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# The Family in Modern Northern Irish Drama

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THE FAMILY IN MODERN

NORTHERN IRISH DRAMA

(TITLE)

BY

Ray Wallace

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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1982

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Abstract of The Family in Modern Northern Irish Drama

By Ray Wallace

The purpose of this thesis is to show the plight of the family in Northern Ireland. The four plays which are the subject of this study--Within Two Shadows by Wilson John Haire, The Flats By John Boyd, Nightfall to Belfast by Patrick Galvin, and The Death of Humpty Dumpty by J. Graham Reid--deal with this innocent faction and highlight three principal effects of the troubles on their family lives. First, the families suffer internal division. They are alienated by religious/political differences which are as inseparable in these dramas as they are in Northern Irish life. Socialist doctrine opposes Christian doctrine; Catholicism opposes Protestantism, and both are opposed by those who see no place at all for religion in Northern Ireland's recovery efforts. Similarly interlocked are the divisions formed by education and age. The educated young sharply contrast with the old and more conservative family members--in their positions towards the current strife as well as in their hopes for the future. Second, the families in these plays suffer as victims of the violent events in which they have become entangled. These events take the form of attacks on family members or their homes which often lead to outright murders. Finally, these families suffer the physical and emotional damage which is the aftermath of the senseless discord in Northern Irish life.

THE FAMILY  
IN  
MODERN NORTHERN IRISH  
DRAMA

Ray Wallace  
April 1982

To the living, the dead, and the innocent  
of Northern Ireland since 1969.



## Introduction:

Ireland has given the world some of the greatest playwrights known to Western civilization: Farquar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, Synge, O'Casey, and Beckett are just a few such men. These writers all achieved international fame in either the distant or recent past. Among them only Beckett presently lives and writes, though not in Ireland; but dramatic creativity still abounds in the country to-day, especially in Northern Ireland.

A fertile seedbed for the contemporary drama of Northern Ireland is the present violent political crisis. In particular, its effect upon the family is the focus of attention in many plays by contemporary Northern Irish playwrights. Four of the best are Within Two Shadows by Wilson John Haire, The Flats by John Boyd, Nightfall to Belfast by Patrick Galvin, and The Death of Humpty Dumpty by J. Graham Reid. These plays are written by men who know their subject--Irish men who were born or have resided in the North as the present situation worsened and who have grasped a clear picture of the problems facing the ordinary people of Northern Ireland.

The present trouble, or "bother" as the local people refer to it, has been going on since 1968, and although it was not the first outbreak of violence in the province, it is one that will be remembered throughout the world when peace finally comes. The strife springs from a divided Ireland. The majority of the people live in the independent Republic of Ireland (EIRE).



To the north of this republic is the less-populated and smaller country of Northern Ireland which still belongs to Great Britain, and this is where the trouble begins. Religious differences compound the political problem. In the north the majority of the one and a half million inhabitants profess the Protestant faith. Along with this profession of faith is, for many, a total abhorrence of anything Catholic. These Protestants look to England (and the rest of Britain) to protect them from a Popish invasion; therefore, they see themselves as loyal subjects of the Crown of England.

The Northern Irish Catholics are a minority, whose civil rights the Protestant government has refused to grant for fifty years. The Catholics have been denied equal opportunities in jobs, houses, and cultural and athletic activities. John Darby, in his Conflict in Northern Ireland, gives evidence of the inequality in employment practices when he cites a 1971 study by a Belfast city councillor:

. . . only 26% of Belfast's population are Catholics, so it is not surprising to find a majority of Protestants on the local authority payroll, but it would be difficult to argue that the holding by Protestants of 95.7% of the jobs in a corporation department was either fair or the result of chance.<sup>2</sup>

Roger Hull's book shows that discrimination in housing is also a common occurrence:

Catholics are continuously awarded poor housing in ghettos from which they are, except when they emigrate, rarely able to extricate themselves. For example, when a new house becomes vacant, it is almost invariably awarded to Protestants, despite the fact that a Catholic family may have been on a waiting list long before and require better housing much more than the Protestant family that receives the house.<sup>3</sup>

Most Northern Irish Catholics want a United Ireland; some only want the restoration of their civil rights. Still others want a Socialist workers

state. Almost all Catholics want the British influence out of Northern Ireland, and then they want a semblance of religious and civil tolerance to appear before any further political action is taken.

In 1968 students and leftist supporters began civil rights protest marches, following the example of other such protests in Europe and America at this time. They protested against the Protestant, or Unionist, government in Northern Ireland, and their grievances were political not religious. The leader of the protesters was a young Queens University student named Bernadette Devlin, later to become a member of the British parliament. Devlin states that "We had been told that this was a non-sectarian, non-political march . . . nevertheless, politically-minded young people had turned up with the banners of their associations--the Young Liberals, the Young Socialists, and so on." They wanted jobs, housing, better wages, and some power for the minority population. The Unionist government ordered such protests banned, and the Catholic minority opposed the ban, believing these protests would, at long last, give them a better standard of living. The Protestant government viewed this protest as the long prophesied Catholic uprising and clamped down on it with vicious force. The protesters marched from town to town across Northern Ireland, and in each town gangs of Protestant youths attacked the marchers with rocks and bottles. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.), Protestant almost to a man, looked on and did not intervene. The worst incident occurred at Burntollet where a protest march was broken up by men and youths, all loyal to the Unionist government, who literally beat the unarmed civil rights protesters into submission with pick handles, batons, bricks, and bottles. Max Hastings has this to say of the

confrontation at Burntollet Bridge:

Most incredible of all, the police appeared utterly indifferent to everything that passed. Many of the police had chatted amiably with the Protestants as they had watched the marchers come up. Others had stood by and watched while marchers were clubbed and kicked. No attempt was made to arrest the attackers or even to impede them. . . . Beyond even this, numbers of men who were clearly identified as 'B' special reserve police were among the attackers. The regular police seemed reluctant to assist the wounded . . . behind them lay the last of the wounded and a few gangs of Protestants striding off towards their cars, parked across the fields.<sup>5</sup>

The government in London, infuriated that a police force had participated in the violence, sent British troops to Northern Ireland. The further participation of the B. Specials (R.U.C. special reservists) in machine gun attacks on Catholic homes in Belfast caused the final split in the community. The barricades went up in many towns and cities, and entrenchment and polarization set in between the two religious factions. Clearly, the Catholics could not expect protection for their homes from the B. specials who had helped to destroy them. Therefore, the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) was resurrected from its near oblivion of the past ten years into a strong fighting army to protect the Catholic population. The Protestant people, when deprived of their B. specials, in turn resurrected the Ulster Volunteer Force (U.V.F.) for protection. The British government had responded with their usual ineptitude in Irish matters, by making only the I.R.A. an illegal organization, thus hardening Catholic attitudes. With the British soldiers added to this cauldron of hatred, the killing and bombing has remained a routine part of the social atmosphere of the province.

In the midst of this Christian country at war is the only other faction of any importance--the innocent, who are among the nucleus of the Northern

Irish society. They are, for the most part, middle and lower working class people trying to eke out an existence in economically bankrupt Northern Ireland. The innocent are the real victims of the endless stream of bombings and shootings. They are the bystanders while the political activists decide the issues by violence. These innocent people now live in a culturally deprived region of Britain where shopping and entertainment has been drastically curtailed. Many stores have been blown up, and the major retail networks are frightened to rebuild again. Entertainment is almost nonexistent: there are few theatres, cinemas, or nightclubs left standing; and those that do exist are situated in dangerous areas for one religious faction or the other. Far worse than any of these disadvantages is that the innocent people are shot, crippled, or beaten everyday as the struggle continues.

The four plays which are the subject of this study--Within Two Shadows by Wilson John Haire, The Flats by John Boyd, Nightfall to Belfast by Patrick Galvin, and The Death of Humpty Dumpty by J. Graham Reid--deal with this innocent faction and highlight three principal effects of the troubles on their family lives. First, the families suffer internal division. They are alienated by religious/political differences which are as inseparable in these dramas as they are in Northern Irish life. Socialist doctrine opposes Christian doctrine; Catholicism opposes Protestantism, and both are opposed by those who see no place at all for religion in Northern Ireland's recovery efforts. Similarly interlocked are the divisions formed by education and age. The educated young sharply contrast with the old and more conservative family members--in their positions towards the current strife as well as in their hopes for the future. Second, the families in these plays suffer as victims of the violent events in which they have become entangled. These

events take the form of attacks on family members or their homes which often lead to outright murders. Finally, these families suffer the physical and emotional damage which is the aftermath of the senseless discord in Northern Irish life.

### The Mixed Family

Within Two Shadows, Wilson John Haire's graphic play about Northern Ireland, is set in the five-year period between 1964 and 1969. Therefore, this work is not entirely about the present violent situation since in 1964, as Mary Holland so aptly states, "the riots in Belfast scarcely rated a mention in the British press."<sup>6</sup> However, a great deal of the play is set in Belfast in 1969 when the troubles are just beginning to explode on the world headlines and the McGreevy family is caught right in front of the blast.

Briefly the play is about a mixed marriage in Belfast. The husband, Shooie, is a useless good-for-nothing Catholic given to proclaiming socialist principles. The Protestant mother, Lily, is a practical but vulgar woman who gradually realizes that she has married beneath herself. The offspring of this match are five children--Mary, Martha, Colette, Anne, and Sammy. All are affected by the constant fighting and bickering inside and outside their house. Haire's play follows the family through the sectarian riots of the mid-1960's to the curfews and war-like atmosphere at the end of the decade. The play shows the change in a mixed Ulster family living through these troubled times. John Jordan seems to have in mind such portraits as Haire draws in Within Two Shadows when he writes: "People in Northern Ireland are born into communities which are often physically and structurally divided . . . and one is as likely to gain as much insight into the nature of social



segregation from a study of Ulster's literature than from her researchers."<sup>7</sup>

From the very beginning of the play, the audience can see the religious/political divisions of Northern Ireland reflected in the McGreevy family. Writing as early as 1936, Nicholas Mansergh commented about the unhappy marriage between religion and politics in Northern Ireland:

The main criticism that one would direct against the operation of the party system in Northern Ireland is not that it fails to permit the nice shades of distinction in public opinion, nor yet that it fosters a bellicose spirit, but that it subordinates every vital issue, whether of social or economic policy, to the dead hand of sectarian strife.<sup>8</sup>

This same strife has severed the McGreevy family into two "sides." The Catholics side of the family consists of Mary, Martha, and, a somewhat reluctant, Shooie. The Protestant faction in the family consists of Lily, Colette, Anne, and Sammy. A typical dispute occurs early in the play as the latter faction verbally attacks Mary as she enters the room. Lily shouts a warning to her cohorts that "the spy for greyheads side is coming."<sup>9</sup> Colette adds to the abuse when she shouts: "Information bought! Information bought! No arse too high to crawl into and search" (p. 63). Soon after this it becomes clear that Lily dislikes Shooie's Catholic side when she says: "But isn't it the humpty-backed height of pity that hell weren't sewn together. With all that power, his side of the tribe mightn't come back at all" (p. 64). This religious split is conquered for a short while when the Protestant mob attempts to attack the house. When Lily, after snatching up the white-hot poker from the fire, declares: "Anybody that comes through that door to-night gets marked for life" (p. 67). Shooie agrees and backs his wife by saying: "We'll deal with any trouble" (p. 67). However, after the mob retreats, the division opens again. In Act Two,

five years have passed, and it is 1969. Colette is now an extreme Evangelical Protestant. She is married to a Protestant man; and, as Shooie tells Martha, she is "riden her bible through the streets of Belfast every Sunday . . . testifyin' and beggin' forgiveness of the mobs for havin' a Catholic father" (p. 72). Anne has left, following in Colette's footsteps, as she cannot get along with her parents' religious arguments. The Catholic "side" has now totally turned away from Lily, and her life is a misery. Mary has become a fervent Catholic after losing her future husband because of his fear of Martha's unnamed illness. Martha herself is a rapidly deteriorating young woman. Her only outburst is one of religious bigotry when she calls Colette and Anne: "Prods, Bastards" (p. 76). Sammy seems to take the only way out-- he leaves home to go to England for a life of atheism and socialism. Finally, Shooie will no longer even talk to Lily nor will he, in fine Irish clan tradition, allow any of his camp-followers to talk to her.

Political division, the partner of the religious differences, also infects this family. Shooie, the father, is always telling the household that he is a "red-flagger," a socialist. However, his wife seems more capitalistic and materialistic when she says:

My father was manager and editor of the 'Ulster Sentinel'  
. . . a paper that was read beneath thatch and tile all  
over the country of Tyrone. We had property--the half  
of Cookstown was under us. Now I haven't a stitch on  
my back. We used to cut our bread triangle shape . . .  
without the crusts . . . dainty sandwiches . . . and  
the milk was put into the cup first . . . everyday  
. . . and not only when we had visitors. Now dogs  
wouldn't lick my blood (p. 63).

At first, none of the children have any political views; but when Sammy comes home from England, he is a new man. Sammy returns with the view that true socialism is the only way out for the people of Northern Ireland. However,

he is rebuked by his so-called socialist father for this view when Shooie says: "Sammy . . . don't interfere! This is not your home anymore--you've made your home somewhere" (p. 80).

A third division in the family is one of intellectual difference, and Shooie and Lily contrast sharply in this respect. Lily is a hard working woman with no time for her husband's airs and graces. She is interested in the type of practical knowledge that will get her husband a job. However, Shooie is content to rattle off general items of trivia which bring him no closer to a job and, in fact so infuriate his wife as to widen the division between them. Even his piano lessons are not important since they are only used as weapons against Lily's constant taunts. Anne has a scholarship to go to a better school, but neither parent is happy with this. Their daughter has the chance to better herself, but the parents fear that she will become superior to them. Sammy, in his travels, has gained some politically superior education and hopes to use this knowledge to help his country. His view of the political situation for Northern Ireland is rejected by Shooie who represents the ordinary man in the street. With this denial and the pressure on Anne to return to her own class, the audience realizes that, in this case, intellectual superiority will not change Northern Ireland. Rather, Lily's uneducated views seem stronger. She is pessimistic and has no noble, logical, nor sound solution for her country. She feels that the Irish are gradually retrogressing to the cavemen mentality so that they need no excuse to kill each other. Thus, to the McGreevy's, the year 1969 holds little hope for peace or a better Northern Ireland.

Throughout the play the family is involved in the strife of the times. The audience hears that an attempt to poison the family was made some years earlier. In the year the play is first set, 1964, the family is in the thick



of the violence again. Fear prevails in the house when the Protestant mob mulls around the street singing "party" songs. Geoffrey Bell points out that these songs refer to "filthy rebel scum" and dirty fenian swine."<sup>10</sup> One such song, written in 1974, relates the destruction by fire of Catholic houses in Belfast in 1969:

On the 14th August we took a little trip, up along  
Bombay Street and burned out all the shit,  
We took a little petrol and we took a little gun,  
And we fought the bloody fenians, till we had  
them on the run.<sup>11</sup>

Another of these songs celebrates the building of a wooden arch commemorating a battle in 1690, in which the Protestants loyal to the Crown defeated Catholic rebels. Liam De Paor mentions that this celebration is "the major feast in the Orange (Protestant) calendar, and the theme for two and a half centuries of Ulster Protestant legend and song:"<sup>12</sup>

Now, praise God, all true Protestants, and heaven's and  
earth's Creator,  
For the deliverance that he sent our enemies to scatter.  
The Church's foes will pine away, like churlish-hearted  
Nebal,<sup>13</sup>  
For our deliverer came this day like the great Zorobabel.

Hearing songs like these puts the family into a state of near panic justified by the ugly situation which arises when a drunk from the mob begins shouting bigotted religious taunts. The situation is defused, but the audience realizes such incidents are common occurrences for the family. By 1969, act two in the play, the violence has worsened to a state of near Civil War. Alien British soldiers are a part of the street scene now, and Sammy has to evade a curfew to reach his home. Talk of bombings, shootings, and barricades is heard on the radio; and the audience knows that the family has endured many unspoken cruelties in the time not accounted for by Haire. The family members

seem taut with fear now, and obviously their relationships with each other, usually fragile at the best of times, are strained to the limit. A dilemma arises within the family due to the violent times. The question is whether to fight or remain pacifist in the face of all the violence directed towards them. The Protestant mob feel a historic hatred for anything Catholic; thus, a mixed marriage invokes their deepest animosity and fear. Violence is threatened, and Lily goes out to the front door to defend her home from the crowd. Shooie, however, stays inside because he is embarrassed by the spectacle Lily is making of herself. Haire, however, presents Lily's behavior as admirable. Even Sammy proves himself to be a man of action when he asks: "What are we sittin' here for, wonderin' for, and waitin' for a pub-load of drunks to come and maybe break down our front door" (p. 67). He goes out to defuse the situation by the use of brains and brawn, which is most unusual for a Northern Irish man. However, in the end Sammy gets so frustrated with Northern Ireland and Shooie's inaction that he comes to blows with his father.

Of course, the family is changed by the troubles physically and emotionally many changes occur; and they all lead to the total destruction of the family. Martha suffers from an unnamed illness but Haire hints that it may be a psychosomatic reaction to the turmoil around her; and she has become such a complete bigot toward all Protestants that she wails in confusion at the end of the play. Thus, Haire demonstrates the total futility of the strife in Northern Ireland which succeeds only in turning an innocent young girl into a physically and mentally damaged bigot. After being beaten up by a Protestant gang, Mary, once a fun-loving girl, becomes a bigoted Catholic extremist. An even more tragic view of this change is that her only friend is Shooie, who does not like the Catholic regime anymore than the Protestant one. Colette has "turned"

to become a Protestant bigot, but this bigotry has spread down to Anne. Moreover, Shooie's life is a total waste; for all his socialist principles, he could not hold his family together, provide for them, or even lead them. Lily has changed too: she has lost everything. She loses her family to bigotry; she loses her standing in the Protestant community because of her marriage to a Catholic; ultimately no one will talk to her except the two new soldiers. Finally she gives herself up to the tragedy of a mixed marriage in Northern Ireland. Sammy, the only one left to carry on the McGreevy name, leaves to take up his life in England. An Irish audience surely knows this young man will have to become Anglicised to survive. However, when he leaves Ireland he does so forever; he is no longer Irish. Perhaps Shooie is correct; Northern Ireland is no longer Sammy's home, but he will not be fully accepted in England either. It is an ironic fact that the majority of the one and a half million people in the province are fighting to remain part of Britain while they and the English people cannot even understand each other William Craig explains:

Two different communities in Great Britain and Ulster at different stages of development by virtue of different historical experiences possess different scales of reference by which to measure, weigh, and judge. The cardinal error is for one to judge events by its different value system. . . . British weakness for transplanting their own value categories explains what Ulster people mean when they say that the British are incapable of understanding Ulster problems.<sup>14</sup>

Martha and Mary are the characters physically changed--one by illness and one by a beating. However, all the family members are also mentally changed by the chaos in the streets. With Catholic and Protestants bigots, violence in the streets, a son leaving home forever, an unemployed worker, and a weeping mother, the family unit is weakened sufficiently to break up.

Haire's play, according to Mary Holland in Plays and Players, does not unravel the Irish problem sufficiently for English audiences and may not travel well. Nevertheless, the most important purpose for any Northern Irish play has to be awakening the innocent Ulster people to their own perilous situation. Only after this has been accomplished can the playwright focus his attentions on other audiences. Haire followed this pattern with Within Two Shadows; and, as Hugh Hunt reports "this promising young dramatist from the North of Ireland won the London Evening Standard Drama Award for the Most Promising Playwright of the Year in 1972."<sup>15</sup>

#### The Family on the Firing Line

John Boyd's The Flats is set in Belfast in 1969 and concerns a Catholic family, the Donellans, living in a block of flats that has already been attacked once before by a Protestant mob on the rampage. The play focuses on one day in the life of this family during which they prepare for a second attack. The flat that the Donellans live in is clearly supposed to represent the Divis flats in west Belfast--a mainly Catholic ghetto designed to keep the Catholic population cramped together. Roger Rosenblatt describes this area in Time magazine:

It is now shut tight like a corpse's mouth, its brown terrace houses strung out like teeth full of cavities, gaps, and wires . . . in the centers of the streets are "dragon's teeth"--high squares of stone arranged in uneven rows to prevent fast getaways.<sup>16</sup>

In the play, as in reality, the British army is present, but some members of the family do not feel well enough protected. Thus, the Citizen's Defense Committee (C.D.C.), the forerunner of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, emerges as the force to protect the occupants of the flats. The Donellan family is a typical one--an out-of-work father, a hard-working mother, a

student son, and an "in-love" daughter. The play follows their emotions and decisions in this critical time, providing a clear picture of Northern Ireland as it was at the outset of the violence.

The religious/political divisions within this family are clear from the very start. Gerard, the son, is worried, that the Protestant working-class people have started leaving the flats, because he wants the working classes, no matter what their religion, to unite. He asks, "What's the difference, tell me, between a working-class Catholic family an' a working-class Protestant family?"<sup>17</sup> Brid, the daughter, is not interested in the political unrest in her country; she is more interested in her romantic relationships; and the audience sees this to be true when she says to Monica, her best friend and a Protestant, "Never out with a Protestant? I have indeed! I don't care about a fella's religion as long as he gives me a good time" (p. 32). The mother, Kathleen, is more religiously motivated than politically. The day after her flat has been attacked, she states that "The world isn't gettin' better, is it? It's gettin' worse . . . Luk at what went on last night--an' we call this a Christian country?" (p. 21). Talks between Sean, the future son-in-law, and Gerard reveal that the younger characters--Gerard, Sean, and Brid--no longer believe, or only blindly accept, the medieval ceremonies of the Catholic church. In contrast to this movement away from the Faith, Kathleen shows herself to be a fervent Catholic when she says she only wishes she "was a better Catholic" (p. 22).

Politically, the divisions within the family are presented as variables. Gerard tries to be logical in his arguments about the political problems of



of the province: "The objective facts are that the Catholics are discriminated against--in housing, in jobs, in culture, in everything. But the Protestant workers are discriminated against too--they both have the same enemies" (p. 22). The reality of Gerard's sentiments has been captured by Leon Uris:

Skillful separation of the working classes has always been the principal canon of Ulsterism. The deplorable housing continues on. . . . Progress for the workingmen is replaced by threats of unemployment. Liberal thought is drenched under Orange nonsense and holy-rolling muckraking. In the end the Protestant worker has been bilked. He, too, has been kept on the edge of squalor, and his diet of medieval meanderings is all he has to hang on to. He continues to live a breath away from a riot.<sup>18</sup>

Sean merely states that he supports the Labour party. The father, Joe, is a confirmed socialist; and he gets rather annoyed at his future son-in-law's political choice. He says, "I belonged to the old Irish socialist Party. . . . The labour party's out for power an' always has been. . . . Shillyshallin' in an' out of the government, only makin' the capitalistic system stronger in the long run" (p. 50). Kathleen, of course, has no political aspirations at all. She has no real feelings of animosity towards the British Army, the C.D.C., or the Protestants, until they infringe upon her civil rights and try to take over or destroy her flat. Boyd displays her friendliness in her remarks to the British soldier outside her home: "How could I hate a young fella like yourself? Sure you could be my own son" (p. 24). Her attitude is not odd since the army had been sent to protect the Catholic areas from more Protestant attacks; the soldiers were received rapturously in Catholic areas. People were later to remember Bernadette Devlin's words in August 1969, "You're giving them tea now. What will you be giving them  
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in six months?" Even Gerard's and Joe's political differences become

irrelevant, however, as both help organize the hiding of guns for use in the future political struggle. As any Irish audience knows from personal history, Radio Free Belfast's pleas for peace, couched in its communistic jargon, mean little to two sides that have been waiting for the day of open warfare. Statements such as "These Protestant workers are the poor dupes of the junta of effete aristocrats and hardfaced capitalists that have for fifty years divided our country and have divided the working class on a sectarian basis" (p. 10), are meant to instill violence in a few and pacify the many innocent families in the flats who are seeking a logical answer to the senseless violence around them.

Tied in with the religious/political problems, the Donellans also have intellectual differences. The audience notes that grass is growing in the shipyards, meaning that Joe is out of work. In contrast, Sean, because of his education, has a job, however insignificant, in Whitehall. The other intelligent character is Gerard, a student who tries to convey his learning to Monica by getting her to read a little of Pascal's thoughts. A glimmer of hope can be seen in Monica, but she is dragged back down by Brid when she says of the work, "Sounds very gloomy. Doesn't appeal to me" (p. 26). In addition to the Socialistic hope for a better future for Northern Ireland, there is the fact that these educated people offer symbolic hope as well. Perhaps this hope for a better education for all the elements of the community is a good idea. The religiously-mixed school in Northern Ireland is virtually unheard of even though it could be one step in the correct direction for peace in the province. Obviously, Boyd feels this way because his character, Gerard, wants to educate a Protestant working-class girl,

and his mother is always stressing that he should ignore the events outside and concentrate on his studies to better himself. Darby shows that Boyd had, earlier in his career as a poet, described the profoundly different atmosphere between the Catholic school he visited and the Protestant school he had attended, and this shows the alienation between both religious groups that he would like to eradicate from Ulster society:

And now this week of June  
is ended; and now I've left this school  
of pale children with strange names,  
children who may see some harmony  
in this place I call native,  
But I am conscious of the bond and break  
between us.<sup>20</sup>

The Donellans are actually involved in the cycle of destruction in Northern Ireland before the play begins. The day before the first scene, one of their windows was broken by the Protestants parading near the flats. Kathleen, Brid, and even Sean, fear what is going to happen next since the Protestant demonstration is going to be repeated. The C.D.C. has started collecting guns, the British Army has started making searches, and the population of the flats prepare for the worst. Kathleen is frightened by the guns, as she does not want to lose her flat to any of the warring factions. Brid just wants to leave for England with her fiancé', Sean. He, in turn, is terrified by the possibility of violence since, until now, he has only read about it in the English papers. Sean is, in fact, trying to prevent bloodshed because he has been away too long and cannot understand what seems to him to be the senselessness of the conflict.

This impending upheaval forces each character to decide how he or she is going to react. Sean lets it be known to all that he will have nothing to do with the violence, and he is bluntly told to look after the women.



Joe is ready for action, and he has enough bombs and guns to fight off the Protestant mob. His son, Gerard, helps deliver these weapons into the house to his father and the rest of the defenders. However, the son, not completely indifferent to Sean's pacifism, decides he also wants to try a more peaceful approach and volunteers for radio duty instead of armed duty. Brid is paralyzed by fear and unable to act without her mother's or Sean's guidance-- which is not forthcoming at this tense moment. She becomes even more frightened when Sean runs out of the flat to assist Monica with her ill mother. Brid hates the violence but realizes that she is powerless to stop it from taking away the one she loves and her means of escape from this island of hate. This feeling of total insignificance is new to Brid, but she knows it cannot be altered either with the use of, or the restraint from, violence. Perhaps this type of destructive education is the only method by which Brid will ever come to realize her situation as a frightened young girl in a bullet-riddled country. Kathleen hates the civil unrest because it has overtaken her basic Christian beliefs. She will, however, defend her flat from the ravages of the Army, the Catholic defenders, or the Protestant mob-- all of whom want to take the flat from her.

These events and the dilemma of whether to fight or not changes the characters forever. Monica is the only character physically changed; she is killed by a stray bullet fired in the riot that follows when the Protestant mob enters the area of the flats. The other characters are changed mentally after the violence subsides. After Sean carries Monica's body in from the street, he turns away in grief. What must this young man be thinking? He has arrived in Northern Ireland to take his future bride back to the security of England, but at the end of the play he is carrying the body of a dead

girl whom he barely even knows. The marriage between Joe and Kathleen is strained to the limit. Kathleen is worn out by the events of the past few nights. She attacks Joe when he tries to persuade her to leave for her own safety: "It's you that has me the way I am . . . a bundle o' nerves! I don't know what I'm doin' or what I'm sayin'" (p. 72). Joe loses all patience with his wife, daughter, and future son-in-law; he shouts at them that they are "bloody well goin' now! I've had enough of you . . . take whoever the hell you like!" (p. 83). Finally, although they do not see Gerard's reaction to the killing, the audience knows that he will be changed. As a consequence to this needless killing, he will leave his logical pacifist ideals and will start returning fire. A comment by Leon Uris documents the reality of Gerard's transformation: "In Scotland and Wales the men of those English principalities are faced with a dual choice of emigrating or taking to the bottle. In Ireland, there is a third choice." 21

The family is weaker now. Civil unrest has overtaken it just as the flat seems likely to be overtaken by some faction. Sean and Brid will leave, and Gerard in all probability will join the I.R.A. and assume all the consequences that entails. The Joe/Kathleen marriage will stagger on since it is a Catholic marriage and divorce is impossible. The family unit, however, is lost; and this is another fatality in the long list of such occurrences in Northern Ireland.

Boyd's comment about his play The Flats is that it is "objective and compassionate and it will persuade the various factions to see the other side's viewpoint; that Catholics in the audience may understand the British soldiers a little better." 22 This approach to his drama has therefore won him much critical acclaim. Sam Bell goes further though when he comments on

what a great dramatist Boyd is:

John Boyd has stressed that The Flats is not a "documentary." Not being averse to the imaginative treatment of factual material, I think that he does himself an injustice. But in conversation with him it seems that he holds to a personal definition of the word. Certainly his audiences went away better informed on their fellow citizens harrowed under by bloodshed, anarchy, and violence.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, John Boyd's play shows the Irish family surrounded by chaos and shows a Christian country enveloped in anarchy.

### The Broken Family

Nightfall to Belfast, Patrick Galvin's second play in a trilogy about Northern Ireland, provides a realistically stark picture of the bloodshed and decay around the people of Belfast in 1973. By this time the problems of Northern Ireland had deteriorated so badly that people did not know what was going to be their future; they simply lived and hoped from day to day.

Bryan Hodgson describes the city of fear:

Midsummer midnight, and Belfast is burning. From the red-brick neighbourhoods huge bonfires cast turbulent shadows across the city. The air is heavy with smoke. From my hotel window I've heard the crash of bombs, the rattle of gunfire, and the constant moaning of Police sirens.<sup>24</sup>

Galvin's play is about the Shannon family and their attempts to eke out an existence on the firing line between the two religious factions within Belfast. The father, simply called Shannon, spends most of his free time in the bar going upstairs a great deal to make love to Kelly, the barmaid. The mother, Sheila, tries to hold the family together but never quite succeeds, due to her inability to shut out the violence outside. Don, the eldest son, seems to have survived quite well; he is married, never worries about money,

and always wears fancy suits. Paul, the other son, driven by his inner desire to help his country, has just returned from Paris, where his writing career has not really "taken off." Finally, Grandad sits in his rocking chair and accepts admonishments from Sheila and Don for his outspokenness. The play shows that the violence has really worsened by the sounds of exploding bombs and the glimmer of raging fires just outside the Shannon's window. More importantly, it shows the social chaos in which young and old are forced to live and by which the family finally falters.

The family is, of course, divided from the beginning. Shannon can find happiness only in his bar because Kelly is there to help him get through the day. Mr. Gold, the bar-owner, is a Jew and tells Shannon that if "the Prods didn't blow the place up, the Catholics would."<sup>25</sup> Shannon will not comment when asked for his opinion on the province's troubles because all he wants is to be safe and away from trouble: "I have no idea" (p. 72). This escape to the pub is typical of the Ulsterman according to John Darby:

The leisure activities of the Ulsterman are largely dictated by the amenities available. Many of them revolve around the local pub and, while it might be true to talk about a tendency in many places for Catholics to favour Catholic pubs and vice versa, this is by no means general. Proximity appears to be a more potent consideration than religion in determining where one drinks.<sup>26</sup>

Shannon's elder son, Don, attempts to escape by disavowing the whole problem. He tells Paul that he wants nothing to do with the religious or political problems of Northern Ireland, and he is annoyed by Grandad's opinion: "I get enough from him. 'Why don't you join the I.R.A. Fight for your country.' What's happening to us all? Jesus Christ!" (p. 82). Grandad hates Don:

"I want stay in the same room with him . . . (in a fury) I'm not British!" (p. 82). Soon the argument pits Don against his brother, Paul. Don states: "If a lot of religious fanatics want to blow each other's brains out that's their problem" (p. 99). He goes on to sum up the situation since Paul has left and expresses his annoyance at Paul's leaving:

What the Hell have you been doing for the past three years? Living it up in Paris. You know what I've been doing? Living here and watching those bastards tearing the country apart. . . . We're a nation of back-shooters. Tar-and-feather boys. Bomb-slingers united. But don't worry about me. I'll still be here when the bell rings . . . when you went off to Paris did you care? It was left to me. I kept this family. I paid for this flat. And I didn't do it Lambeg drums or a string of Rosary beads. I did it with cash. Hard bloody cash. And now you come back here and talk to me about concern. Well I've had concern, brother. Right up to here. (p. 99)

Paul counters these arguments with a stab at his brother's obvious connections with the Black Market in Northern Ireland: "You don't dress like that on fifty-bob a week. Someone's been bled . . . you watch it. One of these days someone will put a bullet in your back" (p. 99). Paul and his father argue too. Shannon is independent and tired of the political upheaval. He tells Paul not to waste his "youth on some phony revolution" (p. 103). Paul wants to stay at home and fight for a United Ireland, but Shannon has more political wit than his son has youthful idealism. He shows this in a fine speech which portrays a man tired of all the political and religious hypocrisy in Ireland:

But a Gaelic Republic is not my idea of a New Jerusalem. There are more political crooks in Dail Eireann than ever occupied Stormont--and that's saying something . . . if you must fight for this country--fight for something worth fighting for. A Socialist state. But not this. This is death. It's good lives being thrown away. Young men who could make this country. (p. 104)



Paul asks him to go out on the street and tell the people this, but Shannon sadly says: "It's too late for me, I'm tired--I've had enough politics" (p. 104). Sheila, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with the religious/political divisions; she wants to heal the division of the broken family. She knows her husband is having an affair, but she hopes for a return to normalcy: "I don't know what's happened to this family . . . we were fond of each other. We sat here in this room and we liked each other. . . . I want those days back. . . . This is my house and this is my family. We can go back" (p. 84). Grandad and Don bring her back to reality. Grandad tells her that her family is finished: "You know damned well what's happened to it. It no longer exists" (p. 84). Don finally ruins the dream: "We can't go back, Ma. We're not the some people anymore" (p. 84).

Intellectual differences further divide the family. Don is an opportunist who sees little future for Northern Ireland but knows that he will survive anyway by his exploits on the Black Market. Shannon is intelligent, but he knows he is too tired to escape the problems of Northern Ireland. He once fought for the revolution, but he says, "I spent half my life on the run because of it. I'm wiser now. I choose my causes. And this isn't one of them" (p. 104). Shannon also realizes that the older Irish people do not hold the answer; he talks of his father: "Leave him alone. And one day he may nod towards the twentieth century. If not, it probably doesn't matter much anyway" (p. 104). Paul is following in his father's footsteps and seems intelligent. He comes home to defend his country and make it a United Ireland. He is one of the new breed of Northern Irelanders because he is willing to act but with some

degree of political intelligence. The path professed by both Paul and his father is towards a true Socialist state, and this gives an indication of what is in store for them. Violence usually overcomes political intelligence in Northern Ireland; and, William Whitelaw, the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has said that a socialist United Ireland will never be attained through violence:

There can be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom unless by the will of the majority. Equally, of course, if the majority of the people in Northern Ireland were to opt for a United Ireland no British government would stand in the way. But here I must simply say something to all those who want a United Ireland and who think they can get it by violence and by force, who think they can somehow bomb the majority of the Protestant community into a United Ireland. I say to them they cannot, that they will not, and that there is no possible chance of their doing it. I say to them that the longer they go on with the violence, the further away will be the objective they seek to promote.<sup>27</sup>

With all the bombings, shootings, fires, and sirens, seen and heard outside, it is not surprising that the family eventually becomes involved. The Shannons are sitting down at the table when a violent explosion rips through the house. Shannon is blown half way across the room, and screams are heard in the darkness. The result of this random attack is that Shannon is left paralysed and with little hope of recovery. The family tries to live life as normally as they can, but this is difficult with Shannon confined to bed and the windows boarded up. Paul is the only one drawn into the conflict; he is young and idealistic, so he joins the I.R.A. to fight for Ireland. Don, wanting as usual only to make a profit from the struggle, refuses to fight. Grandad is too old to fight, but he knows of Paul's wish to join the fighting and he now pleads with him: "Don't involve yourself. Go back to Paris" (p. 112).

This upheaval leaves its mark upon the family. Physically only two

members are changed--Shannon and Paul. Shannon, because of his horrific injuries, finally dies. Just before his death, he calls his wife's name, and the audience must see this as a final, but brief, return to family unity. At the end of the play, Paul is lying at the front of the stage with a mask over his head; this means he was killed while on a terrorist mission. The rest of the family are affected mentally by the attack upon the house. Sheila cannot come to terms with Shannon's injuries; Grandad tells Paul that "the doctor says Shannon may never walk again . . . besides, I have a feeling she does know. She's just not going to face it. Maybe it's better that way. It gives her some hope" (p. 111). Sheila keeps telling everyone that "in a few months, Shannon will be on his feet again. And we'll be fine (she puts her hand to her mouth. Fights back the tears.) I know that. I just know it" (p. 109). Grandad is not his usual self either. He is angry and begins to open up and talk more. He says in anger "who the hell would want to kill anyone in this house? Your father hasn't been involved in politics in years. And they're hardly likely to want to kill me" (p. 111). He confesses why Shannon and he did not talk to each other; he had sent Shannon's first wife out to buy him some drink, and she had been killed by the B. Specials. The deep effect this had on Grandad is revealed by his outpouring of feelings kept hidden for so many years: "I tried to tell him a million times how sorry I was. He wouldn't listen. But I've paid for that drink. And I haven't touched a drop since" (p. 112). Sheila decides to have a birthday party for Shannon, acting as if nothing has changed, but the party only reveals the final disintegration of the family. Don and Grandad immediately get into a fight which nearly ends in blows. Don says to Grandad: "Stupid old ghett . . . another crack



out of you . . . you're really asking for it aren't you" (p. 123). Grandad tries to stand up for himself, but Don is quick to pounce: "I can cut your bloody throat, if you don't shut up" (123). He makes his way over to hit his grandfather when Paul stands in his way, ready to fight him, and the party ends in confusion. Sheila has taken all she can and says:

Well? Are you satisfied now? This is Shannon's birthday and you've ruined everything. I don't know what to do anymore--I try to keep us together. I try but you won't let me. Is that what you want? To kill this family? Well, you're succeeding. You're almost there now. And I'm not sure if I care anymore. (p. 124).

After this speech, Shannon is heard to die in the bedroom. In the epilogue the audience sees Paul and hears his speech about his own death and the consequences of his failure to help Northern Ireland:

I want to live, Lord. I want to save the dream.  
Because when I go there will be nothing left.  
They'll kill it. They'll come out on the stage  
and they'll talk and sell and compromise. . . .  
Lord, help me to stand up, help me to walk.  
When I go they'll kill it. Smear it all over  
with words. (pp. 125-126)

The "they" are the three men that have been watching Paul die. Galvin makes these men symbolic of authority groups--the Church, the Business community and the Law. These three groups will ruin Paul's fine ideals for his country (the true socialist state as laid down to him by his father) because they are in control of the situation of all times. They calmly play cards as Paul dies, and in the end the "Law" comes over and gives Paul the coup de <sup>^</sup>grace. Here Galvin shows the audience the futility of the freedom fighter's death when one of the three authority figures says: "But business . . . will continue. . . . It's happened before and I see no reason why it shouldn't go on happening in the future" (p. 63). Reviewer Desmond Rushe agrees with

Galvin's stance on the futility of ideals when authority figures are involved. He says of Galvin that he has almost captured "O'Casey's sweep of compassion for ordinary people coupled with a contemptuous detachment for emotive causes and mythologies."<sup>28</sup>

The callous unconcern of the authority figures, the two dead family members, the mental instability of Sheila, and the hatred between Don and Grandad seem to guarantee that this family will not survive in the discord which envelops them.

### A Great Fall

Graham Reid's play The Death of Humpty Dumpty is a tragic, but utterly realistic, story set in Belfast in 1979. It follows the life of a school-teacher, George Sampson, who, after having been shot by terrorists and subsequently permanently paralysed from the neck down, loses his family due to his inability to rehabilitate himself into society. However, this play is different from the others for a number of reasons. To begin, the family is middle-class and Protestant. All the members in the family seem to be educated and present an air of refined affluence absent in the families of the other three plays. Ultimately, however, violence splits this family too; and Reid shows that to be Protestant, middle-class, and educated does not insure immunity to the problems of Northern Ireland.

Initially, this family has no religious or political divisions. The audience simply sees a typical British family in their home. The mother, Heather, is in the kitchen preparing food for the evening meal; the eldest daughter, Judith, is at a youth club near Queen's University; and the only argument occurring is between the son, David, and the daughter, Mary, over

David's romantic attachments at school. When George comes home late, he settles the argument fairly and then helps his son with history homework, since he is a history teacher himself. As a middle-class, middle-of-the-road Northern Irish man, George condemns the U.V.F. when his son asks if Prime Minister Asquith acted quickly enough to crush the Protestant extremists: "He didn't act quickly enough, and when he did try to act an army mutiny seemed on the cards." George also emerges as a moderate man when he speaks admiringly of a pro-Catholic politician, Redmond. Thus, the audience realizes that this is a non-bigoted household. Heather shows that she fears the political strife in the country when she shouts at George for returning home late from the youth club with Judith: "You were long enough. I've heard sirens at least four times since you left. The University Cafe, you know how dangerous that area is George" (pp. 10-11). Judith protests that in spite of Northern Ireland's political problems, she just wants to live a normal life with boyfriends, parties, and fun: "I can't sit in all the time. I have to live" (p. 11). George agrees with his daughter, but this dispute is only a minor conflict within the family. The major division appears when Reid shows the audience the real George Samson by a series of flashbacks. George is, in fact, having an affair with Caroline Wilson, another teacher; and after his wife goes to bed, he writes, in explicit details, about his sexual activities with Caroline. He deceives Heather with the excuse that he has to stay late at school for meetings; thus, the audience knows of the division by marital infidelity before the wife does.

Intellectually, the differences within the family are minimal. George is obviously the most intelligent, but David shows himself to be following

in his father's footsteps. The son says: "I got my history essay back. Grade 1 as usual" (p. 4). Heather is a very loving housewife and mother. The two daughters are bright, witty, and fun-loving. However, the most significant factor by far about the family is their apathy, their lack of hope for the future. The children wish only to begin their lives as best they can amidst the destruction of their milieu. Reid offers no solution for them; he merely portrays realistically the inertia that the Northern Irish community has been experiencing since 1977. The entire population seems to have accepted the insoluble nature of the religious and political anarchy in the province, and they struggle to live surrounded by the bigotry and bombs as well as they can. As Rosenblatt confirms: "They have not all suffered so directly from the troubles, but their response to the troubles is similar. They show a will to survive and this seems especially remarkable when one considers the dark, moaning city of their home."<sup>30</sup>

The Samson family is wrenched from their middle-class, unaffected style of life when unexpected violence enters the picture. On one of the evenings when George and Caroline are having an affair at school, George unknowingly disturbs a group of terrorists. These merchants of violence, not knowing if George has recognised any of them or overheard any of their plans, note his car's license plate number and later shoot him on his doorstep. A report of this bloody incident is heard on the radio:

A man is critically ill in hospital. The man, who has not been named, was in his forties, a schoolteacher, and married with three children. When he opened the door of his Lisburn Road home to two young men, one produced a handgun and fired three or four shots from point-blank range. Police say, the man, a Protestant, had no links with any paramilitary groups, nor with any branch of the security forces. (p. 15).

Now the family is overwhelmed by the violence, and George is left paralysed from the neck down. Unlike the families in the other three plays, the Samsons are not given the privilege of debating whether to fight or remain pacifists. In the Death of Humpty Dumpty, Reid gives a stark picture of the sudden unprovoked violence that prevailed in Northern Ireland in the late 1970's. While answering their doors, innocent people were shot-- probably in retaliation for the shooting of some other innocent person by the opposite terrorist faction. George does not even know why he has been shot since he was unaware of having surprised the terrorists. By its meaninglessness to him, his plight seems, therefore, all the more tragic. His family cannot fight back because they are not fully involved. They have no guns; they do not know who shot George; they are frightened, non-violent, and helpless to respond--the epitome of the innocent of Northern Ireland. Reid's play heightens the sense of the insignificance attached to such a large group by the smaller knot of terrorist factions who view the innocent as expendable political pawns to be eradicated at the slightest order from a power-hungry anarchist.

After the bloody attack on the father, the whole family is changed. The pivotal change is, of course, the physical one in George. George is forced to stay in a Belfast hospital while the final tests are carried out on his now useless body. His friend and fellow cripple in the hospital, Doyle, sums up George's potential future:

Question: When is a man not a man? Answer: When he's  
in a wheelchair.  
You're going to live, but you'll never walk again, or wash  
yourself, or shave. Who'll comb your hair? Who'll brush



your teeth? Your manhood, your dignity, your self-respect will be drained away, like your piss. Who'll wipe your arse? Who'll feed you? Who'll take you for walkies? You can talk, some social intercourse, but no sexual. You'll never reach out to touch anyone. You've nothing to reach with, or touch with.  
(p. 15)

George soon realizes his own physical limitations, and in an outburst to Martin, the headmaster of the school where he used to teach, shows the audience his pent up feelings: "You can walk away. What's it like, Martin? How does it feel to be able to walk away? You can go home and walk the dog. You can go and have a drink. You can go home and make love to your wife" (p. 18). George later voices the opinions that so many other innocent victims have said before him: "I wasn't involved in anything. I never did any harm to anyone. I didn't deserve to be shot like that. Nobody deserves that" (p. 25). Later, when Doyle dies while trying one last effort to learn to walk, George's mental transformation becomes complete. He goes home for long weekends from the hospital and makes life miserable for the other members of his family. He spits his food all over his son; he spits in Judith's face when she leaves home; and more importantly, he starts hearing Doyle's voice teasing him, and so he begins talking back to his dead friend. These actions all take their toll on the other members of the family. Judith tells her brother that George hates her, but David counters with the comment: "Join the club. He hates everybody. . . . God is in his wheelchair and all's wrong with the world" (p. 37). David sums up the situation in the house:

Waken up for God's sake. If somebody doesn't begin to see what I see, I'm going to go mad. Nobody could have treated him better than you did. Nobody could have been as kind, as patient, or as helpful as you were. That is what's getting me down, we're just

ignoring reality. He's the most hateful thing I've ever known. It's true Judith, it's true. Everybody reminds me how wonderful he was, how marvelous he was. Just as soon as he stands up again everything is going to be great. But he's not going to stand up again, never, never, and he's the only one in that house who realises that fact. Look at Mum. She can't take much more of it. She's going to crack up. He can hurt her now. Just with certain looks. I hate him. (p. 37-38)

Later David curses at his father, and Heather has to defend George:

"It's so unfair, but then the whole thing's unfair. We all know how terribly changed he is. He's not the man you all loved and adored. He knows that. He knows that and he can't live with it" (p. 40). David has changed and cannot love his father. Mary cannot cope any longer and attacks David, tearing at his face and hair; she screams uncomprehensibly. Heather struggles to stop Mary, but David huddles in a corner and does not retaliate. When at last Heather manages to haul Mary away, the spent girl collapses and sobs. Judith tries not to change, but George's hatred towards her makes this impossible. Finally, Heather has enough; and, after the children leave for an evening out, she speaks truthfully to George:

Can't you see what you're doing to them, George?  
Can't you see how much they want to love and respect you? You're a coward. You're afraid in case they reject you. This way you can make them reject you, and put the blame on them. Come on George, admit it. Tell me I'm right. Tell me you're afraid and we'll fight it together. (p. 41)

She speaks the truth, and George knows it. However, the once logical and intelligent man is now so anti-social and frightened that he has to resort to vulgarity: "Get up you stupid bitch" (p. 41).

Inevitably, the family breaks up. No one comes to visit George for a few days, and so he asks the nurse to find out what is wrong. She comes back with his book full of his past sexual exploits. Heather has told her

to tell George that "I'll not be up to see him again. . . . He'll never be allowed in this house again. Tell him I'm dead. . . . Good God it amounts to the same thing" (p. 50). The audience hears, from Heather, of the family's reactions to their father's unfaithfulness: "I came down one morning and Mary had torn up every family photograph he's featured in. David . . . hasn't said anything yet. He just broods. . . . Judith came back a few days later. I wish he'd died on the doorstep" (p. 50). The nurse tells George that there is little hope of his ever going home and David comes to see him for the last time. George finally realizes what a frightened coward he has been and begs his son.

David, David you're my son. You can't leave me here.  
Look around, look at it, it's worse than any prison.  
Coax them . . . coax them, David. Ask your mother to  
give me another chance. That night, David, that  
night . . . I thought about the people I really loved.  
. . . You can't just turn your back on me, you can't.  
I can't just be left. You have to make decisions  
walking out of here isn't a real decision--it's a  
retreat. (Pause) Help me, David, coax them. Help  
me. (p. 55)

David is left with a difficult decision. He cannot bring his father home because the family will never "be able to look each other in the eyes again" (p. 55). He cannot, however, leave his father in the hospital, since life there is so unbearable. George has allowed Willie, the sadistic ward orderly, to intimidate him for money. David says, "We can't take you home . . . (Looking around the room). . . . But I can't leave you here" (p. 55), so he takes a pillow from behind George's head and smothers him to death. Ironically, Doyle's voice is heard at the end as he recites:

Georgie Porgie pudding and pie  
Kissed the girls and made them cry  
But when he made his family cry  
Georgie Porgie had to die. (p. 55)



Reid's The Death of Humpty Dumpty shows the total destruction of a man, his family, and his country. The man dies at the hands of his son. His family dies by the man's inability to love them since his life has been ripped apart by senseless hatred. Finally, the country slowly dies, choked by different bloody ideals, because so many innocent people are killed each day merely because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. As one critic has so aptly stated, the play "takes a microscopic look at one of the victims of violence who survives the obscenity of his wounds only to wake up in a living hell."<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

The four plays examined in this work give a realistic picture of Northern Irish family life. The reader sees a torn country, torn families, and torn ideals.

The religious/political divisions within the families seldom are healed. The family members are usually set in their ways; and if any movement is made, it is usually a move towards deterioration. Religiously, a movement is slowly growing in the younger family members to forsake belief in a God of one color or the other. This could be constructive in that the young may break away from the religious problems their fathers and forefathers have fought over for many years and begin to build a more stable country.

Education seems to be a major factor in all these plays. Those characters with some education could play a vital role in a more logical shaping of Northern Ireland's future. However, some of them die in the end, some

forsake their ideals, and some simply leave their country forever. This latter group represent Ireland's greatest loss. The Sammys and Seans, on both the Protestant and Catholic divides, are leaving and taking with them the country's most vital assets: youth, intelligence, and vigor. All the playwrights hint that a closer society would be a better one. This must start with education, and Owen Dudley Edwards agrees: "When children grow up in ignorance of each other's attitudes, and without the decent respect for contrary opinions which only the closeness of long-standing comraderie can bring,"<sup>32</sup> sectarian bitterness can at anytime explode.

Within the country, there is a political swing towards the left-- this ideal is that a true Socialist state is the only answer for Northern Ireland. Perhaps this attitude arises from all the years the poor, but innocent, people of Northern Ireland have been under the rule of repressive English governments or vindictive Unionist power. The playwrights may be seen as voicing the population's wish for change, but it should be noted that three out of the four plays deal only with the working classes. The fourth, Reid's play, ignores political change and calls forth the deep yearning of the typical middle-class family for the simple right to survive and hold their loved ones together.

The violent events as portrayed by the playwrights also help the reader to see the province's problems. The reader sees houses being attacked, a flat being fought over, and men and women changed by the bloody upheaval in their country. Curfews and barricades are enforced, and radio communication gives the audience constant reminders that the violence is escalating. In the plays the innocent are being physically maimed and mentally deranged.

The incredible emotional strain begins to take its toll on all. Death by violence is treated in a realistic manner by all the playwrights. The agony, the pain and the heartbreak in the families, and the utter disregard for human life by the freedom-fighters, is shown to be at the forefront of the struggle for life in Northern Ireland. Finally, tempers flair; the fighting without becomes fighting within, and families fall apart.

The dilemma of whether to retaliate to this violence or not shows the debilitating effects of the strife on these families. In Haire's play the family members can only return the taunts and secretly break a few windows. The numbers are against them--as Mary learns from being beaten by a mob as she gets off the bus. Boyd's family, however, can prepare because in the flats they are not in the minority and they know for certain that another attack is bound to come the next evening. Galvin has his family just waiting, knowing that something may happen, but powerless to stop it. Finally, Reid's family, by contrast, never expects the violence to come but are equally helpless to do anything. All the plays show that the idealism of freedom fighters--defenders of the faith or whatever other title they give themselves--has deteriorated into a senseless frenzy of paranoic genocide.

The family unit, in all cases, is weaker due to the violence. Some families break up completely, and others, still clinging to their religion cannot separate. On the other hand, the latter cannot call their household a union or a family due to the contamination of a plague of hatefulness and bigotry from outside. Perhaps this dissolution of the family unit is the sacrifice the Northern Irish have to pay to rebuild a better country for their heirs.

However, these plays do not give the audiences much hope for the future. The playwrights, because they are knowledgeable about the situation in the province, realize that no easy answer is possible. No overnight solution is going to appear, and many more innocent people are going to be dragged down by the bloodshed. This is a desperate dilemma for a dramatist--whether to portray his country wallowing in the spilling of innocent blood or to impose solutions in his play which destroy its realistic stance. Brian Friel, another noted Northern Irish dramatist, had this to say on the playwright's plight:

Dramatists have no solutions. It is not their function to give answers. They are not marriage counsellors, nor father confessors, nor politicians, nor economists. What function have they, then? They have this function: they are vitally, persistently, and determinedly concerned with one man's insignificant place in the here-and-now world. They have the function to portray that one man's frustrations and hopes and anguishes and joys and miseries and pleasures with all the precision and accuracy and truth they know; and by so doing help to make a community of individuals.<sup>33</sup>

The four dramatists in this work follow Friel's principle: they merely offer their own realistic portrayal of the situation in Northern Ireland. They go so far as to teach the audience, a community of individuals, that the family is being victimized and destroyed because they are the insignificant members of that society. They show the family members' frustrations, hopes, anguishes, joys, miseries, and pleasures; they even show the futility of the entire situation, but the audience are always left with the task of creating their own solutions to help Northern Ireland recover.

Haire, Boyd, Galvin, and Reid have all drawn clear and realistic pictures of the Northern Irish family and its problem: surviving in a strife-torn country. Perhaps some day one of these playwrights will have

the envious task of depicting a family that survived, that outlasted the violence!



## EndNotes

1

Seamus Heaney, "A Postcard from North Antrim," in Field Work (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), p. 19.

2

John Darby, Conflict in Northern Ireland (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976), p. 72.

3

Roger H. Hull, The Irish Triangle: Conflict in Northern Ireland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 221.

4

Bernadette Devlin, The Price of My Soul (New York: Knopf, 1969), p. 92.

5

Max Hastings, Barricades in Belfast: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1970), p. 86.

6

Mary Hollands, "Royal Court Upstairs," rev. of Within Two Shadows, by Wilson John Haire, Plays and Players, 19 June 1972, p. 69.

7

John Jordan, "Northern Poets and Northern Politics," in Conflict in Northern Ireland, John Darby (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976), p. 161.

8

Nicholas Mansergh, The Government of Northern Ireland (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1936), p. 27.

9

Wilson John Haire, Within Two Shadows, Plays and Players, 19 June 1972, 62 (subsequent references to this play will be made in the body of the text).

- 10  
Geoffrey Bell, The Protestants of Ulster (London: Pluto Press, 1976), p. 50.
- 11  
Ulster Defence Association, Detainee Song Book (Belfast: U.D.A., 1974), p. 8.
- 12  
Liam de Paor, Divided Ulster (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 29.
- 13  
C. Gavin Duffy, Ballad Poetry of Ireland (Dublin: n.p., 1845), p. 248.
- 14  
William Craig, Ulster: A Nation (Belfast: Ulster Vanguard Party, 1972), p. 10.
- 15  
Hugh Hunt, The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-1979 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 212.
- 16  
Roger Rosenblatt, "Belfast: Nothin's Worth Killing Someone," Time, 11 January 1982, p. 34.
- 17  
John Boyd, The Flats (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1974), p. 21.  
(Subsequent references to this play will appear in the body of the text.)
- 18  
Jill and Leon Uris, Ireland: A Terrible Beauty (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1978), p. 247.
- 19  
Darby, p. 22.
- 20  
John Boyd, "Visit to the School," in Conflict in Northern Ireland, John Darby (Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 1976), p. 136.

21

Uris, p. 160.

22

"Flats Drama," The London Times, 19 March 1971, Sec. 4, p. 20, col. 2.

23

Sam Hanna Bell, The Theatre in Ulster (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1972), pp. 101-102.

24

Bryan Hodgson, "War and Peace in Northern Ireland," National Geographic, April 1981, p. 472.

25

Patrick Galvin, Nightfall to Belfast, in We Do It For Love (Belfast: Threshold, Lyric Players Theatre, 1976), p. 71 (Subsequent references to this play will be made in the body of the text).

26

Darby, p. 151.

27

William Whitelaw, "Northern Ireland: Military and Political Action," in Vital Speeches of the Day, (Southhold, NY: City News Publishing Company, 1972), xxxix, 93-96.

28

Desmond Rushe, "Theatre: Brave Tokens," Eire-Ireland, 9 February 1976, pp. 106-109.

29

J. Graham Reid, The Death of Humpty Dumpty (Dublin: Co-op Books, 1980), p. 9 (Subsequent references to this play will appear in the body of the text).

30

Rosenblatt, p. 34.

31

Quotation from Irish Press, printed on back cover of J. Graham Reid's, The Death of Humpty Dumpty, (Dublin: Co-op Books, 1980).

32

Owen Dudley Edwards, The Sins of our Fathers: Roots of Conflict in Northern Ireland (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1970), p. 229.

33

Brian Friel, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair," Thomas More Association Symposium, Chicago, in The Theatre in Ulster, Sam Hanna Bell (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1972), p. 107.

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