmosphere of McCarthy's America, it seems to Shannon – and myself – is in itself a trait of performative "Irishness" as much as it is a trait of the artist in a more general sense. This is to say that one's national identity is often underlined or even created by *not* being in the country perceived as one's birthplace or ancestral "home." National identity is defined by, and against, what it is not – a parallel with HUAC's ill-defined conception of "Americanness," as I have noted

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<sup>244</sup> William V. Shannon, *The American Irish*, revised edn (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 9.

in the preceding chapters. All three playwrights herein examined, and probably Gilroy above all, draw on this tradition; Shannon quotes ‘an old Irish proverb’ which states, ‘Contention is better than loneliness,’ and across this thesis, both contention and loneliness have proved to be major thematic forces.<sup>245</sup>

### **Dramatic Form**

By contrast, as for dramatic form, and as with O’Neill, Gilroy prefers classical naturalism, which also requires close attention in the following analysis. This dramatic shape tends to be regarded today as innately conservative, because it is closed and restrictive. The box set with the “fourth wall” removed so that the audience peers voyeuristically in can be seen as entrapping the characters within its walls. Stanislavski’s demands for authentic sets with real, solid furniture – rather than painted backdrops – were intended to add authenticity and plausibility to the staging of the plays that he directed. However, in later readings of these sets, the “authenticity” and real, solid permanence of the sets and their fittings in naturalism tends to give the structural impression that the situation in which the characters live and interact is itself equally as solid and immutable as the stage objects.

In formal terms, this immutability rather precludes the possibility of positive change, and therefore has come to be viewed as functioning to “trap” the protagonists of naturalism within the form of the plays. For instance, of this pervasive and highly influential dramatic form, Joe Cleary has argued:

while naturalism was undoubtedly a dissident and socially committed aesthetic, it would be difficult to regard it in retrospect as a radical one. [...] Though a combatively engaged form, naturalist narratives are nevertheless typically focalized through the consciousness of characters so socially isolated and so

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<sup>245</sup> Shannon, *The American Irish*, p. ix.

temperamentally alienated from their communities, or indeed from any sense of collective agency or solidarity, that any sense of social protest is typically funnelled into individual rebellion against a common philistinism or smothered by a pervading climate of entropy and fatalism.<sup>246</sup>

This is both a useful definition of how classical stage naturalism works, and yet a frustratingly literal and therefore limited one. Cleary misses the whole point of using the family as a representative micro-community in which issues of alienation, rebellion, and the quest for belonging can be played out: the family is a *metaphor* for the wider community in which the plays are produced and staged.<sup>247</sup> It is not that the families and their associates in naturalist plays are ‘temperamentally alienated from their communities,’ nor are they necessarily ‘socially isolated.’ Rather, it is that the characters seek a place to belong within the box set walls of the family home, and not finding one, *symbolise* thereby the fear and effects of non-belonging to one’s dominant social narratives: here, I am reading the family as a symbolic microcosm of nationhood.

This allegorical function is particularly relevant to Gilroy’s work, in which the restrictiveness of the form pulls on the characters’ interactions, stifling their self-expression and inhibiting their ability to connect with, and to understand, one another. It locks them into a confined space, and their attempts to forge micro-communities and allegiances within extended family gatherings tend to fail. For Gilroy’s protagonists, there is no escape from the past, into which the characters are locked by their memories, and by the unresolved tensions that they persistently revisit by telling their stories again and again. In this way, the naturalistic form becomes almost another character in the

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<sup>246</sup> Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>247</sup> On the persistence of the family as a metaphor for wider social interactions and community formations, see particularly Arthur Miller’s wide-ranging theatrical essay, which makes specific reference to the connections between depictions of the family and the dramatic form in which they are contained, ‘The Family in Modern Drama,’ in Robert A. Martin (Ed.), *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* (London: Methuen, 1994). Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, Miller first published this essay in 1956, at the very height of the notoriety of Joseph McCarthy, whose activities Miller had baldly allegorised as “witch-hunts” in his 1953 play *The Crucible*.

plays, constantly present and claustrophobic in atmosphere and effect. Kearney asserts that narratives:

impose some kind of selection and sequence on the Babel of stories, spoken and unspoken, that are jangled and jumbled together in a modern city. The city absorbs all of the narratives, past and present, into itself, like paper absorbing ink. And the citizens themselves cannot but write their lives onto this paper, even though their testimonies are for the most part “involuntary.”<sup>248</sup>

I would argue that dramatic narratives are particularly involved in this absorption and reflection, because they stage – verbally and non-verbally – the point at which people come together. In Kearney’s view, the compulsion to tell one’s story is in part an attempt to process and incorporate the clamour of the city.

Gilroy’s use of the atmosphere of New York, always just slightly removed from the box set and yet seeping in from time to time, confirms the validity of this claim. The sounds and smells of the city of New York drift in through the windows of Gilroy’s sets, and characters constantly open and close them, gaze from them and stand near them. In deploying the city almost as an additional character in his plays, Gilroy mobilises a device used by O’Neill in *Hughie*. In this way, the city serves to function as an indirect allegorical signifier of the wider world and the context with which it surrounds these plays, despite Gilroy’s many attempts to render this climate irrelevant. The second chapter of this thesis situated Donleavy on a thematic and formal continuum that can be traced from O’Neill’s late plays to Donleavy’s theatrical works. With these preliminary observations, it is already possible to start to align Gilroy with both playwrights.

### **Disability: An Ominous Metaphor**

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<sup>248</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London and New York: Routledge; Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), Thinking in Action Series, p. 28.



Another clear example of the correlation between Gilroy and his predecessors is that he includes in each play under consideration a dead, deformed or disabled child. Children are often symbols of hope for the future in literature; Gilroy hints through damaging the symbols of hope in his plays that making intimate connections of any kind, and particularly sexual ones, is dangerous. Now, from an ethical perspective, this kind of symbolism is inescapably problematic. In their chapter on ‘Disability as Narrative Supplement,’ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder note the long history of the figures of physically and mentally disabled characters in film, theatre and painting being uncritically deployed as symbolic signifiers of malevolence, difference in a negative, undesirable sense, and non-normalcy or deviancy. ‘[D]isability,’ they argue, ‘has undergone a dual negation – it has been attributed to all “deviant” biologies as a discrediting feature, while also serving as the material marker of inferiority itself.’<sup>249</sup> Gilroy casts visible and invisible – which is to say, onstage and offstage – disabled characters in terms in which their disability is framed as a problem, an encumbrance, and even a judgment on their families. In this, he may at first seem to adhere unthinkingly to the assumption that disability is an automatically negative signifier. This assumption of ‘inferiority itself’ is not one which I share, and in fact, on closer inspection, I will argue, neither does Gilroy.

However, for now, what is at stake in terms of the literary analysis, and the thematic focus of the plays with which this chapter engages, is more to do with how the pejorative symbolism of physical and mental disability, and / or premature death, can be read within the context of the value-system being staged in Gilroy’s plays. This is why Gilroy’s decision to “damage” the symbols of hope, connectedness and vitality in his works by rendering them disabled is worthy of note. Such a rendering is symbolically

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<sup>249</sup>David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) p. 3.

significant to the dearth of hope and the faith in the value of being known and understood by another that pervaded the climate of the late- and post-HUAC era. Gilroy himself is not necessarily anti-disabled people or disability rights; it is *his characters* who judge by appearances, and who feel themselves to have been judged and found undeserving of happiness by bearing a disabled child, and it is important to hold the distinction between the two fields of perspective.

### **“American-Irishness”**

In the climate in which all three of these Gilroy plays were written and produced – the House Un-American Activities Committee was finally wound up in 1968, six years after Gilroy’s first success with *Plowboy* – the search for un-American activity was on the wane. However, because the effects of the Committee’s work were so far-reaching and diffuse, reflection upon how both the form and the content of Gilroy’s plays were affected by HUAC’s activities will be as useful as it was in the preceding two chapters. In the chapter which focuses on Donleavy, I demonstrated that his preoccupation with storytelling, the construction of identity through ritualistic narrative performance, and the effects of not belonging to one’s dominant national stories and myths, place him firmly in the shadow of O’Neill. This chapter will stake a claim that Gilroy is the natural successor of both. Because I have argued previously for the significant, if muted, effects of the climate of HUAC’s America on both the themes and the dramatic form of the plays of O’Neill and Donleavy, it is now possible to say that taken together, these three playwrights’ works constitute a sub-category of allegorical texts indirectly critiquing McCarthyism. Because the playwrights are all American-Irish Catholics, it is furthermore possible to begin to identify them as the hub of a tradition which incorporates a specific stripe of “Irishness” into the value-system of their plays.

## HUAC

All the plays under consideration herein function, to a greater or lesser extent, as dramatic allegories of the repressive, claustrophobic climate of suspicion, secrecy and conflicting loyalties that characterised HUAC's tenure, which climate has been evocatively described by the blacklisted writer Walter Bernstein as 'smelly and poisonous.'<sup>250</sup> Drama is particularly suited to exploring issues affecting the immediate moment of production at an allegorical remove, because of its literary form. Plays communicate their themes not only through an omnipotent authorial voice which directs and governs the constructed narrative, but also through non-verbal cues, silence, movement and shapes. It is possible to show something onstage obliquely without actually saying it; it is possible to stage incomplete and fundamentally conflicting narratives without concluding finitely which position is best or truest.

This conflict, which has underpinned all drama since the time of Aristotle, formally reflects the HUAC era. In the final reckoning, the issue of whether HUAC's aims were well-founded, whether the means they employed to exact them were commensurate with the threat that was perceived in society, and what precisely the outcomes and effects of the Committee's work were, can never be resolved. This lack of resolution is in part a by-product of the enduring HUAC-inspired paradox that it is impossible to disprove a negative. The lasting effects of the investigations of HUAC and the climate of fear that they inspired are only really quantifiable in negative terms. These effects are to be measured by artistic partnerships which never materialised or which were prematurely dissolved; by plays and films which were never produced, or which were never even written; by the fear-inspired systematic purging of overt political critique or, increasingly, even engagement from American art. Arthur Miller described

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<sup>250</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), p. 164.

being ‘afraid, of life and of myself and of what on many days seemed the inexorable march of the cheerful totalitarian patriots’ – which is to say, the “Americans,” or the “friendly witnesses,” or better yet, the “not-un-Americans.”<sup>251</sup> What makes drama particularly pertinent to use to assess the climate pervading HUAC’s America and conjured up so evocatively by Miller here is the Committee’s central obsession with loyalty needing to be an external, publicly-performed quality.

### **Self-Performance and HUAC**

In fact, what HUAC required of its “friendly” witnesses, and the judgments it exacted against its “unfriendly” witnesses, resonate with Richard Schechner’s theories about the nature and purposes of performance. As Schechner recognises, everyone is:

always involved in role-playing, in constructing and staging their multiple identities. By means of roles people enacted their personal and social realities on a day-to-day basis. To do this, they deployed socio-theatrical conventions [...].<sup>252</sup>

These conventions and cues, founded in stories that are told to others, naturally become part of the stuff of which naturalistic stage-plays are made, because ‘each human life is *always already* an implicit story,’ as Kearney has argued.<sup>253</sup> Performative cues are very much relevant to reading the structure of HUAC’s committee rooms and the ritualistic elements of its trials too. Failure to achieve a self-performance satisfactory to one’s accusers and interrogators – which is to say, one’s audience – under HUAC, resulted in being cast asunder from the dominant national narratives of a certain brand of “Americanness.” This resulted in rituals of searching for belonging, and rituals of exclusion and outsiderism, becoming as central and concrete to the effects of HUAC’s investigations as Schechner believes such considerations are for the Performance

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<sup>251</sup> Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 329.

<sup>252</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2003 [1988, 1977]), pp.ix-x.

<sup>253</sup> Kearney, *On Stories*, p. 129.

Studies discipline in the abstract. This exclusion is to be fought against, howsoever unsuccessfully, because as Goffman has so astutely noted, ‘A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it.’<sup>254</sup> This means that without a sympathetic audience which permits one’s self-performance to be viable, one’s whole identity is under threat: a worse fate even than being misunderstood and suspected by one’s audience. In this reading of social interaction, loneliness becomes the ultimate evil, because it is without an audience, be it a forgiving one or not, that one becomes in danger of trying to exist without the hope of acceptance. The family is a social microcosm in classical naturalism, as I have noted above, so in this instance, family members serve as to stand as a structurally allegorical representation of a watching and judging public during the tenure of HUAC.

### **Indirect Allegory**

The important thing to note about dramatic allegory, when attempting to understand what may have been at stake for the wider community, or communities, in plays written under HUAC’s auspices, is that it need not be a blunt instrument. It is well-known, for instance, that Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* (1953) is a direct allegory depicting what he considered to be the similarities between the HUAC trials and the Salem Witch Hunts of 1692. By staging the latter, Miller strove to illuminate the dangers of singling out community scapegoats based on superficial assessments of their innermost thoughts and motives, and blaming them for the deeper-seated ills afflicting a community living in turmoil and fear. His starkly clear and conscious intention, therefore, was to create a cautionary, allegorical depiction of what could ensue if HUAC was allowed to pursue its prosecutions unimpeded. Miller responded directly to the

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<sup>254</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, pp. 244-245.

stimulus of the work of HUAC, therefore, and produced a straight allegory about the issues the work raised.

The intention herein is not to criticise the motivations and effects of such a bluntly cautionary allegorical tale. I hope rather to highlight the richness and potential of the dramatic form, and therefore to moot the possibility of more subtle and nuanced parallels and critiques being depicted onstage. Indeed, for a playwright of the stature of Miller, despite his undoubted suffering regarding his personal decision of whether or not to inform to the Committee, his renown meant that it would always be difficult, if not impossible, for HUAC to silence, discredit and blacklist him. As he himself said, ‘Privately I thanked my stars that I worked in the theatre, where there was no blacklist; as a film writer, I would now be kissing my career goodbye.’<sup>255</sup> This was far from the case for many less well-known artists, meaning that a play produced by a lesser-known playwright such as Gilroy which was too literal in its criticism of HUAC could quickly serve to imperil its creator. Increasingly as HUAC’s tenure stretched into the future, any criticism of the panel, the economic status quo, the government, or the methods used by HUAC’s interrogators, could open up an artist to accusations of disloyalty. As Kovel neatly put it, ‘to hate and to fear Communism was the sure way of proving one’s American identity.’<sup>256</sup> With anti-communism being synonymous with “Americanness” under HUAC, and with HUAC’s ceaseless self-publicity proclaiming the large number of disloyal “Reds” they were unmasking, any criticism of the Committee’s aims and methods became increasingly tantamount to being a communist. This meant in turn that metaphor and allegory, always powerful tools of the stage practitioner in particular, gained increased currency in HUAC’s America, as they could be deployed –

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<sup>255</sup> Miller, *Timebends*, p. 404.

<sup>256</sup> Joel Kovel, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anticommunism and the Making of America* (London & Washington: Cassell, 1997), p. 22.

consciously or unconsciously – to critique the climate and yet still protect their creator from suspicion and attack.

This decentring of the artist and of the ideological climate via the deployment of allegory – direct and indirect – is more than a simple case of cause and effect. It is not merely that HUAC subpoenaed a disproportionate number of theatrical, cinematic and other artistic personnel, and so those artists who wished to continue working but did not agree with HUAC's methods found increasingly subtle ways to criticise the Committee. Rather, whilst this may be the case to some extent, the context affects the texts under consideration in more subtle and complex ways too. It may be that the playwrights themselves were not fully aware of the extent to which it is possible to allegorise the specific social or political situation in which they were immersed. The theatrical form's stock-in-trade is to deal with atmospheres, gestures, issues of blocking to demonstrate power dynamics, and so on. This makes it the most appropriate artistic form to explore, without necessarily answering, the big questions of its day. My assertion about the micro-communities staged in Gilroy's plays, as it was for the plays of Donleavy and the late plays of O'Neill, is that they function as very subtle allegorical models for the stress caused to communities by HUAC's investigations. Moreover it is often, and increasingly, through extra-verbal and formal devices that this critique is exacted.

### ***Any Given Day (1993)***

Of the three Gilroy plays which this chapter analyses, it is his most recent, *Any Given Day*, which both formally and thematically shows the long-lasting and pervading effects of the climate of HUAC's America on second-generation American-Irish plays of the post-War period. It was resoundingly, and undeservingly, unsuccessful at the box office, as Gilroy himself has rather bitterly observed:

Sometimes you do good work and get your due. Sometimes you do bad work and get your due. Sometimes you do bad work and get away with it, but in your heart you know. Worst of all is knowing you did good work and were struck down unfairly. Such was the case with *Any Given Day*.<sup>257</sup>

Gilroy is right: *Day* is a nuanced, confusing, funny, heartbreaking piece, deserving of much more attention than it has heretofore received within critical circles. It is designed to be a prequel of sorts to his more successful play *The Subject was Roses*, and far outstrips that play in terms of technical execution, formal control and the details of the content. It is subtler, with less blunt-object melodramatic climaxes and difficult to justify formal completenesses. It is cyclical like *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and it ends on a negative note of formal entrapment and the total lack of an end in sight like *The Ginger Man*. It is packed with the conventions of classical naturalism, and yet it is bright with innovation and humour. *Day* is not, however, a play with a positive message, in the final reckoning. Below, I will demonstrate that despite being released twenty-five years after the dissolution of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the shadow of that panel's work and its ideology is cast over every aspect of the play, albeit subtly and, quite probably, unconsciously. In particular, the formal devices depicting Willis, the eighteen-year-old son of 'unwed mother' Carmen Benti, gently interrogate the notion, typical under HUAC, that what one says publicly, and the language in which one says it, is the best and only way to adduce one's inner thoughts and beliefs.<sup>258</sup>

### **Disability as Allegory: Willis**

In the other two Gilroy plays which this chapter will discuss, the damaged offspring included in the play's "cast" is either offstage, as in *Plowboy*, or dead, as in

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<sup>257</sup> Frank D. Gilroy, 'Introduction [to *Any Given Day*],' in *Volume I: Complete Full-Length Plays 1962-1999* (Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2000), pp. 262-264, (p. 262).

<sup>258</sup> Gilroy, 'Introduction,' p. 264.



*Roses*. In *Any Given Day*, Willis is not only onstage, but is central to the whole plot development and the play's ending. According to the character-list, 'instrument damage at birth has left him physically handicapped and mentally retarded (without impairment of facial features), so he appears both older and younger' than his eighteen years.<sup>259</sup> This means that he serves as a formal bridge between the past and the future, and therefore, by inference, between hope and hopelessness. Willis is caught at the halfway point between being heard and understood, and being excluded from one's community because of what one does or says. Allegorically, this carries trace references of those who had been subpoenaed to HUAC but had not yet testified, in a blunt way, and is allegorical of any of those witnesses found not to belong to HUAC's narrative, in a more oblique way.

The climate which could allow witnesses' narratives to be either wilfully or accidentally misconstrued, due to the suspicion and doubt which came to characterise the HUAC hearings, is embodied in Willis. This potential for exclusion, and the effects of non-belonging to an externally-imposed "norm," have been described by Ien Ang as 'the all-too-familiar experience of a subject's harsh coming into awareness of his own, unchosen, minority status.'<sup>260</sup> In this observation, it is possible to identify those cast out of the dominant national narratives that surround them with the 'fog people' with which Eugene O'Neill populated his plays. Willis' 'unchosen, minority status' makes him a "fog person," and he does not choose nor, possibly, even understand that this is his existential condition. In formal terms, and in relation to the preoccupations of this thesis regarding the need for an audience to hear and to understand one in order to fix one's place in the community, what is significant about Willis is that *'it's impossible to gauge*

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<sup>259</sup> Frank D. Gilroy, '*Any Given Day*' in *Volume 1: Complete Full Length Plays*, pp. 264 – 333, (p. 264.)

<sup>260</sup> Ien Ang, 'Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm', in *boundary* 2, 4 (3), (1998), 223-242, (p. 224.)

*what he grasps of what's going on so that people often converse and conduct themselves as though he weren't there.*<sup>261</sup> I have said that Gilroy's preferred form is classical naturalism; Willis' constant presence, the fact that he sees and hears everything but is usually largely ignored, and that none of the onstage characters know whether, if at all, he understands what he sees and hears, effectively casts him in the symbolic role of the *offstage* audience.

This figure who might be an ally for the real-life audience, though, is designed to be difficult to connect with. He speaks his own '*secret*' language, which his uncle Eddie gives the impression he understands.<sup>262</sup> However, it is apparent that as Willis' long-term primary carer, Eddie rather "reads" the teenager's moods and feelings, than actually managing to understand every word he says. Willis therefore obliquely symbolises the silently-watching society in which individuals live. His present absence, oddly reminiscent of the Night Clerk's in O'Neill's *Hughie* in that what goes on in his head is not accessible to the audience, reminds us of the watchfulness, suspicion and paranoia of HUAC America's climate, a world in which,

[t]he American Communist was constructed by the Right as a completely dedicated, unnaturally energetic tool of a diabolical plot that emanated from Moscow to take over American civic organizations, unions, schools, entertainment and information sources, and even the State Department and the Army, on the way to overturning the American government.<sup>263</sup>

The vexed issue of what, if anything, Willis understands of the conversations and interactions surrounding him casts him in a symbolic role, akin to those paranoid souls seeking subversion everywhere, and failing to grasp the inner motivations and suffering of those subpoenaed, both "friendly" and "unfriendly." 'If only a monolithic,

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<sup>261</sup> *Any Given Day*, I, 1, p. 265.

<sup>262</sup> *Any Given Day*, I, 1, p. 267.

<sup>263</sup> Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 43.

homogenous community could be maintained,' as John Houchin has described the motivations of those who ceaselessly sought "Red" subversives, 'such problems [as civil unrest] would not occur.'<sup>264</sup> Willis' dual status as an insider – a family member – and an outsider whom no-one understands and several characters do not fully trust, symbolically threatens the homogeneity of the community-in-microcosm, the Benti family and its associates. Even his loneliness is debatable, and he is rather suspected for his isolation, than either helped with it on the one hand, or abandoned to it on the other. Symbolically, then, he demonstrates the futility of the quest described by Houchin above, because he cannot be absorbed into an 'homogenous community' with one, simple identity: he is an outsider who is inside.

## **HUAC**

This is not at all to say that Willis is necessarily an unproblematic allegorical figure inserted into the play to warn plainly of the negative, repressive effects of HUAC's investigations. The discussion of other aspects of his communication techniques and problems below intends to explore the subtleties of his representation and formal function. The aim is to take the temperature of his interactions with his family members, in order to assess the extent to which the climate in which Gilroy was writing can be inferred to be represented by Willis. This reading goes against the grain of Gilroy's various – and variously successful – attempts to render his play solely personal and, therefore, apolitical. This superficial apoliticisation of theatrical content, as I conclude below, is itself an artistic legacy of McCarthyism. Richard M. Fried has asserted that, 'Ordinary people responded to the anti-Communist fervor by reining in

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<sup>264</sup> John Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 & 2004), p. 215.

their political activities, curbing their talk, and keeping their thoughts to themselves.’<sup>265</sup> My assertion is that because audience preferences hardened in this way over the course of HUAC’s tenure, artists’ work was increasingly put under pressure to toe the ideological line to which what Fried calls ‘ordinary’ Americans adhered.

Willis’ made-up speech is only one aspect of his communication techniques and problems, and they all have highly significant formal functions which bolster the case that this play is subtly allegorical of HUAC’s America. There are other key recurrent components of Willis’ communication, including his deployment of catchphrases, jokes, air-writing, verbal spelling, and nonsense-words. Willis can pick up and deploy whole phrases; for instance, when he is beaten by Mrs Benti for growing hysterical while tracing nonsense words in the air, she screams at him, ‘*WHY DO YOU MAKE ME DO IT?...WHY?*’. He replies ‘*Beatifically,*’ ‘Because I love you, my darling.’<sup>266</sup> In its context as the climactic ending to Act I, this is a deeply troubling exchange, as it seems to imply that this is what is said to Willis in the wake of violence, or that he has heard such a comment offered to another to justify violent and bullying behaviour.

### **The Blame for Willis’ Disability**

The various traits of what Gilroy categorically describes as ‘instrument damage at birth’ which characterise Willis are actually typical manifestations of autism. In the light of the work of Mitchell and Snyder, and in particular their book *Cultural Locations of Disability*, the problem with Gilroy’s “diagnosis” of the cause of Willis’ idiosyncratic communication style is that even in the event of finding ‘an organic cause for a condition such as autism,’ a process which is far from near to completion, ‘this would

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<sup>265</sup> Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>266</sup> *Any Given Day*, I, 2, p. 304.

do little to counter the more powerful social contexts that we have now created around those diagnosed with autism.<sup>267</sup> Willis does not, in *Any Given Day*, have even a diagnosis of autism, much less a situation in which adjustments in his surrounding ‘social context,’ which is to say his family environment, are being made. However, as I have argued above, it is somewhat to miss the indirectly allegorical point of Willis’ portrayal to consider the ideological grounding of Gilroy’s depiction of disability to be shaky. For the purposes of this particular part of my argument, what is symbolically significant for Gilroy is that for Willis’ condition, there is somebody – several people, in fact – who can be blamed. The apportioning of blame in, to greater and lesser extents, *all* the plays which this thesis considers is significant because the guilt / blame / recrimination / penance cycle, which never offers any resolution but only turns once in order seemingly to turn endlessly again, is nowhere more evident as a governing structural principle than in the plays of Frank Gilroy. This allows me to situate his work on the developmental trajectory that can be traced from O’Neill’s late plays, to Donleavy’s and beyond, to Gilroy. Willis’ response to being bullied and beaten by Mrs Benti is challenging on a number of levels, and it seems to me that it is most troubling in its formal function: to acknowledge obliquely, again, the perils that Gilroy perceives within the act of attempting to feel close to, and to support, even a member of one’s closest cohort. The portrait of Willis is therefore, as with the inarticulacy and incoherence of various of O’Neill’s and Donleavy’s characters, most productively to be read as a critical depiction of a “type” character who appears in the play as a metaphor, in order subtly to critique his own depiction by his unknowable presence.

The threat of violence, as it is described by Willis’ parroting of a loving phrase, when it is seen in context simmering just below the surface of seemingly benign

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<sup>267</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) p. 11.

phrases, and articulated by a character who is simultaneously articulate in a strictly verbal way, and inarticulate in another way, serves indirectly to allegorise the hallmarks of the effects of HUAC's investigations on citizens' psyches. This is because when people were called to testify of those they knew who had communist backgrounds, it was common that the Committee already knew the identities of those whom the subpoenaed witness would name. The real intention was to add one's personal testimony to the portfolio HUAC was compiling of those who had justified the Committee's existence by helping to reveal the communist plot to overthrow the government of America, as Bernstein has noted:

If you wanted to escape either the blacklist or criminal contempt, you had to become an informer. You could not tell the committee or the various clearance centres just about yourself; names were what they wanted, calling them information. But they already had all the information they needed, for whatever they needed it for. They also had the names. What they really wanted was *your* name. They needed to show that you, too, were on their side.<sup>268</sup>

In allegorical terms, however, this underpinning motivation is left wholly for the audience to infer, because it has already been stated that it is impossible to gauge what, if anything, Willis actually understands of language and community interaction. Here, Gilroy wishes to demonstrate the emptiness of personal narratives. He shows that the stories people tell each other in order to justify themselves, to reach out and to connect, are ultimately ineffectual: a negative message indeed, and by far the most pessimistic one of the three playwrights with whose work this thesis concerns itself.

### **Self-Performance? Storytelling?**

Moreover, Willis' unconscious ability to interact, communicate, even seemingly to confess wrongdoing, without it ever being clear whether he understands what he says

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<sup>268</sup> Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), p. 12.

or what he does, shows an unusual ability, paradoxically, to keep possession of his privacy, in the context of a climate following one in which, ‘the Committee acted as though any question were fair game. It inquired into the most private beliefs and associations of citizens, holding over them the threat of prosecution as well as blacklisting if they refused to answer.’<sup>269</sup> Formally, Willis proves that even under duress, one’s thoughts are still one’s own, and one cannot truly be understood or second-guessed, even by close members of one’s micro-community. In this, he stands onstage indirectly – which is to say, we can read the symbol, but it is not necessarily intended – to critique the cumulatively negative effects of the investigations of HUAC.

Mrs Benti’s violent attack and Willis’ beatific riposte is only one example of the ways in which this character challenges the illusion that the language of storytelling – and the self-performance at which it hints – is properly equipped to forge communities and allegiances, and that what one says will reveal everything about one. For Willis, language is often fractured into its component parts, so that, for instance, he has a tendency to spell out key words in others’ conversations aloud. As always, it is left for the audience to decide whether he understands what the words *mean*; he has learned them, and he speaks them, by rote. This by-rote recitation often serves to show that he has *heard* what has been said, but does not clear up the issue of whether and how much he may actually *grasp* of complex social circumstances and interactions: they are akin to lines spoken by an actor. For instance, when Eddie complains to John that his glass of whiskey is too small, an exchange that gives ‘*the first hint of the constant and thinly veiled enmity between them,*’ he says, ‘She [Nettie] said small not infinitesimal,’ and Willis immediately contributes ‘I-N-F-I-N-I-T-E-S-I-M-A-L.’<sup>270</sup> He knows the word, but there is no way to know whether he understands that Eddie is covertly attacking

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<sup>269</sup> Murphy, *Congressional Theatre*, p. 45.

<sup>270</sup> *Any Given Day*, I, 1, p. 266.

John. Eddie and John are therefore estranged from each other, Nettie is reluctantly included in the unpleasantness between the brothers-in-law, and Willis' attempt to include himself in the conversation falls flat. There is no community in the Benti household: everyone is estranged from everyone else, all communication is fraught with passive aggression and confusion, and everyone is therefore lonely. This small scene reminds us that anything once said can be overheard and repeated – as Willis' intervention demonstrates – and that anything that is said can be potentially damaging to the speaker, as Nettie's unhappy involvement in the argument demonstrates. Both of these aspects of the exchange can be read as being subtly analogous to the climate engendered by the work of HUAC, even after the panel itself had folded, in ways which I will go on to discuss next.

### **The Post-HUAC Landscape**

Formally, the limitations of Willis' language, and the component parts from which it is built, unconsciously reflect the ideological climate of the post-House Un-American Activities Committee's America in which this play was written and staged. *Any Given Day* is preoccupied with what people say and why they say it. Yet, it is the unsaid – Mrs Benti's psychic predictions about the family members' future, for instance – and the language that is stripped of meaning, like Willis' verbal spelling, air-writing and recitation of music-hall catchphrases, that come to dominate the attempts at communication between the characters. This preoccupation with what is unsaid has seeped into the themes of this play, from the external climate in which it was written and produced, howsoever assiduously the playwright has resisted the process. Language after McCarthy – especially, things said that are heard by others – is dangerous, and self-narration is, in Gilroy's plays, safest when it is stripped of any personal and political content. For instance, when Willis is upset, he is often soothed by a



meaningless exchange of witticisms with Eddie, which have clearly been shared countless times already:

EDDIE: (*To Willis – calmly.*) What do you think of the high price of putty?

WILLIS: Yes Eddie dear.

EDDIE: (*Gently insistent.*) What do you think of the high price of putty?

WILLIS: It's putty high.

EDDIE: That's my boy. (*Tweaks his nose.*) Poop shla.

WILLIS: (*Tweaking Eddie's nose in return.*) Poop shla, my darling.<sup>271</sup>

Such exchanges can be read as a very subtle symbol of the thoughtless, unreflective parroting of what Arthur Miller has called 'the inexorable march of the cheerful totalitarian patriots.'<sup>272</sup> Such people, according to Miller, were those who adhered unthinkingly to the tenets of the HUAC and its affiliated bodies regarding what constituted "American" behaviour and ideologies, and acted to include or exclude people from dominant national narratives and social arenas on the grounds of its prosecutions.

Furthermore, the several scenes of ritual recitation in *Day* are formally reflective of the nationally-televised, ritualistic HUAC hearings which Gilroy saw during his formative years. Cate, among others, draws sharp attention to the ritualised, spectacular elements of the physical staging of the HUAC trials to which, via television, Gilroy was exposed:

Under harsh klieg lights Congressional inquisitors roasted civil servants, film stars, industrial workers, lawyers, teachers, writers and trade unionists, while reporters jostled in the corridors, panting for another allegation – *any* allegation from the Senator [McCarthy] whose manure was publicity.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> *Any Given Day*, I, 1, p. 279.

<sup>272</sup> Miller, *Timebends*, p. 329.

<sup>273</sup> David Cate, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 11.

Caute's use of strong language in this quotation in describing McCarthy's charges as 'manure,' and linking the imagery of bodily excreta directly to 'publicity' which was later to be "spread" in the press, is designed to be damning of all the rituals of the HUAC investigations. His impassioned terms should serve as a demonstration of the strong responses in both "friendly" and "unfriendly" responders to HUAC from its fire-and-brimstone outset of the days of Martin Dies. Moreover, Caute's awareness of the elements of staging, which HUAC deliberately deployed by using 'the glare of harsh klieg lights,' as well as the layout of the interrogation room – the figure giving testimony was stranded in the middle of the floor alone, with the Committee members seated above him, and behind the lights – is usefully evocative to the theatrical scholar of HUAC. As Elia Kazan, a "friendly" witness, succinctly put it: 'A film maker could not have devised a more humiliating setting for a suppliant.'<sup>274</sup>

Gilroy observed first-hand the damage that ritualised and publicly-spoken language could do: for a long time he was President of the Writers' Guild and was, as a union activist, under suspicion of being a communist. In *Willis*, he offers the stage a character who ritualistically and repetitively speaks, and yet never does any harm with what he says, and who may not even understand his, and others', words at all. This possible lack of understanding indirectly critiques those who are in actuality excluded from the successful higher echelons of capitalist American economic and social society, but who still think they belong, although the rhetoric they speak is as empty as the *Dreams* to which they blindly adhere. On this matter, the self-professed "redneck" and leftwing political commentator Joe Bageant has described these outsiders inside as, 'the unacknowledged working-class poor: conservative, politically misinformed or

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<sup>274</sup> Elia Kazan, *A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 446.

oblivious, and patriotic to their own detriment.<sup>275</sup> Elsewhere, he has observed that the ‘underclass,’ which for Bageant numbers roughly sixty million Americans, is characterised by being ‘Generally unable to read at a functional level,’ and therefore vulnerable to being ‘easily manipulated by corporate-political interests to vote against advances in health and education [...].’<sup>276</sup> The easy manipulation of people who have been failed by the socio-economic system prevailing in America, to be convinced that acting against their immediate best interests would in some way, paradoxically, aid them in the future, is symbolised by Willis. He can copy what people say, and he can be taught to recite certain phrases, jokes and songs until he gives the superficial impression he is interacting and understanding situations fully. Often, though, his self-performance is undermined by others’ realisation he is not answering them from a position of understanding, or else it crumbles into complete incoherence when left to run unsupported. In this way, and in subtle resistance to the long and problematic tradition of depicting disabilities in the arts, Willis’ autism is deployed critically by Gilroy as a negative symbol of empty rhetoric, untrustworthy community members, and the ultimate futility of endless attempts to connect with others by telling one’s stories.

### **Belonging and Community**

Indeed, all Willis’ attempts to participate properly in conversation tend to end in either violence or contempt being directed towards him, or in his being ignored, disregarded, slighted or ridiculed. There is no real place for him to belong in the Benti family, and yet there is nowhere else for him to be seen, heard and accepted either. All the family members, and all their affiliates, are actually excluded from the *de facto* micro-community in which they live. Next, the focus of the analysis turns to the

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<sup>275</sup> Joe Bageant, *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America’s Class War* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>276</sup> Joe Bageant, *Rainbow Pie: A Memoir of Redneck America* (London: Portobello Books, 2010), p. 2.

contradictory message of the play: that it is essential to break out of the toxic environment of the family and into the wider world; and yet that doing just this is in practice impossible. The ripple-effects that certain testimonies had on the formation of communities' collective identity under HUAC are clearly, if indirectly, in evidence in Gilroy's allegorical deployment of the extended family unit in *Day*, and that the influence of HUAC's investigations is everywhere apparent within the play.

All the characters in *Any Given Day* are actually defined by their difference. Their positions within and without the family are characterised negatively, by what makes them not fit – Eddie's illness, Willis' disability, Timmy's sensitivity, Gus' bigotry, among many other examples – rather than by what makes them belong. The group to which Carmen's fiancé Gus wishes to feel he belongs is in reality a forced collection of individuals who have no cohesion or internal coherence; they are riven with tensions, fissures, and double-dealing. There is no community in any positive sense in this play; there is only duty, entrapment, and stubborn, ill-founded loyalty. This is seen best, but not solely, in the '*thinly veiled enmity*' between Eddie and John, and in the extra-marital affair ongoing between John and his sister-in-law Carmen.<sup>277</sup>

In the plays of Frank Gilroy, community groupings stifle, entrap and frustrate people, and yet his characters cannot break the ties that bind and enter the wider world in order to attempt to forge alternative community groupings. Any kind of emotional or verbal connection can lead to deeper loneliness, unhappiness and deceit; the truth is equally as damaging and dangerous as lying. In *Day*, for example, Carmen asks Nettie, 'Was I always a hellion or did it start because everyone praised your angelic qualities?'<sup>278</sup> This shows that rather than dreaming of, or aspiring to be, a better person,

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<sup>277</sup> *Any Given Day*, I, 1, p. 266.

<sup>278</sup> *Any Given Day*, I, 1, p. 284.

she feels that a close person's positive attributes have had a *negative* effect on her character development. That there is no escape from the dangers of association is neatly proved by Eddie's departure, which improves his health, and his return, which he is warned will kill him. In this play, the individualism that the many and various versions of the American Dream have in common has resulted in competing motivations and divided loyalties underpinning any individual's attempts to connect with another. The message seems to be that loneliness is, in practice, infinitely preferable to trying to build a life with someone. In the earlier chapters comprising this thesis, I have argued that O'Neill and Donleavy are actually often more positive in outlook than they have heretofore been understood to be; with Gilroy's work, I have to assert the opposite. Although the plays under consideration seem at face value to be more small, positive, optimistic and warm than several of the American-Irish plays preceding them on the developmental trajectory I am tracing herein, the underlying messages are almost wholly negative. Moreover, my case now is that this negative representation of community is subtly allegorical of the long-term effects of the investigations of HUAC on the psyche of those trying to find a place in the world to put themselves. Next, I will go on to say why, by reflecting on the power of storytelling to make and to break a sense of community identity.

### ***The Subject Was Roses (1964)***

Throughout the three chapters of this thesis, I have consistently argued that the power of stories, both to stake a claim of belonging to the community or individual which hears them, and conversely to alienate the teller from his audience, haunts the American-Irish stage of the twentieth century. I have asserted that the testimonies given to HUAC were themselves a kind of story told by the witnesses to the world, and Gilroy was alive to the dangers of such self-narration, as can be clearly seen in his most famous

and successful play, *The Subject was Roses*. As it was with his depiction of Willis in *Day*, so it is true of his portrayal of the Cleary family in *Roses*: Gilroy incorporates the effects of HUAC's investigations into the structural value-system of his plays, howsoever unconsciously. Furthermore, in *Roses*, the "Irishness" of the first- and second-generation American-Irish characters is a clear part of the microcosmic structural value system of the family, just as it is in, for instance, O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. This correlation helps to illuminate the connections between the earliest playwright in this thesis, O'Neill, and the latest, Gilroy.

### **Autobiography as Self-Performance**

*Roses* is deliberately cast as an intensely personal story. Gilroy's introduction to his most well-known and successful play categorically states, 'It's essentially my parents and me. Insights gained later imposed on events that took place twenty years earlier.'<sup>279</sup> Here, Gilroy makes the direct claim of the "essential" quality of relaying his own story in *Roses*, and then immediately qualifies the claim by acknowledging that he has manipulated the "facts" in order to accommodate his later insights. This demonstrates that the details of the playwright's actual life with his parents ought not to be the primary focus when critically examining this play. As was the case with O'Neill, and with Donleavy, Gilroy presents various semi-autobiographical self-portrait characters in several of his plays; as with these other playwrights, these self-portraits are for various reasons unsatisfactory. In Gilroy's case, Timmy, the returning soldier in *Roses*, is as curiously blank a canvas as O'Neill's Edmund in *Journey*. Moreover, there are many scenes between his parents, Nettie and John, in which Timmy is not present,

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<sup>279</sup> Frank D. Gilroy, 'Introduction' in Frank D. Gilroy, *The Subject was Roses* in *Volume 1: Complete Full-Length Plays*, pp. 56 – 109, p. 54.

which means that they cannot have been straightforwardly reported by the playwright to us, the audience. This blurring of fact, impression, fiction and guesswork has overtones of 1950s McCarthyism, which has been absorbed into the play's overarching value-system, or as Murphy has described it, 'the cold-war imagination.'<sup>280</sup> It will always remain unclear what actually went on, and what Gilroy has manipulated in order to shape his own narrative version of events.

*Roses* was written during the Writers' Guild strike of 1960, and finally staged in 1964, just four years before HUAC was wound up. By staking a claim that the subject matter for the play is drawn from a deeply personal, individualistic cache of material, the playwright moves to protect himself from charges of disloyalty, and charges of engaging in a wider political critique of its surrounding social context. Gilroy feels that he owns his personal narrative and it is therefore unimpeachable: he asserts that it is part of his identity alone, and that it is separate from the world and the climate in which it was written. This is, however, itself a symptom of his subjectivation and there are therefore, unavoidably, traces of the climate of the time the play was written to be found in both its themes and its form, particularly as regards the characters' preoccupation with telling their stories in the quest to be heard and, crucially, accepted. This self-performance, foregrounded as it is in this play, can be framed by the very public and self-abasing displays of loyalty required by HUAC and described by Cate, Murphy, Bentley and many other HUAC commentators in order to absolve its witnesses of the taint of disloyalty. The failure of the Clearys in *Roses* finally to come to terms with each other's life-choices – and the gaps in the stories that are told – offer a subtle critique of the probable falseness underneath the performed authenticity of the penitential confessions of HUAC's "friendly witnesses." Bentley, the great historian of

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<sup>280</sup> Murphy, p. 161.

McCarthyism, claims that some friendly witnesses were ‘more apt to bear the breast of some creature of their fantasy’ than to offer a full and authentic confession, and yet there is no doubt that they were seeking absolution despite this, by cooperating with the Committee through telling their stories.<sup>281</sup> This culturally Catholic-tinged climate creeps into all Gilroy’s plays, and none more so than *Roses*, because the characters attempt sincerity and openness, but ultimately, they fail to articulate themselves fully.

### **Dramatic Form**

In this context, then, the description of the protagonists’ environment is of interest, because in classical naturalism, the set tells as much of a story as the action. In *Roses* the formal conventions of naturalism are stretched to their limit, because the family home is so oppressively tense, and the family members are so trapped in the cyclical inability to hear and understand each other properly, that the set becomes almost another character in the play. *Roses* is set in ‘a middle-class apartment in the West Bronx,’<sup>282</sup> to contrast with *Plowboy*’s ‘lower-middle-class apartment’ setting. Gilroy’s characters do not tend at face value to be the misfits, down-and-outs and ‘fog people’ typical of O’Neill’s late plays, and nor are they the strong-willed, insane, singular individuals of Donleavy’s theatrical works. They are ordinary people, not wildly rich or desperately poor, comfortable enough and yet profoundly unfulfilled and frustrated, disappointed that things are not better in their lives.

What is interesting about this is that Gilroy, the most contemporary of the three playwrights whom this thesis examines, shows hereby that the American Dream in its

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<sup>281</sup> Frank Rich, ‘Introduction’, in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-1968*, ed. by Eric Bentley (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Press), pp. xxiii-xxiv, (p. xxiv.)

<sup>282</sup> Frank D. Gilroy, ‘*The Subject was Roses*’ in *Volume 1: Complete Full Length Plays*, pp. 56 – 109, p. 57.



various incarnations, starting with the ‘*Great Hollow Boom of the twenties*,’ progressing through the Second World War, the onset of the Cold War and the effects of the work of HUAC and its associated bodies, is consistently failing.<sup>283</sup> Moreover, for Gilroy, it is not merely the desperate, hopeless vagrants at the extremely sharp end of capitalist society who are being failed, as is the case in O’Neill. Even in Donleavy, there are those occasional characters which have ambition, hope, and the drive for a more economically and therefore socially viable situation. One example is *The Ginger Man*’s Miss Frost, who successfully breaks out of her claustrophobic and bigoted community to pursue her fortunes as a single woman elsewhere. In Gilroy, the many different, individual dreams in evidence are failing everyone except the super-rich, who never warrant a single mention in any of the three plays under consideration. Indeed, often, Gilroy’s protagonists have long since ceased seriously to dream of a better life at all, or to hold any faith that one is achievable, as the oppressiveness of the naturalistic form underlines. In O’Neill and in Donleavy, it is possible to find characters for which a Dream is working, even if they are usually absent from the actual play, as is seen, for instance, with Erie’s stories about Arnold Rothstein in *Hughie*. In Gilroy, no-one is successful, and attempts to leave, to change their situations, to develop themselves and their lives, to grow and to learn, all always fail for his protagonists. Of the three playwrights under consideration, Gilroy therefore unconsciously demonstrates the least faith in hope.

Significantly, the naturalistic form, which tends to demand resolution and closure – or at least, as in *Journey*, a completion of one full turn of the play’s cyclical events – forces Gilroy’s plays’ protagonists to *feign* a kind of resolution or completion

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<sup>283</sup> Eugene O’Neill, ‘*Hughie*,’ in *O’Neill: Complete Plays 1932 – 1943*, ed. by Travis Bogard (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988) pp. 831 - 851, I, (p. 831.)

that rings ominously hollow. Goffman observes, ‘Sometimes the traditions of an individual’s role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously or unconsciously disposed to create such an impression.’<sup>284</sup> The use of the word ‘traditions’ here is particularly useful, as it reflects the ritualised and cyclical nature of social behaviour which is so self-evident in *Roses*. The dreamers still dream, but their dreams are dead; and sometimes, they do not even seem to know it. They parrot them only by rote, like lines they have memorised, but which have long since been emptied of feeling and import.

Therefore, Gilroy starkly stages a point which has emerged developmentally, and which can be used in the process of starting to trace a trajectory from the work of O’Neill, through Donleavy’s plays, and to himself. The flipside of the acquisitive, capitalist version of the American Dream, characterised by the aspiration to self-make and by an individualistic ethos, is loneliness. This loneliness is manifest in the distance between characters’ dreams and their lived reality. Their storytelling, the dangers of being heard that are implicit within it, and the inaction which underpins the hope for a better life that they determinedly carry with them anyway, are central to its thematic effect. The emptiness of the characters’ dreams, and the distance between the sad figures they actually cut and the hopeful, positive attitude Gilroy seems to intend them to project, points up this playwright’s unconscious construction of an indirect allegory about the cumulative effects of the late- and post-HUAC era.

### **Storytelling**

In *Roses*, as in *Iceman*, characters’ stories come to stultify them by trapping them in inaction, and by casting them permanently in the role they had occupied in the

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<sup>284</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 18.

past, however fleetingly. The same stories are trod and re-trod; the same anecdotes and accusations appear in each Act of the play. For instance, calling on one of the great symbolic traditions of classical European naturalism, Gilroy gives the Cleary family a deceased baby, John, who would have been Timmy's younger brother. His birth, rapid decline, and death are discussed by John and Timmy in Act II Scene 2, when Nettie disappears after arguing with her son. Tellingly, the opening line of the scene is, 'I remember sitting here like this the night she went to have John.'<sup>285</sup> This immediately alerts the audience to the formal and stylistic similarities between this play and, particularly, *Long Day's Journey into Night*: Timmy is drunk, and he reminisces about events twenty years earlier as if they were absolutely current. Both father and son are effectively talking to themselves, not so much at cross-purposes as in two parallel monologues, as can also often be seen between the Cobbs in *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*. They tell each other their stories in a cyclical way reminiscent of *Journey*, and they retread each others' stories too, as can be seen when Timmy prompts John with the details of his early encounters with Nettie in Act I. However, the two men ultimately fail to impress upon each other the validity of their position, due to the generational and ideological gaps between them, leaving both men experiencing the bitter loneliness which must characterise the failure to reach one's audience.

In this scene, the pervading atmosphere is one of simmering violence and resentment just below the surface of the characters' words, never fully articulated and therefore never resolved. With this comes the subtle echo of the effects of HUAC's investigations which, as has been noted above, often provided a forum for the airing of a personal grudge. 'The accused were guilty until proven innocent, rather than the other way round,' as Claudia Johnson and Vernon Johnson have described the climate of the

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<sup>285</sup> *The Subject was Roses*, II, 2, p. 94.

time, and ‘the trials had as a basic assumption the idea that the accused were naturally liars and that any arguments or evidence the accused could muster in their own defense were faked.’<sup>286</sup> As Gilroy’s works unfold, language comes increasingly to fail those who would use it to connect with others. The blame, the guilt and the accusations stay in the words, but the meaning, and the power of language to exact positive change, are often evacuated from them, which culminates in the seemingly wholly empty rhetoric and speechifying of Willis in *Any Given Day*.

### **Dramatic Form under Strain: A Legacy of HUAC**

Formally, there are two points in *Roses* at which the naturalistic form is strained to its limits, as Timmy’s attempts to break out from the stifling claustrophobia of the family home are echoed stylistically by a rather strange, momentary dissolution of the fourth wall. The first time this happens, John and Timmy are drunk and the scene merely serves to offer some light relief; the second time, the two men are discussing a dead baby and the atmosphere is fraught with guilt and blame, so the trick is less benign. In both instances, what happens is that Timmy and John exchange jokes and songs in the music hall tradition, with the stage directions explicitly indicating that Timmy is at various times ‘*Lost in contemplation of the audience,*’ and ‘*Playing the Palace,*’<sup>287</sup> as John explains to Nettie:

TIMMY: (*To John – indicating the audience.*) Tough house, but I warmed them up for you.

JOHN: Thanks.

TIMMY: Don’t look now, but your leg’s broken.

JOHN: The show must go on.

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<sup>286</sup> Claudia D. Johnson and Vernon Elso Johnson, *Understanding The Crucible: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 141.

<sup>287</sup> *The Subject was Roses*, I, 3, p. 82.

TIMMY: (*To Nettie – indicating John.*) Plucky lad. (*Extends his hand to John.*) Honor to share the bill with you.<sup>288</sup>

This is a most interesting and unusual stylistic device, because within the conventions of naturalism, the audience is traditionally utterly ignored. Characters should proceed as though the fourth wall that encloses the box set is still in place; the real-life audience of the play sits in darkness and voyeuristically observes the onstage action.

Formally, then, “pretending” to play to the audience whilst in the living room of the fixed set does not actually break the fourth wall, but it does draw attention to the artifice of the enterprise, and therefore pushes at the claustrophobic confines of the dramatic form of the play. Thematically, Timmy is desperate to break out of the family home, and formally, looking out into the “audience” chimes with this desperation: the form echoes the content. Contextually, Timmy and John’s mock-performances subtly demonstrate an awareness that one is always already being watched, judged, weighed up and observed, even in the intimate privacy of the family home. The HUAC-induced climate of enduring paranoia can therefore be seen to have crept into the family’s lives, in that the private time they spend together also has a public dimension, albeit a “pretend” one. In this way, *Roses* can be read as another example of a play that subtly and indirectly allegorises the climate in which it was produced, despite its surface impression being one of a studiously small and personal family story.

### **Performative Identity**

In terms of performative *national* identity, particularly in the light of HUAC’s demands on citizens to demonstrate their loyalty publicly by sharing their private business, what is arresting about these two scenes is that they illuminate one aspect of the Clearys’ Irishness without, seemingly, such an illumination being consciously

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<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 3, p. 83.

intended. Across this thesis I have tended to argue that on the whole, all identities are constructed and performed, and they are all works in progress, but not all facets of identity formation are deliberate, and this one is not. Marjorie Howe has quoted Conrad Arensberg on the subject of folk humour in the Irish countryside, observing that for him, ‘humour is the “velvet glove that cloaks the iron hand” of social control.’<sup>289</sup> I have said that the naturalistic form symbolises Timmy’s desperate desire to break out of the family home, and his inability so to do. Now, I can assert that the mock-humorous music hall interactions with John serve to lock Timmy into ritualistically and cyclically retreading old routines with his father, which contributes to his entrapment and loneliness. In this way, Arensberg – and Howe – are proven right; humour cloaks Timmy’s oppression and helps to make it bearable for him, but it does not help to release him from the ‘social control’ of his micro-community: in fact, it does the opposite. What is significant about this stereotypical trait of “Irishness” as it appears in *Roses* is that Timmy is a second-generation immigrant, born in America to Irish parents, which shows that Gilroy’s work is part of a certain tradition of American-Irish playwriting which is both distinctly American – *Roses* is set in New York – and distinctly Irish. This is why the relationship between form and content in *Roses* is a tense one.

### **Community, Belonging and Endings**

The most ringing example of the often fraught relationship between form and content in Gilroy’s plays concerns the last scene of *Roses*. In a ghastly attempt to round off the play on a positive note of resolution to match the formal permanence, completeness and seeming immutability that traditionally characterise the naturalistic

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<sup>289</sup> Marjorie Howe, *Colonial Crossings: Figures in Irish Literary History* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2006), p. 52.

form, John and his son Timmy abruptly arrive at a deep emotional connection with each other. I have repeatedly asserted across the three chapters of this thesis that forging any kind of emotional connection with another, in order to have an audience which hears, understands and accepts, is the crucial step in starting to build some kind of community. Such aspirations to community formation and acceptance have the potential to shield the protagonists from loneliness, which is the inevitable offshoot of the individualistic, capitalist American Dream. According to this theory, forging even a micro-community of two – as do Jim Tyrone and Josie Hogan in O’Neill’s *Moon*, for instance – injects a sense of hope and the promise of a better life into many of the plays under consideration. In *Roses*, *Plowboy* and *Day*, even these micro-communities do not work, formally or in terms of the plays’ content.

The closing scene of *Roses* consists of John begging his son not to move out of the family home, which involves by turn threats, pleading, emotional blackmail and very sad attempts to pretend indifference, before he finally accepts Timmy’s decision. In this, the young character educates and helps the older character to develop; youth therefore holds the symbolic promise of a better world to come in the play. The scene as it actually plays out, however, is excruciatingly awkward and unbelievable, to the point that this audience member, at least, finds it embarrassingly unsuccessful in its formal function and execution:

TIMMY: I love you, Pop.

*(John’s eyes squeeze shut, his entire body stiffens, as he fights to repress what he feels.)*

TIMMY: I love you.

*(For another moment, John continues his losing battle, then, overwhelmed, turns, extends his arms. Timmy goes to him. Both in tears, they embrace. [...])*<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>290</sup>*The Subject was Roses*, II, 4, p. 109.

Here, Gilroy stages a spontaneous outpouring of sincerely expressed, heartfelt emotion between two men who have not done anything more demonstrative than shaking hands and slapping each other on the back up until this point in the play. This outpouring goes strongly against the grain of the play's master-narratives about failures of communication, the yawning gap between the older and the younger generations, and the emptiness and pointlessness of symbols of love and devotion. All these thematic preoccupations are epitomised by Nettie hurling a vase of red roses to the floor in rage and frustration. The dénouement detailed above is positively melodramatic; Gilroy has had to take recourse to a theatrical form older even than classical naturalism in order to find a way to draw hope, completion and a positive note into the ending of his most acclaimed play.

In this, we can see that the playwright himself seems still to dream of a better world, but the world from which he actually draws his inspiration is devoid of the tools for him to create one, even at such a slender fictionalised remove. Richard Kearney advises his readers that they should regularly 'reflect on the paradox that our sense of identity and placement in the world often presupposes an acute sense of loss and displacement.'<sup>291</sup> It seems that this advice – which was specific to the discipline of Irish Studies – is highly pertinent to several scenes in the plays of Frank Gilroy too, including this one. John, the first-generation Irishman, and Timmy, his second-generation American-Irish son, are desperate to feel that they belong, both to each other, and in the family home. Ultimately, though, one of them must leave in order to continue the search for an audience which will truly accept him. Neither belongs in, or to, his micro-community, and what should be a scene of reconciliation and closure is actually

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<sup>291</sup> Richard Kearney, "Memory, History, Story: Between Politics and Ethics", in *Shadows of the Gunmen: Violence and Culture in Modern Ireland*, ed. by Danine Farquharson and Sean Farrell (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), pp. 165-176, p. 168.



unsatisfactory in both form and content, in that the hope the scene is intended to deliver does not actually materialise.

### **“Irishness” in *Roses***

I hope to have demonstrated by this analysis that this stylistic and cultural echo does not necessarily constitute formal laziness or sloppiness, although dramatically, in the case of this particular scene, the content strains not to be farcical. Gilroy’s attempt, like that of his predecessors O’Neill and Donleavy, is to mobilise inarticulate characters to express ideas – in this instance, *emotionally* inarticulate characters. Moreover, in the light of the applicability of Kearney’s advice to the scholar of Irish society to this scene, it seems that Gilroy’s Irish heritage, as much as his status as a second-generation American-born citizen, is as relevant to interpreting his plays as anything else. In his connection with O’Neill, it is possible to see the trajectory of a peculiarly Irish understanding of “Americanness.” This is because the individualism of each character, howsoever inarticulate, is subtly coloured with a common kind of ‘permanent yearning nostalgia,’ as Roy Foster has called it, to belong and to connect – and the regular failure so to do.<sup>292</sup> This nostalgia tends to be ascribed in critical circles to those Irish who emigrated permanently, as did John in *Roses*, and felt themselves to have been involuntarily exiled from their homeland. This attitude can best be seen in the title of the seminal tome on Irish migration to North America, Kerby Miller’s *Emigrants and Exiles*. In terms of Timmy and John’s strenuously overblown declarations of love at the end of *Roses*, the inference is that being known – telling one’s story to another, allowing it to be heard, and laying claim to owning it – results only in a hollow, superficial community forged between interests that are in practice irreconcilably rent asunder, set

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<sup>292</sup> R.F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 288.

at odds by the mores of the world in which they occur, and that, moreover, this world is riven with contradictions. Various contextual cultural overtones have therefore seeped into the text, subtly colouring its content and its form, regardless of whether Gilroy actually intended this to happen.

### ***Who'll Save the Plowboy?* (1962)**

The thematic forces evident in *Roses* are also prevalent in Gilroy's first moderate success on the American stage, *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*. This play, like *Roses* and *Day*, stages the issues of self-performance, seeking and failing to find validation – and therefore a sense of belonging – from one's audience, loneliness, dreaming, and the indirectly allegorical function of storytelling in late-HUAC era theatre. In *Plowboy*, storytelling often takes on a confessional tone which serves to highlight the peculiarly Irish and Catholic tint to the depiction of the American characters portrayed therein. As I have argued above, Catholicism and "Irishness" are part of the structural value-systems of all the plays which this thesis considers, to greater and lesser extents. This means that I can begin to identify a peculiarly Irish, second-generation tradition of an indirect, because unintended, allegorical critique of the McCarthy era on the American stage. The consideration of *Plowboy* which will follow is the last close textual analysis of this chapter, and of this thesis as a whole. Because of the play's relative formal and stylistic awkwardness, being as it is the work of an inexperienced playwright, these traits and facets are somewhat clearer to see than in Gilroy's other two significant stage plays, whose critique of the era, though pervading the form and content of both *Roses* and *Day*, is rather more oblique.

### **"Irishness" in *Plowboy***

*Who'll Save the Plowboy?* concerns an unhappily married couple who live in 'a lower-middle-class apartment in New York.'<sup>293</sup> They await the arrival of Larry Doyle, an ex-Army friend of the "Plowboy," Albert Cobb. Larry is dying from an injury occasioned by saving the life of Albert during the Second World War, although at the play's outset, Albert and his wife Helen are unaware of his condition. At first, Larry's "Irishness" shows only in his name, but the appearance of his judgmental, interfering mother, a straightforward caricature of a shrewish, canny first-generation Irish immigrant woman, at the end of Act I, draws attention to his cultural background. Mrs Doyle shows the precise traits noted by Shannon as referring to an authentic cultural type; he said that such women's 'resentment and competitiveness impelled them not only to want to be accepted and well thought of but also superior and invulnerable.'<sup>294</sup> Mrs Doyle is both judgmental and condescending in her manner towards Helen Cobb, indirectly criticising both her housekeeping, and what she immediately perceives to be her lack of children, within moments of her entrance. The deployment of such stereotypes as those outlined by Shannon, as is usual and has been noted regarding the works of the other two playwrights which this thesis considers, does not constitute casual racism on the part of Gilroy, any more than it did in O'Neill and Donleavy. Rather, Larry's mother functions subtly to frame the play's action in a cultural context of a certain kind of constructed Catholic "Irishness." She introduces an atmosphere of silence, judgment, confession, penance, and dreams deferred or defiled, which to a greater or lesser extent all indirectly thematically echo the climate of the late HUAC era in which this play was written and staged.

## **The Outsider**

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<sup>293</sup> Gilroy, 'Who'll Save the Plowboy?' in *Volume 1: Complete Full Length Plays*, pp. 5 – 51, I, 1, p. 5.

<sup>294</sup> Shannon, *The American Irish*, p. 143.

Across twentieth century drama, both American and European, the incursion into the closed family or marital home by an outsider regularly precipitates a crisis – often a violent one. In *Plowboy* however, the outsider, Larry, is subjected from the outset to the psychological violence and emotional desperation in which the Cobb household is already steeped: Larry does not bring it; it is there already. For instance, in Act I, Helen begins by speaking sharply and critically, ‘I wish you’d cut your toenails once in a while. [...] These don’t look like your socks. Where did these socks come from?’<sup>295</sup> However, this unfavourable first impression is later moderated when Albert confesses his infidelity to Larry. He tells him that he accidentally donned socks belonging to the husband of his lover, which generates some sympathy for Helen on reflection, because her suspicion is justified. However, early in the play, we merely witness her being impassive, passively aggressive, actively aggressive, and mean. The audience has very little chance to find any empathy for her, as she seems only to be shrewish, humourless and unpleasant. Nor can our sympathies be channelled into the character of Albert. He drinks to excess, verbally abuses and then slaps his wife, and tells Larry about his numerous extra-marital affairs. The psychological violence he wreaks on Helen – deliberately, sadistically spelling out the virtues of their fictional (presumed dead) son to Larry in order to torture her into going to bed – is quietly horrifying in a very typically Gilroy way.

## **Dreams**

It is therefore possible to begin to assert originality for Gilroy on the grounds of this claim, even within the formally restrictive four walls of the naturalistic set, and to align him again with the thematic concerns of both O’Neill and Donleavy. His work can therefore be tentatively situated, along with these two earlier stage practitioners, within

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<sup>295</sup> *Who’ll Save the Plowboy?*, I, 1, pp. 5-6.

an emerging tradition of specifically Irish-flavoured “Americanness” on the second-generation American-Irish stage, steeped in the pervading ideological climate of HUAC’s America. All the protagonists of *Plowboy* are already outsiders. They are people for whom, in different ways, the optimistic promise of life has resulted only in stultification, frustration, disappointment and rage. Cullen has said,

the flip side to the sense of hope that goes to the core of the Declaration [of Independence] and the [American] Dream is a sense of fear that its premises are on the verge of being, or actually have been, lost.<sup>296</sup>

The brand of “Americanness” which drives the protagonists of *Plowboy* to act out different versions of their American Dreams, and to fail at them all, can therefore be read as a muted but nonetheless damning indictment of the failure of the House Un-American Activities Committee’s efforts to homogenise and apoliticise the nation in order to generate unity. This is not to say that the conduct of HUAC is consciously designed by the playwright to be mapped straightforwardly onto the themes and form of this play, any more than this is the case with any of the other plays which this thesis considers. Rather, the case I am making is that the climate engendered by the activities of HUAC came to pervade staged work: no artist is free of his cultural and social context, and these plays prove that. There is no community evident within *Plowboy*, and every attempt to forge one, through marriage, heroism, or storytelling, only serves further to isolate the protagonists. Moreover, the fear that subtly underwrites the action of the play goes beyond Cullen’s assessment that the Declaration’s premise of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” can sometimes be feared lost. Although the Cobbs and Larry have been at liberty to make their own choices – whether it is Larry choosing to save Albert during the war, or the newly-wed Cobbs choosing to buy a farm – there

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<sup>296</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 40.

has never been any happiness or fulfilment for any of them, separately or together, and everything each of them has attempted to achieve has failed.

### Storytelling

As is common in naturalistic plays, Albert and Helen spend the opening of the play ritualistically retreading stories that they both already know – in this case, Larry’s heroic self-sacrifice, and how he thus came to be ‘the only real friend [Albert] ever had’ – for the benefit of the audience; but there is deeper significance in this rehashing of the past, too.<sup>297</sup> For the Cobbs, as for the Tyrones in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, ‘the past is the present’ – they have not resolved the traumas and crises at which they only hint, and therefore they cannot move on.<sup>298</sup> Foster has observed,

With emigrant communities everywhere, the memory of homeland has to be kept in aspic. The perspective over one’s shoulder must remain identical to that recorded by the parting glance [...]. In a similar way, ownership of received historical memory is fiercely guarded.<sup>299</sup>

This observation aligns the Cobbs, and the Tyrones, in a stereotypically Irish emigrant context, in that the past is relevant, fixed, immutable and damaging – more so, even, than any events of the present, the latter of which is inextricably bound up with the former.

In this sense, typified by the cultural echo identified by Foster, the Cobbs are trapped in the cyclical and seemingly endless inability to connect with, and to accept, each other. They are also trapped in the compulsion to do just this, because they can only fully call themselves into being through the eyes of their “audience” – their spouse. Both the Cobbs are therefore lonely. Albert has not seen his ‘only real friend’ for fifteen

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<sup>297</sup> *Who’ll Save the Plowboy?*, I, 1, p. 8.

<sup>298</sup> O’Neill, ‘*Long Day’s Journey into Night*,’ in *Complete Plays*, ed. by Bogard, pp. 717 – 828, II, 2, p. 765.

<sup>299</sup> R.F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch*, p. xiii.

years, and Helen categorically states, ‘Every night before I go to bed I hope I don’t wake up in the morning,’ although she quickly counterbalances this bleak note by adding, ‘Know what my other hope is? [...] That the landlord gives us a new stove. [...] Death or a new stove. I’ll settle for either one...’<sup>300</sup>

As they prepare for Larry’s arrival, the couple consciously align their stories into a falsely favourable projection, agreeing what to tell him about their absent child and bracing themselves to present a cheerful aspect, although Helen says plainly, ‘the idea of pretending this is a happy house galls me.’<sup>301</sup> Helen explicitly foregrounds the couple’s self-performance, both as a unit in terms of their marriage, and as two separate individuals, by adding, ‘When your good friend gets here we’ll begin the game. Till then we’ll be ourselves.’<sup>302</sup> In this sense, there is a form of micro-community that is consciously forged between the couple, although in cause and effect it does not have the positive resonances of the hope that connection can bring that is seen between, for instance, Erie and the Night Clerk in O’Neill’s *Hughie*. The couple’s allegiance to an agreed, albeit fictional, version of events is best understood through Erving Goffman’s description of the ways in which people form themselves into “teams.” He says,

Among team-mates, the privilege of familiarity – which may constitute a kind of intimacy without warmth – need not be something of an organic kind, slowly developing with the passage of time spent together, but rather a formal relationship that is automatically extended and received [...].<sup>303</sup>

This is applicable to the way in which the Cobbs align their stories before the arrival of their visitor, because the Cobbs’ allegiance is the epitome of one that is founded in ‘intimacy without warmth.’ They mechanically force a palatable version of their lives into being by agreeing a fictionalised version of events between themselves, and yet it is

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<sup>300</sup> *Who’ll Save the Plowboy?*, I, 1, p. 9.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 1, p. 10.

<sup>302</sup> *Who’ll Save the Plowboy?* I, 1, p. 10.

<sup>303</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, p. 88.

their loneliness, their sorrow, and their estrangement from each other that underpins this agreement.

### **Belonging and Notions of Home**

For the Cobbs, as these preparations for their visitor show, home is a place of entrapment, falseness and strain; their absent child occupies every corner with his absence, and they seemingly cannot escape each other, despite a strong desire to do so. Madan Sarup rhetorically asks, ‘It is usually assumed that a sense of place or belonging gives a person stability. But what makes a place home?’<sup>304</sup> By asking this question, Sarup means to problematise the assumption he identifies: safety, sanctuary and belonging are to be found in an existential sense only once one’s place in the world, and in one’s community, is fixed. This problematisation is useful to understanding the relationship the Cobbs have with their apartment, and by inference, with their marriage.

Helen and Albert know that they are miserable and unfulfilled, that they have stagnated horribly in their marriage and in their apartment. They cannot, however, make the other understand why this is the case, or imagine how to remedy the situation; they talk largely in parallel, at cross-purposes, and pay little heed to what the other is actually saying. This failure to connect their life-stories would be poignant because they plainly have no other friends, acquaintances, or children; they have only each other to act as their audience, from whom they can seek acceptance, understanding, and forgiveness.

For this couple, it is clear that they will never forge such a connection within their micro-community of two. There will be no redemptive moment such as that which is seen, for instance, in O’Neill’s *Hughie*, when the Night Clerk finally breaks out of his

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<sup>304</sup> Madan Sarup, “Home and Identity”, in *Travellers’ Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, ed. by George Robertson, Melinda Mash, Lisa Tickner, Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, and Tim Putnam (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 94.



thoughts and offers Erie Smith the lifeline of listening to him, showing interest in his stories, and believing him in his constructed performance of pretended success. The Cobbs are irremediably alienated from each other, and yet they cannot break the ties that bind. Helen confirms this when she tells Larry that she did attempt to dissolve her marriage once before,

One day I got on a bus...Rode all across the country...passed all sorts of wonderful places...saw all sorts of beautiful sights...But you know what?...It wasn't real to me...none of it...The only thing in the world that's real to me is here...this place...<sup>305</sup>

For Helen, home is a real, concrete place that is recognisable and that shuts out the wider world, but it traps and smothers those within it, rather than protecting them from attack or shielding them from pain. It is a place of horror, not sanctuary. Therefore, as a dramatic symbol, it functions in Gilroy to problematise the typical yearning of the second-generation immigrant to find a “home,” and to tie such a notion to the quest to find somewhere to be safe, and to belong. For Helen, belonging in her home gives her no solace. In the context of a climate in which one’s private conversations, allegiances and even thoughts had the power to bring hardship and exclusion to one, her situation gives the lie to the notion that creating an “Americanness” yardstick could possibly succeed in including more than it excludes. Indeed, for Gilroy, belonging is in itself merely a story we tell ourselves, and even achieving a sense of belonging does not automatically impart acceptance and peace. In this, consciously or unconsciously, he is the most pessimistic of all three playwrights whose work is examined in this thesis.

## **Loneliness**

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<sup>305</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?* II, p. 46.

However, unlike Harry Hope's regulars in *The Iceman Cometh*, loneliness, for Helen in particular, is not a singularly negative phenomenon. Hannah Arendt has observed, 'loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal conditions like old age, has become an every-day experience of the evergrowing masses of our [twentieth] century.'<sup>306</sup> Helen's situation is indicative of the trend that Arendt identifies, and yet Gilroy takes her role further, in that her sanctuary is to be found *in* her 'every-day experience,' however negatively isolating she finds her situation to be. Physically and emotionally, she knows herself and is in charge of herself only when alone; she speaks often of her loneliness, but is still determinedly defensive of her specific place in the world, which is to say, her individualism. For instance, despite a sincere desire to make Larry believe the Cobbs' charade of happiness when she learns of his illness, she refuses to allow her husband to touch her physically; she tells Albert, 'I'll go along with all this. I'll smile and laugh and do everything I can to make him think we get along fine, but don't put your hands on me.'<sup>307</sup> She prefers her day-to-day loneliness to the falseness of a performed physical closeness which does not exist; she cannot trust her husband, or his friend, or anyone else, with having control of her physical self. Her social identity is intractably superficial, therefore; her marriage can be, and is, performed to Larry as being something which it is not, but her physical situation remains her own active choice. Alone, she can control her personal narrative, and although the truth of her situation is not redemptive, it is possible to argue that there is something like hope in her refusal to be manhandled, because she has established and then maintained a sense of self, at least in an individualistic sense.

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<sup>306</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 478.

<sup>307</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, II, p. 36.

It is to claim too much to say that this self-possession is a positive realisation of American capitalist individualism, particularly because what Helen is actually refusing to do in this scene is to commodify herself. However, her assertion does serve to argue that identity in the late-HUAC era was as much in contention as it was at the instigation of the Committee. Moreover, what happens when others bear witness to the false and performed stories of her life is that those stories come to threaten her sense of self, because they take the place of the character of the speaker. One small lie – for instance, that the Cobbs’ son is alive, well and visiting relatives – leads quickly to a string of lies that the narrator cannot control. This is seen, for example, when Albert mistakenly places his child in the sixth grade, although he is only supposed to be ten years old. This spiralling deceit echoes in microcosm both the causes and the effects of the HUAC operation on communities.

In the context of the surrounding ideological climate in which this play was produced and staged, stories, hopes, dreams and lies are all of a piece for Gilroy. They are potentially dangerous things, with the power to drive space between people and to entrap them in a narrative from which they cannot escape. The atmosphere of HUAC’s America has drifted in through the window which Helen constantly opens, and which her husband regularly slams shut, and it exerts a subtly shaping influence on both the form and the content of *Plowboy*. This allegorical interpretation of the opening and closing of windows by the couple runs at parallel with the context of the play’s action; the reasons the Cobbs give for this stage business relate to noise, pollution, and the temperature. However, despite the determinedly small and personal focus of the play, by indirect allegorical inference, the climate does find a way to penetrate the closed, naturalistic form of *Plowboy*. In this play, except in one instance at its very end, the truth holds little redemptive value; it is to be avoided because it can cause at least as

much damage as lies, or as dreams deferred. In fact, even when dreams come true, as when Albert tells the story of realising his dream of owning a farm, they prove to be hollow, depressing and dissatisfying, leaving the dreamer only with one less dream and a little more self-knowledge. Storytelling does have a confessional aspect, as I will discuss next, which also colours the events of *Plowboy* and which introduces again a specifically Irish, Catholic hue to the tone of the piece. Again, however, the confessions the audience witnesses are not cleansing, but are only ultimately damaging, hurtful and selfishly motivated.

### **Confessional Storytelling**

The one instance in *Plowboy* when the truth is redemptive, after a fashion, is when Helen finally tells Larry what happened to the Cobbs' son. This confession is directly comparable to the function of the story that Jim Tyrone tells to Josie Hogan in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, about drinking and having sex with a prostitute on the train that bore his mother's coffin. From sharing this, his darkest secret and the story that paints him in the worst possible light, and attaining forgiveness for it from another person, Jim finds the peace that only an unconditionally loving, forgiving audience can imbue. He finds the solace of being both heard and understood which eludes every member of the Tyrone family in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Helen seeks this solace from Larry when she describes to him the aftermath of her child's birth, and the effect the tragedy has had on her life and her marriage:

They have a complicated name for it...a long medical word...What it means is...What it means is I gave birth to a monster...Yes... Not boy. Not girl. Not anything human...not anything. [...] I've never seen it. They put it some place. Some institution. We pay. I don't know where it is...<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, II, p. 45.

Here, in the absent, unseen, ill-described, deformed child of Albert and Helen Cobb, is the most potent metaphor for the horror that associating with anyone, in howsoever positive and optimistic a frame of mind, can wreak upon the lives of individuals who dare to dream of a better, less lonely life together. Larry saved the life of Albert, who went on to father this almost-child with Helen, which he named after Larry before hearing of its condition. The connections between Albert and Larry, and then between Albert and Helen, have yielded nothing but suffering and misery.

Helen's superstitious belief that bearing a profoundly disabled child is a judgment of sorts upon herself and her husband is, at first glance, troubling. It could be interpreted as a flaw in the dramatic approach of Gilroy that he is willing to engage in making disability 'a social category of deviance,' which Mitchell and Snyder rightly deplore.<sup>309</sup> However, Gilroy's sensitive handling of the character of Helen as she finally unburdens herself to Larry raises the important question of authorial ownership and the presumption of uncritical personal input. What is at stake in this scene, in the final reckoning, is not what Gilroy believes; that her disabled child is a nigh-on Biblical judgment which is visited upon her husband and herself as punishment for their youthful intimacy and mutual trust is what *Helen* believes to be the case. The total evacuation of any hope of ever again trying to alleviate her loneliness, evinced by her "reading" of the misfortune of having a disabled child is thematically significant to this thesis. As Ranald described O'Neill's attempts to make inarticulate characters speak about ideas, so Gilroy's attempt with Helen is to facilitate, in his character's own metaphorical terms, the emotional trauma and damage self-perceivedly wrought upon a character whose only wish was to stem her loneliness by connecting, physically and emotionally, with another. As such, Gilroy deploys the negative stereotyping of

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<sup>309</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, p. 1.

disability critically, not casually, as O'Neill and Donleavy mobilised unflattering stereotypes of stage-Irish characters. If Helen's worldview has been coloured indirectly, and unconsciously, by the wider climate that has crept in through her open windows, then she is of a piece with Gilroy himself.

Helen spells out the total failure of her marital micro-community when she continues her confession to Larry, 'It took something in him and something in me. Something bad in the both of us to produce this thing. They say it couldn't happen again in fifty years...'<sup>310</sup> This makes the dangers of association, of connecting, and of trusting another – any other – clear, and further develops the thematic depiction of loneliness with which both O'Neill and Donleavy wrestle repeatedly. Though loneliness is typically a negative phenomenon, there are times when it is safer than attempting to fit one's narrative with another or others, and it is therefore preferable. Increasingly, looking at the plays which this thesis considers on a continuum from O'Neill, through Donleavy, and to Gilroy, the hope leaches out of the characters' desire to connect, to be heard, and to be understood. Gilroy's characters have the least faith in the hope of self-betterment and finding personal peace of any which have been analysed herein.

### **The Death of Hope**

I have called the truth of Helen's story "redemptive," but only in the existential sense that, stripped of their hopes, their illusions, and their belief in a better world ever to come, be it a spiritual or a material one, both she and Larry are freed from fear and self-doubt, rather than encumbered by false aspiration, ambition and hope. Theirs is the metaphysical peace of mutual loneliness that *Moon's* Josie and Jim and *Hughie's* Erie and Charlie also find; the space defined by being the only two people in their

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<sup>310</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, II, p. 45.

community to recognise the emptiness of truth, heroism, community loyalty and trust. However, the strange kind of peace that comes from Helen's confession is shattered by Albert, who arrives with a child whom he has bribed to pretend to be his son. The audience is now forced to be complicit in Larry and Helen's deception of Albert, and is further sucked into the empathy that was lacking from their earlier experiences of observing her behaviour in the play; it is dreadful to see acted out what it has been like for her to pretend that her son is a happy, healthy ten year old. In this case, to see her performance in the light of the harrowing story she has just told to Larry is what brings home her abject position and profound sadness to the audience. The play therefore demonstrates formally, in keeping with all the other texts that this thesis has considered, that storytelling and self-narration are intractably bound up with the construction of one's identity, and the position of one's character within its community and the wider world. Therefore, as a theme, loneliness saturates American-Irish dramatic works produced in the second half of the twentieth century.

Larry leaves alone, having pretended to Albert that he believes the boy to be Larry Junior; Helen has recoiled from the touch of the stranger-child and is at breaking point by the time Larry exits; Albert alone remains pathetically hopeful that Larry has believed the charade. We, the audience, know that he has not; yet, when Albert desperately asks Helen, 'I think he believed it...Don't you think he believed it?', she answers, 'Yes.'<sup>311</sup> The twist is in this one-word reply of Helen's; she has shown nothing but hatred, resentment, bitterness, unpleasantness and regret towards her husband systematically throughout the play, and this sudden *volte face* in order to soothe his fears is jarring. It seems that she hopes to atone for telling Larry the truth about her child, by allowing Albert to preserve his dream – the only one he has left – of deceiving

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<sup>311</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, II, p. 51.

his dying friend into thinking that his sacrifice was worthwhile. In this act of kindness, there is a very small glimmer of hope that the Cobbs' loneliness is not everlasting or absolute.

The problem is that the difference between O'Neill's Jim and Gilroy's Helen is that the latter attains her own absolution by honestly relaying what happened to her son at the expense of Larry's peace of mind – one attains grace by destroying the hopes of the other. Larry's mother Mrs Doyle, visiting after his collapse, expressly tells the Cobbs that the reason for Larry's visit is to investigate whether his sacrifice in saving Albert at the cost of his own life was worth it: '[...] my intuition tells me that this is by no means a happy home. If my son hasn't discovered that, I beg you – prevent his doing so.'<sup>312</sup> By unburdening herself, Helen tells her story in the full knowledge that it will, for Larry, result in his life, his sacrifice and his suffering being rendered effectively meaningless. Worse, even, Helen tells him that not only are the Cobbs not happy, and that they will never again be happy, but she goes further:

I think about it all the time. I think what a fool you were. And how wrong. The best thing you could have done was let him die that night. He'd never admit it, but he feels that way himself. [...] A plowboy who hates the country. He's lost in this world. He should have died that night.<sup>313</sup>

Without the mask of his self-constructed and endlessly, ritualistically re-narrativised identity, Helen suggests, Albert has nothing for which to live, because he has no hope. His failure as a farmer shows his audience, whom he needs to validate and cement his identity by witnessing his performance and believing it, the truth of the emptiness of his dream.

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<sup>312</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, I, 2, p. 33.

<sup>313</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, II, p. 46.



In this way, Gilroy skilfully and subtly uses Helen's story – which is effectively one of bereavement, but without a body, a funeral or closure in any meaningful emotional sense – to foreground the dangers of storytelling, the power of narrative to break dreams into pieces as well as to construct them. Larry's heroic narrative of self-sacrifice is undermined by the emptiness of intent – 'I never thought why. I just did it' – and by his action's failure to bring happiness to another or others.<sup>314</sup> Instead, Helen tells him that he has, by saving Albert, become the unwitting architect of her misery, of Albert's and, of course, of his own. Because 'the past is the present' for Helen, as it is for O'Neill's characters, she cannot move on from it. Her deformed child therefore functions as a dark and troubling metaphor for the dreadful things that can happen when people act on their desire to connect with another or others, to make contact, to be heard and to hope to benefit from the interaction. When she asks Larry, 'What will you do now?' he replies, 'Who knows. I may have to turn to God or whatever you call it...There's nothing else left... [...] I begrudge the Plowboy every breath he draws. When we got down to the wire I'd tell him so...'<sup>315</sup> His search for meaning and his desire to connect with others – his quest for absolution from guilt at the effect his decision to save Albert has had on every aspect of his life, including the length of it – leads to the death of hope in one respect. The answer to all his questions about meaning, and about the possibility of making a positive contribution to one's community, is a resounding No.

## **HUAC**

In the wider social context of this play, bearing in mind that HUAC had already been active for nearly twenty-five years when it was written, this is an ominous

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<sup>314</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, II, p. 46.

<sup>315</sup> *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, II, p. 47.

collection of theatrical symbols indeed. According to the situation of Larry, Albert and Helen, heroic actions could do harm; telling one's story and offering public loyalty to one's thoughts and decisions could do harm; associating with anyone, forming a community, trusting anyone, and following one's dreams of success and self-fulfilment could do harm. Some "unfriendly witnesses" to HUAC were lauded in some circles as heroes, uncompromising and brave, such as Arthur Miller, who determined that he would 'preserve my sense of myself' by refusing to name names to the panel.<sup>316</sup> Gilroy problematises this heroism by emptying Larry's heroic courage in the field of battle of any grandeur, intent and significance, raising an indirect, and probably unconscious, critique of it.

Conversely, those "friendly witnesses" who did inform on their former friends and colleagues were also seen in some circles as heroic, for standing up to the communist menace and being brave enough to speak out, whilst by others they were vilified as betrayers and, sometimes, liars, as was seen in the mixed response to the testimony of the filmmaker Elia Kazan.<sup>317</sup> Therefore, Gilroy gestures very subtly towards his doubts about both sides of the issue of informing, by highlighting both the power of telling one's story to do harm, and the helpless compulsion we all feel to be heard, understood and accepted, whatever the consequences. It is possible to say that in Gilroy's plays, to greater and lesser degrees, any human connection with any other does

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<sup>316</sup> 'Arthur Miller,' in *Thirty Years of Treason*, pp. 791-825, (p. 820.)

<sup>317</sup> Elia Kazan testified in executive session to HUAC in 1956, and later published a statement in the national press extolling the essential courage and integrity of those who chose to "name names." Staunchly anti-communist in that way that only an ex-communist can be, he never recanted his decision or regretted his permanent casting in the role of "informer." In 2000, the Motion Picture Academy bestowed upon him its Lifetime Achievement Award. The audience was fractured: many applauded in exaggeratedly enthusiastic fashion; many more pointedly sat on their hands, or left the ceremony altogether in protest. This scene is itself indicative of the pervasiveness of the work of HUAC: nearly fifty years separated Kazan's testimony and his Award. For more details, see the blacklisted writer Walter Bernstein's account of the scene in the Preface to his memoir, *Inside Out* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000).

harm, and people are generally safer on their own, however hopeless their situation comes to be.

## Conclusion

In the plays of Frank Gilroy with which this chapter has engaged, storytelling through language is either emptied of meaning and therefore not understood by the onstage “audience,” as in the case of Willis’ nonsense-language, spelling aloud, air-writing and so on in *Any Given Day*, or it causes harm to the teller. This latter instance is extremely common in all the plays that this chapter has discussed. It is rare for a character actually to succeed in saying what they want to convey, and stories are used across the plays rather to damage and accuse others, than to justify and to articulate the character, decisions and beliefs of the teller. If a storyteller does succeed in conveying what their position is, they uniformly immediately regret it, as is seen when Nettie and Timmy argue in *The Subject was Roses*; of Willis, he says, ‘If you and the rest of them over there want to throw your lives away on him, you go ahead and do it! But don’t try and sacrifice me to the cause!’, leaving her ‘*stunned by Timmy’s assault.*’<sup>318</sup> In *Who’ll Save the Plowboy?*, Helen tells a story about the birth of her profoundly disabled child and the permanently damaging effect its birth, and its absence, has had on her marriage and values. This tale has the effect of stripping a dying man of what he had hoped to consider the sum contribution of his life to date: saving the “Plowboy,” rather than leaving him to die, at the expense of his own health and happiness.

No-one is happy in Gilroy’s world. All the lost and lonely people in his plays make one another miserable; they resolve nothing; and they seek atonement and acceptance from their immediate family, which functions formally as their community,

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<sup>318</sup> *The Subject was Roses*, II, 1, p. 93.

although it is patently clear that, unlike Jim Tyrone in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* and even Cornelius Christian in *Fairy Tales of New York*, they will never get it. Storytelling is ritualised, dangerous and cyclical; all social connections lead to difficulty, horror, sadness, betrayal and loneliness. Indeed, loneliness is infinitely preferable to striving to live with and be accepted by any other, and yet there is no escape from the stifling community that one is entrapped within.

The curious thing about Gilroy's plays is that in terms of their dramatic form, they seem to be designed to convey the opposite message to that for which they actually come to stand. Staged in a fixed, naturalistic setting, within the family home, they are designed to be small, intimate and personal. Gilroy makes claims of autobiographical fidelity, at least to some extent, for all three of the plays under consideration. By claiming his plays as a component part of his own personal, private self-narration and self-performance, Gilroy attempts to shield himself from accusations of disloyalty and sedition in a wider sense, in a post-HUAC climate. It is harder for him to be accused of harbouring and covertly presenting a political narrative counter to that imposed from outside regarding "Americanness," because his plays are resolutely small, personal, and specifically concerned with depicting the lives of isolated individuals. Bigsby observes that in the post-1968 climate of the American theatre, 'the dramatist, with the marked exception of David Mamet, increasingly concerned him- or herself with the family, the private, the domestic, the psychological,' and Gilroy certainly fits this pattern.<sup>319</sup> In this very conscious and careful apoliticisation of his works, it is possible to perceive the lingering effects of the climate of HUAC's America on both the form and the content of his plays. In Timmy's conscription into the Army and the ticket out of New York it affords him in *Any Given Day*, there is a ray of hope that the cyclical and self-contained

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<sup>319</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 239.

family narratives might possibly be fractured and set the protagonists free in the future. However, he returns, and although he is changed, the family dynamic, ultimately, is not. The assumed optimism of his emotional reconciliation with his father at the end of *Roses* is undermined by the complexities of the relationships between John, Nettie, Mrs Benti, Carmen, Gus, Eddie, Timmy and Willis that are staged in *Any Given Day*, which is *Roses*' prequel. The family and marital 'teams,' to borrow Goffman's term, are forced collectives of excluded outsiders, who are only bound together negatively by their differences, and by the pain of their shared past. Even the fact that *Any Given Day* was written after *The Subject was Roses* and yet is set in chronological terms before the latter play serves to intimate that 'the past is the present,' as Mary Tyrone says, and that until past traumas have been healed, nothing will change – and in Gilroy's works, they will never be healed.

Having argued about O'Neill and Donleavy in the preceding two chapters that these two playwrights' works are sometimes more optimistic about the human will to find a place to belong, and an accepting audience to receive one's stories, than they may appear at face value, I must conclude about Gilroy that the opposite is true. His plays appear warm, reassuringly complete, polished and optimistic; on closer examination, they truly are none of these things. Gilroy speaks from firmly within the climate engendered by HUAC's pursuit of "un-Americanness," as do all three of the playwrights herein discussed, but Gilroy is in the least position to be convincing about the positive aspects of community identity, belonging and narration, as his work comes latest. The House Un-American Activities Committee's work and influence have been so invasive of every area of the lives of individuals that Gilroy is left to depict characters that have come both to believe in a better life, and to be incapable of finding the linguistic tools or the social mobility to create one. However, his allegorical

critiques are so subtle, indirect and cautious that one may even doubt whether the playwright himself consciously grasps the lingering effects of the climate as it acts upon his plays.

Loneliness, Storytelling and Community in Performance: The Climate of the House Un-American Activities Committee's America in Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill, J.P.

Donleavy and Frank D. Gilroy

**Conclusion**

This thesis traces a thematic and formal developmental trajectory through selected dramatic works by three second-generation American-Irish playwrights: Eugene O'Neill, J.P. Donleavy, and Frank D. Gilroy. Linking together an acknowledged giant of the twentieth century American-Irish stage with two comparatively unknown and later playwrights of a similar, Catholicism-tinged cultural backdrop is part of the contribution this thesis makes to the critical field. Reading Donleavy and Gilroy in the light of detailed analyses of O'Neill's late plays cycle yields new insights about the theatrical output of all three.

In thematic terms, the trajectory I identify is a downward one: across the works of these three playwrights, when they are read broadly chronologically, there is to be found a gathering sense of hopelessness and bitterness, and a dwindling faith in better times ever to come. This means that when examined closely, the temperature of O'Neill's plays is the most optimistic; Donleavy's still show evidence of optimism and hope, although less often and less convincingly; and Gilroy's stage a world of quiet despair. To find this cumulative negativity in the themes and the dramatic form of the plays under scrutiny, it is necessary to read them somewhat against their own grain. All three playwrights strive to stage lonely but undefeated individual protagonists who are determinedly positive, in plays with semi-autobiographical overtones which purport to stage the positive possibility of connection, community and change for the better. My against-the-grain reading exemplifies an emergent sub-genre of what I call "indirect

allegory.” The reason these plays conflict within themselves about what the playwrights seem determined to depict, and what they actually do depict, is related to the surrounding ideological climate of the House Un-American Activities Committee’s America in which all the plays were produced. All three playwrights seem consciously to strive to keep their dramatic works free from overtones, or even undertones, of the wider climate of fear, anxiety and mistrust that increasingly characterised HUAC’s America. However it is nonetheless possible, as the literary analysis comprising this thesis shows, to discern some unconscious traces and echoes of this climate in all the plays under consideration.

### **The House Un-American Activities Committee**

Increasingly, as the HUAC era progressed, the thesis notes that any criticism of the economic or political status quo could potentially be interpreted as equally treacherous, meaning that any association with others was increasingly shot through with danger. In such a climate, connecting with any other by telling the stories of one’s life was potentially problematic, and yet what Samuel Beckett has called ‘the obligation to express’ was alive in people too.<sup>320</sup> This compulsion, as it is explored within these various American-Irish plays, is acted out by characters which ritualistically and cyclically tread and retread the stories of their lives. They all desire to lay claim to a pre-existing, innate self of the mind, to counter the prevailing atmosphere of judgment, regret and blame that tinges their onstage micro-communities.

In addition, the fact that HUAC itself was a consciously performative operation, preoccupied with publicly staging its trials, its representatives, and its convictions, also appears in the plays under scrutiny, albeit at an indirect allegorical remove. It is notable

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<sup>320</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: Calder, 1965), p. 139.



in the careful and critically alert deployment by the playwrights of recognisable “type” characters, all of which strike poses and adopt attitudes in order to stake a claim of belonging – or non-belonging – the necessity of which self-performance was influenced indirectly by the HUAC operation. The spectacular, staged elements of the HUAC proceedings included klieg lights, pounding gavels, marooning the witness in the middle of the room with too many microphones before them to have space for their notes, and attacking witnesses with a barrage of rhetorical questions about faith, decency and honour. These hearings brought HUAC to national attention, and spread fear and doubt throughout the entertainment industries. These industries were disproportionately sensitive to HUAC’s attempts to impose its homogenising sense of “American” traits and behaviours because their work was in the public eye, and therefore particularly vulnerable to the censure and disapproval of that public. Furthermore, in its turn, the panel and its associates disproportionately pursued celebrities in order to make an example of them, and to garner more publicity for itself and its activities. This increased the vulnerability of artists and, therefore, of the characters which they called into being by writing their plays.

### **Storytelling and Self-Performance**

Central to this thesis are the ideas put forward in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by the social theorist Erving Goffman. He is quite right to view all social interactions in performative terms, and his work is especially illuminative when mobilised to frame analysing the drama of a particular, twentieth-century American-Irish cultural context as it appears on the stage. Storytelling, and the self-performance to an audience at which it hints – a story only classes as such when it is heard and understood – shows itself in the plays under scrutiny to be both dangerous and imperative. The imperative nature of the self-performance which intends to call the

individual into being has been noted by Richard Kearney, who has said that telling stories offers the teller ‘a sense of yourself as a *narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime.’<sup>321</sup> The thesis shows that the notion of a narrative identity as it is constructed through storytellers, in search of a sympathetic audience for their stories, pervades the second-generation American-Irish stage as it is exemplified in the works of O’Neill, Donleavy, and Gilroy. This self-performance is shown both to characters’ onstage “audience,” who hear their tales, and to the wider audience attending the theatre, and these concentric circles of allegiance and community both, in one way or another, should function to stem loneliness. The tales told in the plays examined, and the connections they forge and break onstage, serve to draw the attending audience – or the readership – into a kind of alternative, non-mainstream community, in opposition to the dominant political and social mores of the plays’ social context. The individual’s right to self-invent was under overt threat during HUAC’s tenure, and this threat lingered after the Committee’s curtailment too. Artists working at the time felt themselves to be particularly vulnerable to suspicion and attack, and the traces of this anxiety can be found in the plays they produced while experiencing it.

### **The Role of Theatrical Art**

Pertaining to this vulnerability, certain artists – the example deployed in the Introduction is Arthur Miller – felt exposed under the auspices of HUAC, because of the way in which they preferred to view the role of the artist in society: to stand outside it somewhat, in order to ask the difficult questions, and perhaps to challenge the dominant status quo. This is to say that some American theatrical art of the second half of the twentieth century was ostensibly positioned, deliberately or accidentally, outside the dominant political and national narratives surrounding it. This liminal status, established

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<sup>321</sup> Kearney, *On Stories* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

in opposition to what Miller has called the ‘galloping commercialism’ and the ‘present sterility’ of mainstream Broadway theatre, was essential in order for its creators to be able to critique what they could see transpiring in the world around them.<sup>322</sup> I have gone some way towards demonstrating that this non-mainstream theatre, as part of the artistic field most concerned, naturally enough, with issues of performance, increasingly came to be consumed with meta-theatrical questions of self-performance, self-narration, and the validation one seeks from telling one’s stories to an audience.

However, to position the artist and his work nominally outside the dominant ideology typified by HUAC’s direct lines of questioning about many Americans’ personal, religious, political and social viewpoints and experiences, is of course a performative construct itself. Artists’ self-elected “outsider” status was, and is, belied by Louis Althusser’s irrefutable point that ‘Ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects,’ which point is a founding principle of the literary analysis of the thesis.<sup>323</sup> Nevertheless, the sense persists across the plays examined herein of the artist’s exclusion from, or at least doubts about, the ‘fanatically anticommunistic’ climate and communities which predominated in the second half of the twentieth century in America.<sup>324</sup> This sense, though, is a subtle one; in all the plays under consideration, characters persist in believing in the possibility of finding connection, and acceptance of their asserted individualism. The traces of anxiety evinced in the gradual diminishment of hope and trust seen onstage from O’Neill, to Donleavy, and on to Gilroy show the impossibility of trying to avoid subjectivation by the ideology of the world in which one is.

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<sup>322</sup> Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (London: Methuen, 1999) p. 312.

<sup>323</sup> Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008) p. 49.

<sup>324</sup> Crosby, Donald F., *God, Church, and Flag: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the Catholic Church 1950-1957* (Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1978) p. 229.

## **Loneliness**

In the climate of HUAC's America, and bearing the self-performance of the theatrical artist in mind, loneliness emerges as one of the more prevalent themes in second-generation American-Irish drama post-1938. In the Introduction to this thesis, I hypothesise that loneliness might be, thematically, the existential flipside of the dream of American capitalist individualism. To help to cast light on the terms and implications of this hypothesis, the thesis invokes the various incarnations of the American Dream. This is a term used, following Jim Cullen, with circumspection, as a kind of collective noun that encapsulates the various kinds of aspiration towards national belonging and acceptance, success, security, individual self-fulfilment and financial viability noticeable in the dominant stories of the American twentieth century. The theme of loneliness in various American-Irish plays can be plotted along the broadly chronological developmental trajectory of its depiction. I have come to conclude that although loneliness is, by many characters in the plays herein examined, feared above all other conditions, it is not a singularly or simply negative phenomenon. Moreover, this increasingly comes to be the case in plays produced during the mid- and late-HUAC years, culminating in the later plays of Gilroy, especially *Any Given Day*.

## **The Dangers of Storytelling**

In particular, when attempting to tell one's stories to another or others, characters in the plays under scrutiny, to greater and lesser extents, find that they must take a risk. Being heard and being known exposed one, in the climate of HUAC's America, to the danger of being charged with disloyalty, synonymous for HUAC with non-belonging, which is to say, with being "un-American." However, because it wielded the threat of rendering citizens effectively outsiders, "un-persons" in America,

HUAC's activities served to make it dangerous to allegorise the panel's activities directly. In some instances, indirect allegory therefore became the order of the day. In other words, playwrights such as Donleavy turned consciously away from the desire to stage any kind of straightforward critique or objection to their surrounding climate, and yet this very turning-away actually asserted a certain kind of performed "American" individualism and autonomy that indirectly undermined HUAC's enterprise. Because of this internal conflict, loneliness comes to be feared by the characters in all these plays. However, I have also shown that sometimes – increasingly, according to the developmental trajectory I have begun to trace – it is a condition preferable to the riskiness of exposing oneself to the vicissitudes of one's "audience," or in other words one's community, by telling one's stories.

The loneliness engendered by failing to live up to the possibilities and potential inherent to all versions of the American Dream, the literary analysis of the thesis demonstrates, comes to be because one's life story, once in the public domain, has the power to expose one as a failure. Cullen confirms this; he notes:

the Dream also served as a powerful vehicle for blaming those who did not succeed and for distracting those who might otherwise have sought structural changes by seducing them into thinking they weren't really necessary.<sup>325</sup>

Dreaming of a better life, and telling others of such aspirations in order to seek validation of the hope such aspirations figure, makes the act of storytelling in the plays under consideration an absolutely imperative signifier, a claim to belonging to America and, crucially, "Americanness." This means that the stories characters such as O'Neill's, Donleavy's and Gilroy's tell each other indirectly allegorically react against the

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<sup>325</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 101.

exclusion of those who did not, or could not, fit the dominant national narratives surrounding them.

Therefore, the plays under examination all serve to dramatise both sides of the act of storytelling. They show that it can help one to assert one's identity and stake a claim of belonging to one's community; and they show that relating a tale has the potential to imperil the teller, who may find himself cast out of the dominant narratives surrounding him, which latter effect engenders loneliness. The theories of Hannah Arendt are illuminative of what precisely I mean by loneliness; she states that the 'iron band' of loneliness and fear 'presses masses of [...] men together *and* supports them in a world which has become a wilderness for them.'<sup>326</sup> The nuanced point of this assertion is twofold: Arendt confirms both that loneliness is not necessarily straightforwardly negative, and that community formations are not automatically positive either. In the light of this, the twin powers of storytelling, both to create and to imperil a sense of belonging to one's immediate community, are intractably bound up with the loneliness pervading the plays and the characters evaluated in this thesis. Furthermore, the plays of O'Neill, Donleavy and Gilroy at which I have looked come to constitute an alternative kind of "national biography," serving as portraits of those possessed of, or cast within, an outsider status as it is defined by the work of HUAC in the twentieth century. It seems that by masking any such critique behind an innovative, and personally specific, literary genre such as "national biography" – wherein the personal is universalised and then reduced back down to the personal by the teller of the tale – is itself emblematic of the definition of an indirect allegory.

### **"Hopeless Hope" and Community**

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<sup>326</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 473.

Conversely, and importantly, it is also possible to trace a developmental trajectory in a chronological sense, from the work of the earliest of my chosen playwrights to the most recent, of increasing negativity, more frequent failures to connect, and a gathering dearth of hope for future improvement. This thematic evidence hints at the cumulative effects of HUAC's attempts to homogenise American national identity upon the drama of the HUAC period and afterwards. This increasing sense of loneliness and exclusion, echoing as it does some stereotypical notions of the yearning, homesick diasporic exile – a figure discussed in this thesis in particular connection with constructed performances of “Irishness” – brings, at times, a peculiarly Irish tint to the depiction of community formation in the plays under examination.

### **Indirect Allegory**

My argument is not that the texts under examination are bluntly allegorical theatrical documents in the manner of, for instance, agit-prop theatre of the 1930s. The assertion is rather that the ideological climate seems to have seeped into the form and the content of the plays, unnoticed and unintended. This is unavoidable because they were written and produced in, and about, the world which surrounded the playwrights, which Althusser has noted will ‘always-already’ inevitably show, even if the intention is to conceal it. This notion is of signal importance to the methodological framework of this thesis. From its perspective, it is not important whether the playwrights themselves were aware of the permeation of HUAC's preoccupations into the dramatic form and thematic content of their works. They, and their plays, are as firmly rooted in the ideology of their time as all people are. It is both a curious and an interesting contradiction that the absolute individualism of “Americanness” as an idealised construct intends to preclude the recognition of this fact. I call such a construction contradictory because “Americanness” is itself a kind of ideology, so the individuals

who aspire to it cannot, by definition, be what Donleavy would call “singular men.” Arendt’s ‘iron band’ of ideology ‘holds [men] so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions,’ which makes the determination to self-create, and to stand apart, impossible.<sup>327</sup> Therefore, the projection of the isolated, self-sufficient, self-made individual in figures such as Donleavy’s Sebastian Dangerfield or Cornelius Christian, for instance, is undermined by the persistent recurrence of experiences of loneliness, misunderstanding, sadness and exclusion which such protagonists undergo. This means that it is possible to read all the plays under consideration somewhat against their own grain.

### **Settling for Half**

The traits of “Irishness” as they are depicted in the plays this thesis considers serve to cast in a new light the opaque closing remarks of Alfieri in Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge*, and I believe it will be useful to draw this thesis towards its conclusion by reflecting upon them. Alfieri, himself an immigrant character, observes of the death of Eddie Carbone, ‘I confess that something perversely pure calls to me from his memory – not purely good, but himself purely [...].’<sup>328</sup> Now, *Bridge* is a play about the consequences of informing; its characters wrestle with the conflicting demands of loyalty to family, the American state, and their immigrant community. In terms of the play’s internal rhythms, the dramatic form draws a sharp distinction between the law and justice, as is shown early on when Alfieri asserts, ‘there were many here [in Red Hook] who were justly shot by unjust men,’ which itself serves to comment obliquely on some of the consequences of the HUAC era as Miller perceived them.<sup>329</sup> By defining

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<sup>327</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 465-466.

<sup>328</sup> Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge and All My Sons* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000), pp. 11-85, II, p. 85.

<sup>329</sup> Miller, *Bridge*, I, p. 12.



“Americanness” against others which it categorised arbitrarily as “un-Americans,” HUAC’s investigations imperilled the right to assert a self-made identity upon which, ironically enough, many definitions of American national identity were predicated. Miller himself noted this in his own testimony to HUAC when he stated, ‘I am trying to, and I will, protect my sense of myself.’<sup>330</sup> For the Irish and American characters in the plays which this thesis considers, no less so than for Alfieri, who prefers to ‘settle for half,’ this sense of self is not one thing.<sup>331</sup> It is multifaceted, complex and problematic, meaning that trying to cast it within one clear, unambiguous definition of being “American” can only be doomed to failure. The typical yearning of the diasporic figure to find a home, which is to say a place in the world to which one belongs and within which one is safe, is characterised by this impossible, and imperative, drive to fix oneself somewhere, in an ‘imagined’ rather than a geographical sense. In this sense, ‘nationality [is considered] less as an idea to be represented than as a set of problems to grapple with,’ and the plays with which this thesis engages all dramatise this grappling.<sup>332</sup>

In the late plays of O’Neill, through the dramatic works of Donleavy, and all the way to the most recent output of Gilroy, various Irish- and Catholic-inflected cultural and religious tropes are manifest. In each chapter of the thesis, it is shown to be the case that the deployment of any such stereotypes, tropes and pastiches are not tantamount to formal or dramatic laziness on the part of the playwrights. Rather, these stereotypes are critically deployed in order simultaneously to draw on some of the signifiers of their multiple ancestries, and to problematise the reliance on such amorphous and sometimes

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<sup>330</sup> Arthur Miller in Bentley (ed.), *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-1968* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/ Nation Press), p. 820.

<sup>331</sup> Miller, *Bridge*, I, p. 12.

<sup>332</sup> Marjorie Howe, ‘Introduction,’ in *Colonial Crossings: Figures in Irish Literary History* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2006), p. 2.

two-dimensional depictions. When *Bridge*'s Alfieri speaks of those who 'settle for half,' those who are 'quite civilised, quite American,' he could be speaking, to a greater or lesser extent, to all the Irish and second-generation American-Irish characters in the plays examined in this thesis.<sup>333</sup>

## Community

The literary analysis of the plays in hand also shows that the desire of O'Neill, Donleavy and Gilroy's characters to stake a claim to being 'not purely good, but [themselves] purely,' is best to be understood in its wider social context. The atmosphere of this wider context was coloured by the work of the House Un-American Committee, with its preoccupations over publicly demonstrated, unconditional fidelity to the particular types of "Americanness" its members favoured. Arthur Miller made explicit reference to the importance of maintaining a sense of oneself in HUAC's America, and this is the impetus behind the three playwrights' various, and variously successful, representations of communities and their non-mainstream members. Observe, for instance, *Iceman*'s Larry and *Journey*'s Tyrone children; *The Ginger Man*'s Dangerfield; the Cleary family members as depicted in *Roses* and *Day*. Tracing this trajectory of the depiction of people who dream of better lives, of acceptance and belonging, and who in the main (and increasingly) do not find it, the performance of self as Goffman understood it is staged and explored most closely through the plays' first- and second-generation Irish characters. Whether this fact is connected to the playwrights' own second-generation "Irishness" is moot, and ultimately beside the point in hand, which is to do with self-performance, and the security a successful presentation

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<sup>333</sup> Miller, *Bridge*, I, p. 12.

of self can offer; ‘life itself,’ as Goffman has so plainly stated, ‘is a dramatically enacted thing.’<sup>334</sup>

### **Insiders and Outsiders**

In this light testifying to HUAC, or not testifying, became itself a kind of story told publicly: a dramatic performance of which side one was on. Therefore, as one’s private thoughts, beliefs and allegiances came increasingly to be considered public property as the era progressed, storytelling in all the plays considered thereby comes to hold the power both to forge communities and bonds between individuals – and to break them. These dual powers, in their depiction on the twentieth-century American-Irish stage, gathered weight and significance as more and more significant prosecutions were achieved by HUAC. Therefore, as the microcosmic world of these plays carries unconscious traces of this climate, according to the trajectory I can trace across my thesis, O’Neill’s onstage world is the most positive and optimistic one, and Gilroy’s carries the bleakest, most lonely atmosphere.

In the works of these playwrights, one’s identity is performative: it is more than bound up with one’s stories, but is actually called into being by them, and by the audience to which they are relayed. Thus, the failure of one’s self-performance to find an audience which hears, understands, *and accepts* the teller, in all his imperfections, can potentially imperil the solidity and security of their characters’ self-construction and self-projection and engender loneliness. This means that by indirect allegorical inference, the plays assert that those branded “un-American” were in danger of becoming, if it is not too strong to say so, “non-persons.” This is what clarifies the imperative need to attempt to forge other, non-mainstream, alternative communities in

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<sup>334</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 78.

O'Neill, Donleavy and Gilroy – even on the very small level of essential micro-communities with only two members. Notions of home are intractably bound up with parallel notions of belonging in the plays this thesis considers; the failure to find the first seriously destabilises the quest to find a sense of the second. The three playwrights upon whom I have chosen to focus are multiply excluded from various versions of their national and political context. They are as much outsiders to their Irish heritage, and to narratives of their second-generation Irish status, as they are cast out – or cast themselves out – from meta-narratives constructing America, which are intended to preclude ethnic, religious and class distinctions.

These multiple layers of exclusion, and the fear of loneliness that such isolation could engender, serves neatly to exemplify Arendt's point that fear – under the auspices of HUAC, of communism, at least nominally – binds men together into an enforced, oppositional community grouping, in an 'iron band of terror.'<sup>335</sup> In the context of HUAC, the fear engendered by "Red-hunting," namely that communist subversives were on the verge of overthrowing the American democratic and economic systems by force, served to bind people together in the way in which she describes, although she never wrote specifically about HUAC itself. Such people were cast in opposition to a perceived "community" of violent revolutionaries, Moscow-directed and working ceaselessly to undermine the achievements of American society and its members. Brenda Murphy, for instance, has described these 'imagined' enemies of America as being 'constructed by the Right as a completely dedicated, unnaturally energetic tool of a diabolical plot that emanated from Moscow.'<sup>336</sup> Thus, anti-communist and pro-HUAC communities, bound together by fear – which groups Richard Nixon, without apparent

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<sup>335</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 466

<sup>336</sup> Brenda Murphy, *Congressional Theatre: Dramatizing McCarthyism on Stage, Film, and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.43.

irony, called the “silent majority” – were oppositional and ideologically dogmatic, and the jingoism of which they were occasionally guilty forced others who were not willing to follow the dominant line into alternative communities opposing them.

Murphy has described how sharp and ideologically charged the distinction between such oppositional groupings under the pressure of HUAC’s investigations was, and the dangers of showing one’s loyalty to either side by telling one’s story to HUAC, thus:

In order to be restored to the status of loyal American, and to get off the blacklist, one had to become what was quickly labeled an “informer,” which led to a kind of blacklisting of its own – an ostracisation by the Left.<sup>337</sup>

Such enforced groupings – collections of excluded outsiders on both sides of the divide, represented for instance in O’Neill’s *Iceman*, Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man* and Gilroy’s *The Subject was Roses* – were formulated in straitened circumstances, forced into being by external pressures. Their members could therefore often be unwilling, meaning that such non-mainstream “collectives” were sometimes unsuccessful. This can be seen in macrocosm in the consistent failure of the American Left to assert a strong, coherent and un-fractured rebuttal of the terms of HUAC’s definition of “un-Americanness,” which has resulted in our own time in its virtually complete dissolution. Without the *fear* engendered by the activities of various Red-baiting governments and figures in America in the twentieth century, as Arendt’s image of the ‘iron band of terror’ binding men together so evocatively illustrates, later challenges to Americans’ constitutional and personal rights would not have been possible. This claustrophobic, paranoid and fearful atmosphere, at bottom, has permeated both the content and the dramatic form of the plays which are assessed in this thesis, despite the playwrights’ seeming resistance

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<sup>337</sup> Murphy, *Congressional Theatre*, p. 33.

to the notion that this permeation is inevitable. Particularly, perhaps, dramatic form is where the traces show, because form is where more subtly reflective and interrogatory concerns can creep in unnoticed.

### **Dramatic Form**

One of the central issues binding together my three chosen playwrights is this question of dramatic form. Each in his way strains at the limits of classical naturalism, which is typically staged in a proscenium arch box set, with the action occurring within the twenty-four-hour time-frame Aristotle dictates, and largely consisting of the dramatisation of an intimate family scene. In *Hughie*, for instance, O'Neill includes extensive, nuanced stage directions to guide the 'drooping waxwork' that is the character of the Night Clerk, after the detailed fashion of naturalism, which would nevertheless be impossible to realise in performance.<sup>338</sup> Donleavy's typically singular depiction of pseudo-naturalistic but fragmentary scenes in *Fairy Tales of New York* serves to highlight the restrictiveness and oppressiveness of the naturalistic form. Lastly, Gilroy's characters' desperate, and always failing, attempts to break out of the family unit similarly set his plays' thematic content to reflect, and to test the limits of, the classical naturalist form, which comes almost to seem an extra character in his plays, so smothering is it.

These formal challenges are significant because art, despite imitating, reflecting and feeding into our understanding of life, is not actually life – these plays are *naturalistic*, therefore, without being fully *natural*. As works of art, it is possible to over-infer the directness of their correlations with the wider climate in which they were produced and staged. Even as I have shown that it is possible to read all my chosen

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<sup>338</sup> Eugene O'Neill, 'Hughie,' in *O'Neill: Complete Plays 1932 – 1943*, ed. by Travis Bogard (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988) pp. 831 – 851, p. 835.

plays as being indirectly and unintentionally allegorical reflections of, and upon, the society in which they first appeared, it has been essential to remain alert throughout this thesis to the limits of such interpretations.

### **Future Research**

These conclusions aside, as with all such documents as this thesis, there is inevitably a great deal that has been omitted from the discussion and analysis due to limitations of space, and to maintain a specificity of focus. For instance, the gap between theatrical art and the actual world it reflects or talks to is a big one, however verisimilitudinous the depictions of the characters and their scenarios may be, and I have occasionally resisted acknowledging this fact. Artists, if they consider themselves in the societal role in which Miller prefers to position them, may well actually favour remaining self-excluded outsiders to their own, smaller sub-communities of Americans – immigrants, “Irishness,” and so on – as well as to the dominant national groupings propagated by HUAC, rather than yearning to be absorbed by them. For instance, there is traditionally a very strong streak of anti-communism among Catholics. Therefore, for many first- and second-generation Irish immigrants, HUAC, McCarthyism and what followed it were to be celebrated and applauded. McCarthy himself, after all, was a second-generation American-Irish Catholic, and this thesis argues that certain elements of the structure and requirements of a HUAC hearing contain echoes of Catholic traditions of confession, penance and absolution. Murphy, for instance, has described these elements as ‘a ritual of absolution’ through confession, including ‘accusation, exposure, [and] repentance.’<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Murphy, *Congressional Theatre*, p. 13.

There are many further avenues down which I would take further research into this field: indeed, one feels very much at the beginning of one's intellectual development, rather than at the end-point at which concluding a Ph.D. thesis hints. Above all, it has not escaped my notice that there is a strong strain of later O'Neill critical commentary which makes the case that he is a playwright of a misogynist bent. Nor have I failed to note that if there is a more misogynistic playwright whose work saw the twentieth-century American-Irish stage than Eugene O'Neill, that playwright would have to be J.P. Donleavy. Even Frank D. Gilroy, whose work is gentler, more subtle, even less of a blunt instrument in terms of social critique than that of his predecessors, casts women in his plays exclusively in the roles of mother, wife, daughter, sister and mistress.

In writing about community formation, ideological climates, storytelling and self-performance, limitations of space have precluded the kind of in-depth engagement with constructions of femininity, and females' particular fight for self-creation and recognition of their value from other members of their social context, which such simmering misogyny deserves. Such an against-the-grain reading of the texts would constitute a different thesis. The plays under examination, at base, are written by men, about men, and all the characters of primary critical interest within them are men. The potential ironies of my own position as a female scrutinising such masculinity-centric depictions have not escaped me either, but this thesis is not my story; it is my chosen playwrights', or rather, the story of the work they produced for the American-Irish stage. Having said this, though, in future research I would hope to reflect on the meta-narrational considerations of *my own* moment of production; largely, I have tended artificially to exclude myself from the discussions and conflicts staged herein by my reading of the plays in hand and the era that subtly and inevitably pervaded them.



However, as with the nominally self-excluded position of the American artist noted above, such an omission is more a methodological sleight-of-hand than it is a realistic “grandstand” to inhabit.

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