

# Absent Characters: Stage Space and Social Change in Modern Drama

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*This Thesis is dedicated to  
Sydney Lyn Dammert*

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

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## Introduction

Absence, particularly in the theatre, is the phenomenon that occurs when the audience is primed to expect a manifestation of a thing and find the stage space empty of it. An examination of characters that are physically absent or invisible in works of 20<sup>th</sup>-century drama shows that the matter of each characters' absence is closely tied to those characters' occupation of space.

Absent characters in drama, as I will be considering them in this thesis, are those characters who are present within the world and even the action of the drama, but that are not visually perceptible to the audience. However, the audience is nonetheless made acutely aware of the character and his or her absence via the use of dialogue, gesture, and sound. In modern drama, and particularly in the two plays this thesis examines, Chase's *Harvey* and Friel's *Aristocrats*, absent characters take on an agency within the drama and directly interact with physically represented onstage characters.

The word "drama" literally means "action," and so it can seem paradoxical for a character absent from the stage to be considered a dramatic character when they perform no visible actions in view of the audience. However, absent characters are indicated, via the dialogue and physical gestures of the actors onstage, to perform actions out of view of the audience. In ancient Greek drama, these characters were typically the gods, who blessed and cursed the onstage characters and manipulated their fates. Early modern drama usually had the invisible hand of Fate intervening in the plot of the play. In modern drama, absent characters tend to take one of two forms: the offstage character that acts in the imagined space beyond the onstage set, and the invisible character that acts unseen and yet within the imaginary stage space. These characters, being in either case invisible to audience members by virtue of offstage location or literal disembodiment, are in modern drama representative of marginalized

individuals and social groups, rather than abstract concepts like fate and deity. Their specificity as representatives of people, rather than ideas, allows them to interact directly and with agency with the onstage characters of the play.

Space is integral to pre-modern manifestations of absence, but in order to fully examine how absent characters are presented in drama it helps to differentiate the different kinds of theatrical space. Michael Issacharoff separates the space in a performance venue into three categories: the theatre space, created through architectural design separating the temple-like space in which spectators and spectacle converge from the outside public space; stage space, created via a stage and set design, in which the actors typically perform; and dramatic space, the space created by a dramatist and imagined to replace the stage space and an imagined space beyond (Issacharoff 212). Dramatic space is necessarily the space in which absent characters reside, these characters being not physically perceptible to audience members within the theatre space nor physically represented upon the stage space. Issacharoff further divides dramatic space into two categories, those being *mimetic space*, which refers to the dramatic space made visible and represented to the audience within the stage space, and *diegetic space*, which refers to a space described to exist within the universe of the drama, but which is never visually or aurally represented to the audience, instead being merely described by those mimetic characters onstage (Issacharoff 212). Hanna Scolnicov has made the same distinction, referring to Issacharoff's mimetic space as *perceived space*, also known as the theatrical space within, and diegetic space as *conceived space*, or the theatrical space without (Scolnicov 14).

Absence typically occurs in the diegetic or conceived space, and thus space not represented onstage but imagined by the audience to exist just outside of the space represented on the stage. For example, in *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, the characters repeatedly mention a



lover, Pepe el Romano, who passes by the windows outside of their house. Although he is presumably just outside the window, and in any case his presence is hugely important to the play's narrative and directly contributes to the suicide of an onstage character, no actor playing Pepe ever appears on the stage space. To an audience immersed in the world of the play, Pepe is very real, and yet he is never seen, never heard, and never appears within the room represented onstage. In an examination of absent characters mediated through diegetic space, it is crucial to recall that the term "diegesis" means literally "a narration or narrative account" (Gruber 81), and that, as the diegetic space is entirely imaginary, it is formed not in a physical space but within the minds of the audience members through the intercession of descriptive dialogue given by the characters onstage. The occurrence of absence in the mimetic space is much rarer, with reason: how can an actor represent his own absence while physically present in front of an audience? The two plays examined in this thesis, *Harvey* by Mary Chase and *Aristocrats* by Brian Friel, answer that problem through a manipulation of spatial boundaries and use of theatricality to engage audience imagination in the physical creation of physically absent characters.

The absent characters in modern drama differentiate from traditional models of absence primarily in that the characters given power are not gods and kings, but rather those figures typically deemed powerless. Modern theatre is famous for challenging societal and historical norms, growing out of the devastation and lack of confidence in western culture following the first World War. In Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, modern gods are helpless to influence mortals, and are in fact abused by the mortal world. Modern absent powers, then, are more likely to be women, the elderly, the infirm, and the voiceless in society. Modern drama, more so than any previous era of theatre, embraces the paradox in absent character by using them to give a metaphorical platform to the silenced and marginalized in society.

Crucial to the selection of *Harvey* and *Aristocrats* for study is their placement as quasi-bookends to the modernist movement within Anglophone drama. *Harvey* was first performed in 1944, when modern drama was gaining real popularity as a movement among regular audience members. *Aristocrats*, first performed in 1989, premiered as the modernist movement was giving way to the first great postmodern plays. Although the plays represent the beginning and end of an era, their experimentation with absence, while individually innovative in each play, is emblematic of the questions surrounding theatrical and literary absence being explored throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Mary Chase, an American journalist, playwright, and children's novelist, wrote *Harvey* in 1944. Born to a poor Irish Catholic immigrant family in 1906, Chase was fascinated by her mother's stories of Irish folklore, which produced the magical pooka Harvey. *Harvey* was Mary Chase's first commercial success after a string of poorly performing plays, earning her the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1945, and in 1950 it was turned into a movie starring James Stewart. The original Broadway run lasted over four years, and has been continually revived on stage and screen.

*Harvey* focuses on Elwood P. Dowd, an eccentric man who lives with his sister Veta and niece Myrtle Mae. Elwood's best friend is a six-foot, one-point-five inch tall invisible white rabbit named Harvey, who is visible only to Elwood and accompanies him everywhere. During the play Veta and Myrtle Mae attempt to oust Harvey from their lives by institutionalizing Elwood in a psychiatric facility and medicating him until he is unable to see Harvey, thereby making him "normal." Harvey, using his mysterious powers as a pooka, an Irish mythological creature, thwarts their attempts.

Despite *Harvey*'s enduring popular success, however, it has been neglected by critics. It seems likely that *Harvey*'s use of the fantastic, namely the character's magical powers over time and space, is the source of the critical disdain. Although magical realism has been slowly gaining respect as literary fiction in recent years, thanks in large part to an interest in Latin American studies, English-language stories and plays utilizing magic and the fantastic have remained relegated to "pop" and genre fiction.

Not only does *Harvey*'s magic render it critically invisible, however: Mary Chase's precarious position as a female playwright writing in the '40s makes her difficult to place within a scholarly context. None of her fourteen plays have been the subject of any critical scholarship. The great American writers of the period in between the two World Wars were predominantly masculine figures writing about masculine themes through masculine eyes, and female writers from that time period have struggled to gain critical staying power, if they gained critical attention at all. Mary Chase's femininity, as well as the popular magic in her blockbuster play, has made her hard to place within the canon of literary criticism and also difficult for scholars to take seriously, contributing to her virtual invisibility within the scholarly world.

While Mary Chase has been nearly erased from dramatic scholarship, Irish dramatist Brian Friel has enjoyed tremendous critical success. *Aristocrats* was written in 1979, when Friel was already an established and popular playwright. *Aristocrats*, however, was and remains one of Friel's less-successful plays, possibly because its frank portrayal of class interaction and the dying incarnation of fabricated Irish Republican national identity was uncomfortable for audiences during the turbulence of the Troubles.

*Aristocrats* is the story of an Irish Catholic brood returning to their family home to celebrate the wedding of the youngest child, Claire, to a middle-aged green-grocer in town. The

family was once a very wealthy, quasi-aristocratic installation in the Donegal area, and throughout the play they try to live up to this grandiose past, all while their dying father's voice inadvertently booms out from a baby-monitor that connects his offstage bedroom to the onstage living area in which the family congregates. Near the end of the play, Father dies and the wedding is put on hold for the funeral. In the end the family sells their hereditary mansion, which they can no longer afford without Father's government pension, and disperse.

During his lifetime Friel continually lived just on either side of the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and so his drama is consistently acutely aware of tensions along the border and between the two nations, and is frequently set near the border in County Donegal. The tension within the Republic of Ireland during the Troubles is brought to a head with two versions of Ireland—a modern, realistic version that attempts to live with disparity and pluralism, represented by the various adult children, and an antiquated, folkloric version of fierce pride and aristocracy, represented by the dying Father.

Within the hundreds of examples of absent characters in modern drama, the type most typically seen—and the easiest for a dramatist to write well—is the offstage character, or the character that never appears in a scene presented in front of the audience. The child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Pepe in *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, and Godot in *Waiting for Godot* are all archetypal examples of key players, movers and shakers within the drama, who never appear onstage and never participate directly in a scene. We see a version of this type in the character of Father in *Aristocrats*, who is confined to an offstage bedroom despite being the nucleus of the family he controls on the stage below. A second, less common type of absent character is that character which is presumed to be onstage but is not represented by a physical actor. The most famous dramatist to employ this strategy is Eugène Ionesco, particularly in his

drama *The Chairs*, where more and more chairs are successively brought on stage and addressed by the two principal characters—embodied by actual actors—as if there were people sitting in them. Harvey is, of course, an example of this second type.

The use of audience imagination to create an absent character is not exclusive to the theatre, and is in fact a common trope in prose. While an entire book is necessarily diegetic, due to the fact that visible and auditory worlds are described in prose and need to be imagined by the reader, there are unrepresented characters in books who never appear directly within the narrative point of view, thus similarly “appearing” yet remaining absent figures, unrepresented. The difference in drama is that we expect all characters important to the plot to appear within the narrative point of view—that is, upon the physical stage. The various means by which dramatists have subverted that expectation is the focus of this thesis.

*Harvey* and *Aristocrats* are particularly powerful examples of the modern treatment of silence and invisibility in that, unlike Beckett’s *Godot*, *Father* in *Aristocrats* and *Harvey* in *Harvey* have agency within the onstage action of the play. “Every one of Beckett’s plays suggests that some decisive action has gone on before the characters have come into our view,” writes Lionel Abel. Furthermore, that representation of absent characters with agency in both the diegetic and mimetic space of the theatre allows the playwrights to foreground issues of social and class power dynamics. These invisible characters are representative of the invisible members of society, and for a modern playwright to give an absent character agency is to acknowledge the humanity of the marginalized in the playwright’s own society. In other examples of modern drama, despite their increased representation of social groups in their treatment of absent characters, “They [the characters] show us the results of dramatic action, but not that action itself” (Abel 83). Both *Harvey* and *Father* conduct dramatic action onstage, whereas the typical

absent figure in modern drama, even those given significant implied power, only indirectly influences the onstage events. In addition to representing the marginalized through a paradox of absence, *Harvey* and *Aristocrats* revolutionize the expectation of absent character occurring in absent space. That is to say, instead of keeping the absent character entirely offstage in the diegetic space, the absent characters in these two plays insist upon intruding into the space onstage through their own mimesis. Although the characters themselves are invisible and physically absent, Harvey and Father make themselves directly perceptible to the audience despite the absence of a visual presence, refusing to rely merely upon the descriptive dialogue of traditional actors.

What differentiates Father in *Aristocrats* and Harvey in *Harvey* from similarly absent figures in modern drama is their agency despite—and even because of—their absence. Father, despite his relegation to a room offstage, continually intrudes upon the stage space and interrupts the action through the projection of his voice via the baby monitor. At the end of the second act, he physically intrudes upon the stage, breaking the established rules of his absence by physically manifesting, only to immediately make himself absent again in order to regain invisible control of the family. Father breaks the “rules” of offstage characters by ruling over the stage itself. Likewise, Harvey is far more than the invisible observers of Ionesco’s *The Chairs*, who in no way interact with the embodied characters onstage. Harvey actually speaks directly with Elwood while they are both on the stage, and Harvey physically moves set pieces and interacts with them without the intercession of an embodied presence. Harvey and Father both have agency and power in their respective worlds and on their stages, beyond the standard power of absent dramatic characters.

Absence is manifested primarily in visible and auditory manifestations, and this thesis divides its analysis along those lines. Due to the differences in how Brian Friel and Mary Chase characterize and portray their absent characters, each chapter will disproportionately feature details from one of the plays. *Harvey* will feature heavily in the chapter on visibility, due to Harvey's literal invisibility whereas Father in *Aristocrats* is more conventionally made "invisible" by his offstage location. Likewise, *Aristocrats* will be drawn upon more frequently in the chapter on the auditory, as Father's character makes extensive use of vocal presence whereas Harvey remains inaudible throughout Chase's play.

Each play, despite using vastly different techniques, experiments with the power a socially oppressed character may take in their absence from the stage space. Responding intimately but subtly to the political discourse of their respective decades, namely feminism during the second World War in *Harvey* and nationalistic identity in a changing political landscape in *Aristocrats*, the plays hide their central concerns in plain sight by making absent characters central to their narratives. These characters subvert expectations of the expected power dynamics in drama by retaining agency within the action of the play, directly and massively influencing the drama—literally, the action—on the stage itself. The drama of these two plays surrounds themes of absence and the threat of invisibility and marginalization, and so each play foregrounds an invisible character that rebels against attempts at confining them. Harvey and Father are rebellious spirits that use their perceived absence to their advantage, in the process questioning the means by which they and those they represent have been made absent in society.

## Chapter 1: Visibility and Physical Embodiment

How is an invisible character visually manifested on the stage, which is by and large a visual medium? The Father in Brian Friel's *Aristocrats* is largely given form through an auditory presence, the baby-monitor allowing him to breach the gap between diegetic or offstage space and the mimetic space onstage through the intrusion of his voice. Father is physically understood to be frail and thus confined to an offstage space, which makes his sudden appearance at the end of act two, where in suddenly becoming visible he succumbs to death, so powerfully thematic. Harvey, in Mary Chase's *Harvey*, is by contrast a silent character, and his physical presence is mainly intuited by the words and, most tellingly, the directed actions of the other actors onstage. Although invisible, Harvey is presented as having a very real physicality that interacts with the embodied actors, as communicated by their actions toward him.

Mary Chase's personal history informs her decision to create a central character who is literally invisible, despite the challenges of doing so on the stage, as a stand-in for the invisible figures in society. Born into a poor Irish Catholic family, Chase occupied a marginal class position. In addition to the social invisibility created by poverty, anti-Catholic sentiment was widespread in the 1910s and 20s, when Chase would have been growing up, particularly with the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan. In the 30s, however, Chase would have seen growing acceptance of Catholicism and understood that social perception can change with influence from the government and groups for social equity. More personally, as a woman in journalism Chase would have been subject to the discrimination and lack of respect given to women embarking on what was seen as a man's job. These experiences likely contributed to Chase's expression of marginalization in *Harvey's* invisibility, particularly in the scenes with the capable but ignored Veta.



It's tempting to be swayed by the prevailing opinion of the academy and dismiss *Harvey* as a fanciful comedy of magic and whimsy, with little else to recommend it. However, the comedy in the play is anything but frivolous. To be true, Chase fully intended to write a comedy, but in so doing she was profoundly inspired by the wartime experience when writing *Harvey*. "In 1942, during the early days of U.S. involvement in World War II, Chase learned about a widow in the neighborhood whose only son was killed in the South Pacific. When she saw the woman resume her daily commute to her job downtown, Chase resolved to write something that would make her laugh again and started her two-year journey writing the play that would become *Harvey*" (Steen 4). In 1945, a production of *Harvey* went to the war fronts and was performed for soldiers on foreign soil. Certainly *Harvey*'s popularity during the war had a great deal to do with its comedy and ability to transport the viewer away from reality. However, *Harvey*'s endurance suggests that there is more profundity to this play than mere jollity. Perhaps some of the play's popularity was, and remains, due to its social implications about the necessity to acknowledge, rather than disenfranchise, marginalized groups: World War II was possibly the most unifying force for disparate religions and ethnicities in the history of the United States.

*Harvey*'s presence is largely intimated to the audience through the actions of Elwood P. Dowd, who is normally the only character granted the ability to see *Harvey*. Elwood's elaborate courtesy toward all other characters in the play allows for him to make exaggerated gestures toward the imagined (in the mind of the audience) figure of the invisible *Harvey*, thus almost painting him into being. When Elwood (and *Harvey*) first appear onstage, the stage directions describe Elwood's actions thusly: "*As he enters, although he is alone, he seems to be ushering and bowing someone else in with him. He bows the invisible person over to a chair*" (Chase 4). Immediately we are made aware that Elwood is indicating the presence of an invisible person,

and the stage directions make small notes of Elwood's gestures toward this invisible person, Harvey, throughout the rest of the play. These actions are most explicit when defining the person of Harvey near the beginning of the play, however.

Harvey's relationship to the audience is complicated and given extra dimension due to his invisibility. As Dennis Kennedy points out in his examination of spectatorship and its relation to drama, "We are bodies which occupy space and metaphorically are occupied by it" (Kennedy 133). Yet Harvey as a character is conjured up onstage through the use of dialogue, actors' gestures, and moving set pieces, and he is not actually played by an actor himself. Harvey does not physically occupy space as an embodied actor, but as a character, he does—albeit invisibly, meaning that when he is not being gestured to at that moment, the audience can never be entirely sure as to what space on the stage he occupies. Normally in theatre, "distant views of a proscenium performance normally affect only the eyes and ears, keeping the danger of [the actor]'s body at bay" (Kennedy 138). Harvey has no actor's body with which to threaten the audience members, but as a character Harvey is presumed to have a body, albeit an invisible one. As he does not affect the audience's eyes and ears, because he is invisible and inaudible, the audience loses the ability to track him, and he thus re-threatens them by virtue of his total power over space. Harvey, when not directly indicated on the stage, could be anywhere—including among the audience members. "Especially when we are present in a space marked off from the mundane, like a sacred temple or a chamber for the exercise of power," Kennedy remarks, "we are likely to alter not only our behavior but our frame of mental reference" (Kennedy 133). When in the theatre, an audience member is willingly suspending their disbelief and surrendering themselves to the illusion of the play, making Harvey's powers, and his invisibility, suddenly very real possibilities with which the audience must interact.

Harvey is not only made visibly absent—which is complicated enough, as he is invisible to us the audience but apparently visible, perhaps on another plane, to his friend Elwood—he is also given a definite physicality. Harvey is not a ghost, visible at whim but utterly intransient, but instead a physical being that takes up space. Chase defines him as such near the beginning of the action, when Elwood first introduces Harvey to another person:

ELWOOD: (*Bows to MRS. CHAUVENET.*) I beg your pardon, Aunt Ethel. If you'll excuse me for one moment— (*Puts his hand gently on her arm, trying to turn her.*)

MRS. CHAUVENET: What?

ELWOOD: You are standing in his way— (*SHE gives a little—her eyes widen on him.*) Come along, Harvey. (*He watches the invisible Harvey cross to door, then stops him.*) Uh-uh! (*ELWOOD goes over to door. He turns and pantomimes as he arranges the tie and brushes off the head of the invisible Harvey. Then he does the same thing to his own tie.*) (Chase 7-8).

In this moment we see that Harvey cannot merely pass through Mrs. Chauvenet, as a ghost would, but that he actually occupies space. This image of Harvey as invisible but physical stands as a near-opposite concept of an absent person to that presented by Father in *Aristocrats*, where the Father is invisible due to his lack of physical presence on the stage.

In the scene with Mrs. Chauvenet, and in many scenes to follow, Chase presents the curious paradox of Harvey's invisibility contrasted with an elaborate concern for Harvey's physical appearance. In this scene Elwood grooms Harvey in preparation for his meeting a great group of people, although both Elwood and Harvey are aware that Harvey is invisible to everyone unless he chooses to make himself visible. There is, in this seemingly unnecessary ritual, a fastidious insistence upon Harvey's potential for visibility. Although Harvey is aggressively invisible, his invisibility causing the great drama of the play and Harvey himself never made visible to the audience, Chase constantly insists upon the potential for visibility and the importance of Harvey's physical, visual appearance, should he ever become visible.

Characters who insist upon Harvey's invisibility, or even his non-existence, are careful to maintain accuracy when describing his supposed physical and visual attributes.

When Veta describes Elwood's problem—his companionship with Harvey—to Dr. Sanderson at Chumley's Rest (the mental institution in which she wishes to commit Elwood), she emphasizes, not the fact that Elwood sees something that the rest of the family cannot, but the physical attributes of Elwood's invisible friend that she finds most objectionable. "Harvey is a rabbit—a big white rabbit—six feet high—or is it six feet and a half? Heavens knows I ought to know. He's been around the house long enough" (Chase 14). Veta's objections to Harvey are mainly that he is a large white rabbit, and thus a ridiculous companion for a man like Elwood, more than any concern for Elwood's mental health. She continually emphasizes these attributes of Harvey throughout the interview, saying things such as "No one could eat at a table with my brother and a big white rabbit" (Chase 15) rather than, say, insisting that no one could eat with her brother and his invisible friend. She emphasizes instead that the rabbit, Harvey, is "big" and "white"—two very visual attributes.

Harvey's manifestation of marginalized and invisible groups in society is particularly striking when viewed *en situ* with the other characters' attempts to have Elwood institutionalized in a psychiatric institution as a result of his friendship with Harvey. Invisibility and madness, or rather the appearance of madness, are closely linked in theatre history, particularly in modernist plays. In an examination of madness in Ionesco's plays, Klaver notes the insistence of visual signifiers for invisible things as a symptom of madness. She observes that in the play *Victims of Duty*, the detective searches insistently through images of memory for a man named Mallot 'with a t at the end,' noting that "The insistence on the 't at the end' suggests a search for a

transcendental signifier which could locate Mallot” (Klaver 183) and expanding upon the madness of the idea:

desire turns into obsession not only as a search for the absent Mallot but also for textual signification. The gaps in the images or signs of Mallot ‘with a t’ within Choubert’s unconscious mind indicate a compulsive movement of deferral within semiotic structure, a movement that leaves sites of absence in the textual apparatus which must be filled with images of some kind (Klaver 184).

When searching for images of a man, it is madness to insist upon his name having a silent ‘t’ at the end, and yet Ionesco’s detective does exactly that. Similarly, when searching for the invisible Harvey, or even when just discussing him as a figment of Elwood’s apparent madness, it is madness in itself that the other characters insist, repeatedly, upon both his height of over six feet and his white color. It shouldn’t matter, when Elwood is seeing something that either isn’t there or is invisible to the speakers, whether the invisible entity is white in color—it has no bearing upon Elwood’s condition of seeing what isn’t there or upon the existence of an invisible entity—and yet Veta, Dr. Chumley, Nurse Kelly, and Dr. Sanderson all insist upon Harvey’s height and whiteness when they are discussing him as a phenomenon. The astonishing suggestion in this insistence is that it is not Elwood who is mad, in recognizing the friend he can see, but that society is mad in its obsession with the trivial and unknowable, and the desire to define and regulate what they cannot possibly verify. This subversion of madness is of course reflected when Veta is initially presumed mad and locked up instead of Elwood. The psychiatrists do eventually realize their mistake, and yet the language they and Veta use when referring to the ‘visual’ aspects of the invisible Harvey suggest that they were in fact right to see Elwood as sane. The subversion of madness translates into the subversion of power dynamics we see with those who have social power—namely, the psychiatrists—and Harvey, who holds complete power over them despite being a literal manifestation of the socially invisible classes.

The preoccupation that Veta and the psychiatrists have with Harvey's visible characteristics is symbolic not only of a racial bias but also of their desire to retain their own social power. Elaine Scarry argues that "to be intensely embodied is the equivalent of being unrepresented and [...] is almost always the condition of those without power" (Scarry 207). On some level, Veta and the psychiatrists understand that Harvey's invisibility threatens them, as he is able to escape and manipulate their efforts to maintain authority. Insisting upon Harvey's height, his whiteness, and the attributes of his physical body allow these characters the comfort of feeling they can categorize Harvey. They will him into a visually perceptible and physically manifest body so that he can be labeled and controlled. Of course, Harvey resists visible embodiment, to their continual frustration.

By the midway point of the play, Veta has accepted the reality of Harvey's presence as a physical being instead of merely a figment of Elwood's imagination, despite the fact that she cannot see Harvey herself (though she admits that she once saw Harvey, briefly, in her kitchen, though at her request she never saw him again). Rather than relief for her brother, however, Veta sees Harvey's reality as a detriment, as it means that Elwood cannot be cured. "He can't be helped," she tells Judge Gaffney, "There is no help for him" (Chase 45). Her language admits Harvey's reality when she is questioned by Dr. Chumley, responding to his question "He does talk to the rabbit, you say?" with an acknowledgement of Harvey's own agency in Elwood's two-sided conversations: "They tell each other everything" (Chase 45).

Due to her acceptance of Harvey's reality and physicality, Veta constantly falls into the trap of expecting Harvey's visibility, when he does not actually reveal himself visually to her during the course of the play. At one point, entering the sanitarium, Veta "*Looks around cautiously. Sighs with relief*" and says, "Good. Nobody here but people" (Chase 59), as though

she would have been able to see Harvey. Later, when Dr. Chumley attempts to trick Elwood into revealing his location over the phone, Veta again falls into the trap of assuming she would be able to see Harvey if he were present:

VETA: *(covers phone)* He won't say where he is. He wants to know if Harvey is here.

CHUMLEY: Tell him Harvey *is* here.

VETA: But he isn't. (Chase 44).

Veta's most telling moment of acknowledging Harvey's reality, despite confusion over his visibility, occurs when she persuades the doctors to give Elwood a formula that will, presumably, prevent Elwood from seeing Harvey. "if you give him the formula and Elwood doesn't see Harvey, he won't let him in," she tells Dr. Chumley. "Then when he comes to the door, I'll deal with him" (Chase 60). When Elwood is no longer able to see Harvey, he will essentially become exactly like other people, but it won't mean that Harvey is no longer real. Harvey will retain his physicality despite being made forcibly invisible to Elwood, whereas typically Harvey is invisible of his own volition.

Harvey is physically present despite being visibly absent, in contradiction to the typical expectations of absent characters, who are counted absent do to their visual and physical absence. For this reason, when speaking about absence, visibility and physicality are often considered to be more or less the same; but for Harvey, his physicality as a character exists in spite of his invisibility, and in fact in spite of the lack of a physical actor to play him. That said, the stage directions intimate that a great deal of physicality should be used to indicate his presence. At the end of Act I, Dr. Chumley runs locks the doors to both the clinic (door L) and his private office (door R). At this point, Harvey arrives:

*Then from door L. comes the rattle of the door-knob. Door opens and shuts, and we hear locks opening and closing, and see light from hall on stage. The invisible Harvey has come in. There is a count of eight while he crosses the stage, then door of CHUMLEY's office opens and closes, with sound of locks clicking. Harvey has gone in (Chase 56).*

This is the first moment in the play where we have direct proof, onstage, of Harvey's reality, although the actions and words of a number of characters have hinted at it so far in the play. This moment of proof, however, occurs due to the physical movement of doors opening and closing. Harvey's physicality makes him an aggressively present character despite his invisibility.

Harvey's presence in the play, however, goes beyond mere physicality, as he also has a non-physical control over the physical world. Now only does he control who can and cannot see him, he can also, as demonstrated in the previous quote, influence physical objects that he shouldn't be able to—for example, unlocking a door (locked from the inside) from the outside. Initially, the audience's only impression of Harvey's powers was concerned with his visibility, or voluntary lack thereof. Near the end of the play, however, Elwood reveals that Harvey's powers go far beyond visibility and a control over physical objects. Chumley asks if it's true that Harvey can see the future, to which Elwood casually responds "Gets advance notice? I'm happy to say it is. Harvey is versatile. Harvey can stop clocks" (Chase 62), going on to explain that Harvey can stop time, and even travel through space without time moving an instant. In a word, Harvey has godlike powers: "Einstein has overcome time and space. Harvey has overcome not only time and space—but any objections" (Chase 62). Elwood's nonchalance to Harvey's powers must be as astonishing to the audience as it is to Dr. Chumley, who struggles to understand the implications of this supernatural ability, which thus far has been as invisible as Harvey's physical person. "Fly-specks," he says, "I've been spending my life among fly-specks while miracles have been leaning on lamp-posts on 18<sup>th</sup> and Fairfax" (Chase 59). The stage directions indicate that as he says this line he tries the lock on his office door, which Harvey has recently broken, presumably to test Harvey's ability to miraculously control the physical objects around him. Harvey's powers, to Dr. Chumley and to the audience, are explained only in the final act of the play, and



with very little ceremony. Their presence can seem abrupt, even jarring, and yet the nonchalance with which Elwood, the only character to understand Harvey's powers, treats them, is central to the main theme of the play.

Elwood explains that "If Harvey happens to take a liking to people he expresses himself quite definitely. If he's not particularly interested, he sits there like an empty chair or an empty space on the floor. Harvey takes his time making his mind up about people. Choosey, you see" (Chase 28). At this point in the play the quote seems mainly humorous, as most people presented with Harvey assume that the chair or space of the floor truly is empty, and that Harvey exists only in Elwood's mind's eye. However, once we learn that Harvey is real and physically present, we understand that Harvey's choosiness is central to his friendship with Elwood, who is welcoming and kind to absolutely everyone. Elwood says that "if Harvey has said to me once he has said a million times—"Mr. Dowd, I would do anything for you"" (Chase 28), and he tells Dr. Chumley that Harvey has offered to use his powers over time and space at Elwood's request at any time, but that so far he has not desired to take Harvey up on the offer (Chase 62). Harvey's friendship with Elwood, in light of this information, is likely due to the fact that, although Harvey is both strange (particularly in his physical appearance, to which Veta strongly objects) and extraordinary (in terms of his magical powers, which Dr. Chumley indicates he would like to exploit), Elwood treats him very simply as a friend, not a freak or a tool. Harvey's invisibility, when seen in light of his friendship with Elwood as the focal point of the play's plot, then becomes extraordinarily important in terms of thematic connotation.

Harvey, as a literally invisible character, stands in for the figuratively invisible people in Mary Chase's society. Mary Chase wrote *Harvey* in 1944, near the end of the second World War. No mention is made of WWII during the play, but the social climate of mid-century

America is almost stifling. During this period patriotism often took the form of over-emphasizing supposedly “American” values, mainly those of the white, Christian, patriarchal home structure. Harvey, as an invisible stage presence accepted only by the man who is considered strange for accepting absolutely everybody, stands in for those groups that are looked down upon or made invisible by the prevailing cultural narrative of the time. Most obviously he represents immigrants, being a transplanted Pooka (a mythical creature native to Ireland), but he also represents women, as throughout the course of the play we repeatedly see moments of sexism that Chase, as a woman, placed there intentionally, and which are by the end of the play mainly refuted.

Veta, in particular, is portrayed as a victim of a patriarchal structure. Her parents left everything to her brother, Elwood, although Elwood is incompetent and unable to manage the house financials—freely admitting to others that he leaves all of the managerial work of the family to Veta: “She always does all the signing and managing for the family. She’s good at it” (23). While Elwood freely admits Veta’s managerial superiority, this is due to the fact that he is the only character in the play who appears open-minded to lifestyles alternative to the prevalent culture, and he is presumed insane for it. Judge Gaffney woefully remarks on Elwood’s tolerant nature, telling Myrtle “I used to admire it. I should have been suspicious. Take your average man looking up and seeing a big white rabbit. He’d do something about it. But not Elwood. He took that calmly, too. And look where it got him!” (Chase 36). Dr. Chumley becomes so convinced of Elwood’s insanity that he considers him a psychopathic case, potentially dangerous. And yet Elwood’s only crime has been in welcoming a peculiar stranger into his life and home, a stranger who has as of yet done nothing but provide him with companionship. The allegory for

marginalized groups, made invisible by the social doctrine, looms ominously, particularly given the rising momentum for the Red and Lavender Scares that would take place in the 1950s.

Chase's focus on these marginalized invisibles, although open to the inclusion of various groups, focuses on women, particularly Veta. When listening to her description of Elwood, the psychiatrist, Dr. Sanderson, becomes convinced that it is Veta, not her brother, who must be seeing hallucinations, and has her locked up and "treated" in the sanitarium against her will. The psychiatrists only realize that Elwood is the one who sees an enormous rabbit when they receive confirmation of that fact from Judge Gaffney, a male character with power in the community. The only character in the sanitarium to believe Veta instead of instantly siding with her brother is Nurse Kelly, another woman, who took Veta's claims at face value. The stage directions in particular indicate that the actions of the male psychiatrists are intended as blatantly sexist: when Dr. Chumley meets Myrtle Mae, the stage directions instruct that he greets her while "*Giving her the careful scrutiny he gives all women*" (Chase 41). When Veta is finally freed from the sanitarium, after having been stripped naked, forced into water therapy, and otherwise personally invaded without her consent, she is then interrogated by Judge Gaffney and her daughter. Myrtle asks "What did you say? What did you do? You must have done something" (Chase 37), implying that Veta is to blame for her poor treatment, and Judge Gaffney is more indignant that Veta's call to him was "hysterical" (Chase 34) and caused him to leave a game at his gentleman's club than that she was assaulted. Due to this annoyance and his trust in the male psychiatrists, he is reluctant to sue the sanitarium as Veta requests. Veta's response to them is thus entirely understandable: "They're not interested in men at places like that" (Chase 39), she says, and retreats to her bed. The whole world, in this moment, appears to be against her, as no one seems willing to fight for her. Although Veta is herself guilty of enforcing the societal status

quo in her condemnation of Elwood's kindness to Harvey, whom she resents as an intrusion of unfashionable strangeness into her life, that doesn't prevent her from also being a victim of rigid social norms. Harvey, as an invisible character, represents women like Veta.

In considering Veta's victimhood, as symptomatic of the treatment of women in mid-century America, it is useful to re-visit Elwood's line about Harvey's choosiness in who he reveals himself to: "If Harvey happens to take a liking to people he expresses himself quite definitely. If he's not particularly interested, he sits there like an empty chair or an empty space on the floor" (Chase 28). Harvey, we find out, has revealed himself to Veta: "Every once in a while I see that big white rabbit myself" (Chase 15), Veta confesses to Dr. Sanderson. Although Veta fears and hates Harvey, Harvey shows himself to her—perhaps because they are both representatives of social outcasts.

Harvey's invisibility makes him a representative of figurative invisible members of society, but it is also something over which he can exercise total control. He reveals himself only to those he wishes to see him, and in fact he is revealed to have complete power over time and space. While invisible, he is fundamentally physical. Almost in direct opposition, Father in Brian Friel's *Aristocrats* has almost no control over his visibility, as he is shut away in his room upstairs. Like Harvey, he is a fundamentally physical character, but his physicality—namely his physical weakness, which confines him to his room—is what makes him "invisible," as for the majority of the play he is heard over the baby-monitor but does not actually appear onstage, whereas Harvey is invisible even when he is onstage. Father's invisibility turns him into a kind of ghost, unconfined by the limitations of physical embodiment on the stage. His useless body is instead relegated to an offstage area so that attention can be focused on the source of his power: his disembodied voice.

Father is mainly important as a character visually absent but with an auditory presence, as his speech impacts the characters onstage while his physical and visible body does not, but there is one great moment in which he subverts this established nature of his character. At the end of the second act, Father actually appears onstage:

*FATHER enters the study. An emaciated man; eyes distraught; one arm limp; his mouth pulled down at one corner. A grotesque and frightening figure. He is dressed only in pyjamas. The tops are buttoned wrongly and hang off his shoulders; the bottoms about to slip off his waist. He moves very slowly—one step at a time—through the study. He is trying to locate where Anna's voice is coming from—his distraught eyes are rolling round the room. When he speaks his voice is barely audible (Friel 304).*

Father's entrance, near the end of the play, is shocking in the extreme. By this point, at the end of the second act, the audience has accepted that Father is an exclusively offstage and invisible character, who communicates solely through the baby-monitor, and whose illness is called into question by his ability to transcend time when his voice regains the tenor and power of his younger years. At this moment, however, it is as though his powers have switched: he is visible, but nearly inaudible, and his physical presence is emaciated to the point of horror.

From this point, Father's physicality grows only more frightening. Drawn by a recording of his youngest daughter, an African missionary who sent the family a recording of herself, he shambles into the room calling her name, his voice growing ever-louder. The result is a cacophony of hellish noise, and the paradox of Father having both visible and auditory presence, when thus far we have believed him only capable of one or the other, proves too much for the character, resulting in his death:

*FATHER's roar stops. Saliva is dribbling from his mouth. He begins to sink to the ground. EAMON, who is furthest away from him, is the first to move. He runs to FATHER and catches him as he collapses so that they both sink to the ground together. Now the tape is silenced (Friel 304-305).*

Father's heart attack occurs in a powerful moment, when he "*emits an almost animal roar*" (Friel 304) of his daughter's name, and simultaneously the tape's volume is accidentally turned up, "*so that the tape's scream and FATHER's roar overlap for a few seconds*" (Friel 304). Father, who has thus far existed in a world where he is allowed audible presence but visible absence, dies in the moment when his visible physicality, utterly incongruous with the menacing strength of his voice as it appeared over the baby-monitor, literally shatters the illusion that his voice had held over his entire family. His children, in fact, are rendered powerless when they see the emaciated figure their father has become: they "*seem to be incapable of action. CASIMIR is on his knees, transfixed, immobile*" (Friel 304). Only Eamon, the only person in the room who did not grow up under Father's rigid thumb, is able to spring to action in time to catch Father before he fell, signaling the enormous power that Father's voice had held over them and just how his sudden visibility has shattered the family. Father is meant to be an invisible character, and his sudden visibility, which implies and indeed brings about his mortality, also causes the collapse of the family. They are in the moment of his death impotent and unable to help, and after his death, in the final act, they find that without his pension they are unable to maintain the family home. Father's illusion of power and grandeur was the only thing keeping the household together, and with his death, despite the fact that he has been physically and physically absent for the entirety of the play until the very moment of his death, the whole thing falls apart. The illusion of grandeur, which blinded the family to the decrepit nature of the house, also dies when Father's real visible body shatters his illusion of strength. Father took power from his invisibility and his physical absence, so appearing in his diminished physicality destroyed the illusion and robbed him of whatever power he possessed.

Father's moment of visibility not only breaks the established "rules" within the world of Friel's play—that is, that Father is a powerful and invisible character—but also breaks the established "rules" of drama, which stretch back to ancient Greek theatre. William Gruber writes that, in order to achieve verisimilitude, a play must avoid those things that "cannot occur in action," namely:

certain objects are too unyieldingly "real" or "raw" for the stage (a functioning clock on the wall is a famous example), while some actions, if they are simulated (such as an actor's pretending to die), are too overtly "theatrical." According to Racine, these latter elements of any theatrical representation (e.g. the passage of extended lengths of time, deaths, or events that might be considered either marvelous or fantastic) are to be assigned to the offstage, whence they can be made accessible by means of linguistic report (Gruber 4).

Admittedly, this view is decidedly neoclassical (Gruber 5), whereas *Aristocrats*, first performed in March of 1979, has the advantage of coming near the end of the modernist period of playwriting and on the cusp of post-modernist drama. Friel was thus very familiar with drama that experimented in breaking Aristotelian and neoclassical rules, and yet *Aristocrats* is in many respects an extremely conventional, even 19<sup>th</sup>-century-style play, with the great exception of this moment onstage in which Father loudly and provocatively gives himself a heart attack. Friel is intentionally breaking this rule of what should and shouldn't be shown onstage, in an attention-grabbing a manner as possible in order to highlight the thematic consequences of both Father's death and his sudden visibility, when Friel has chosen to keep him invisible throughout the majority of the play.

Father's lack of physical presence provides a particularly powerful contradiction, as it serves both as the source of his present power and the indication of his impending lack of power.

In discussions of power, it is conventionally the case that those with power are said to be "represented" whereas those without power are "without representation." It may therefore seem contradictory to discover that the scriptures systematically ensure that the

Omnipotent will be materially unrepresented and that the comparatively powerless humanity will be materially represented by their own deep embodiment (Scarry 207).

Friel's representation of Father, although it makes use of the power afforded to a disembodied character, modifies the absolute nature of Scarry's hypothesis. Rather, Friel understands that power is based upon perception and belief: so long as an audience believes a character to be powerful, he is, and once they cease to believe it, the power is lost. Father makes use of the God-like power of seeming omnipotence due to his lack of a visible body. Functioning more as a ghost than as a person, he is given absolute freedom as to when and where he intrudes upon the embodied action onstage. Like a god, his voice commands and influences the physical creatures below him. However, Friel also understands that the audience will associate a lack of visible representation with powerlessness, and Father's absence becomes a way for Friel to intimate the dying power of the quasi-apocryphal "Catholic aristocracy" that Father insists upon representing. Father is not truly a ghost or a god, free to move without the limitations of physical embodiment, because he is attached to a body that is physically trapped in an upstairs bedroom. Although his voice can move freely about the house via the baby monitor, Father himself can no longer influence anyone outside of the house. Indeed, his power is weakest over Tom, who has only been a guest in the house wherein Father is confined for a short while. Father's physical absence is not the same as physical disembodiment, because he is trapped within a body, just one that has not been allowed onstage. Although through vocal power Father can invade the stage space, Father's entrapment in a decaying physical body and that body's entrapment in a single room demonstrate his utter powerlessness as a man. Although as an idea Father carries great weight, in physical reality he and everything he stands for is dying.

The local characters in *Aristocrats* are repeatedly careful to never physically describe Father, as if terrified to shatter the illusion his voice maintains. The closest they come is when



Eamon ruminates on the potential visible power in the baby monitor: “I suppose baby-alarm has an aptness in the circumstance. But there’s another word—what’s the name I’m looking for?—what do you call the peep-hole in a prison door? Judas hole! That’s it. Would that be more appropriate? But then we’d have to decide who’s spying on who, wouldn’t we?” (Friel 279). A spy hole is of course a visual method of interference, whereas Father’s baby monitor allows him to interfere via auditory means. However, Eamon’s statement draws attention to the very visual illusion that Father’s voice creates about the grandeur of the house and family, and calls into question Father’s appearance of power. While Father appears to be fabricating a grand illusion with his voice, the baby monitor also reveals the cracks in that illusion when Father’s frailty occasionally shines through.

Ultimately, illusion is the root of Father’s presence throughout the majority of the play. Although he is not visually present, his voice prompts an illusion that manifests visually in the imagination. The introduction to the collected works of Brian Friel in which this play appears ruminates on the many disembodied voices to be found in Friel’s plays:

The voice of power tells one kind of fiction—the lie. It has the purpose of preserving its own interests. The voice of powerlessness tells another kind of fiction—the illusion. It has the purpose of pretending that its own interests have been preserved. The contrast between the two becomes unavoidable in moments of crisis. (Friel 18).

While Father appears to be the voice of power, he is revealed to actually be the voice of an illusion, and therefore powerlessness. While within the illusion Father’s vocal manifestation gives him total power over the fellow inhabitants of the illusion—the family members that he reared to cower under his thumb—the play reveals that in the country at large Father is a powerless relic whose iron-fisted hold over the illusion of his family’s grandeur is the only place he has any kind of power whatsoever, as revealed in the moment of crisis where Father finally lurches onto the stage.

In truth, Father and the house he inhabits—and in many senses embodies—share the same flaw. When things are kept under a vocal or sonic illusion, such as by Father’s powerful voice from the past and Casimir’s embellished tales, everything seems grand and permanent; but when these elements are granted visibility and brought out into the light, everything falls apart. Father is an invisible character precisely because the grand Catholic aristocracy he represents was never truly a power in Ireland during the time period Father claims, and it exists mainly in the cultural imagination but does not hold up to historical scrutiny. When he makes his emaciated physicality suddenly visible, it takes all of the power out of his romanticized person. Likewise, when the family is forced to examine the house upon Father’s death, they realize that it is no mansion but in fact is barely even standing. In *Aristocrats*, invisibility, although unwilling, gives Father power over how he is perceived, allowing him to seem grander and more powerful than he actually is. By contrast, Harvey’s invisibility allows others to question him; it is only when he allows Vera and Dr. Chumley to see him that they believe in his existence.

One of the main differences between Harvey’s and Father’s relative invisibilities is connected to their agency over their invisibility. Although invisibility grants the both of them power, Harvey has a choice as to when and how that invisibility manifests and is lifted. Father, by contrast, is invisible because he is physically unable to leave his room—he is only physically able to come downstairs when prompted by an external voice, his missing daughter’s voice, which serves as a kind of command override for his failing body. The disparity between the agency of these two characters over their invisibility is inversely correlated with their social power. Harvey, who has no social power, being a complete outsider to the town, an object of ridicule, and a representative of marginalized groups (particularly women), incredibly has complete power over his visibility. Father, on the other hand, is the character in the play with the

most social power, due to both his class status and his position as patriarch of his aristocratic family, and yet his invisibility is a circumstance forced upon him by cruel reality. In fact, the power these characters hold over their invisibility could be described in terms of their power over reality: Harvey is able to overwrite reality, whereas reality overwrites Father's entire sense of himself as a powerful man.

The connection between invisibility and social power becomes heightened in these characters when we consider the difference between actual and perceived power. Harvey is initially perceived to have no power due to his invisibility and the fact that he represents marginalized groups, but by the end of the play it is revealed that he can control time and space at whim, making him easily the most powerful character in the play. Father, although as the patriarch of an "aristocratic" Irish Catholic "big house" family, is in fact both physically and practically powerless. His power lies in the imagination of his family members and the villagers, who ascribe a power to his title without considering his lack of actual political or monetary power. As Eamon points out, "Don't you know that all that is fawning and forelock-touching and Paddy and shabby and greasy peasant in the Irish character finds a house like this irresistible? That's why we were ideal for colonizing. Something in us needs this... aspiration" (Friel 318-319). Although through the course of the play the family admits that they have no actual money, despite the initial appearance of the family mansion (now crumbling and more expensive to keep than it's worth), and that even in the family's fabled glory days their Catholicism prevented them from having any real political or social power among the Protestant upper classes, it takes Father's physical appearance at the end of Act Two to solidify the fact that the family's façade is just that—a façade, with nothing of reality behind it.

## Chapter 2: Voice and Auditory Presence

One of the most crucial features of diegetic or offstage space in the theater is the role the audience plays in its construction. Hanna Scolnicov writes that “the theatrical space without extends as far as the playwright wills it to, thus demanding an imaginative response on the part of the spectators” (Scolnicov 14). It is this aspect of diegetic space that is most powerful in the two plays examined in this paper. While in a novel, all spaces and characters are described verbally and then imagined by the “spectator,” the reader, in a play all elements are typically visual; thus the choice to make any particular character both invisible and integral to the drama is an impressive invitation to the audience in two ways. Invoking an invisibility allows the audience members to become contributors in the drama, which by its very nature is a much more collaborative enterprise than other forms of literature, but does not usually allow the audience to become one of the authors of the play. Invisibility, however, prompts audience members to create their own mental vision of a character, designing them much like a playwright or costume designer, and insert them into the play.

This chapter focuses on the verbal manifestations of and construction of absent space and character. In so doing I will focus on the dialogue of onstage characters defining the offstage or absent, the dialogue off the offstage Father in *Aristocrats*, and the communicative, if non-verbal, qualities of the Harvey in Mary Chase’s play of the same name. These two late modern plays innovate the convention of absent characters by making them present and active in the drama of the play in its entirety, rather than performing as ghosts in a single scene or as characters whose absence prevents them from interacting with their onstage, visible counterparts. Father and Harvey, by contrast, interact in a very literal sense with the visible characters in their respective

plays, and in so doing become active agents of their own representation rather than allowing their existence to rely upon the interpretation of onstage characters.

A particular feature of the absent character in drama is the dependence that character has upon the more traditionally “present” onstage characters. In order for an audience member to understand the existence of an unseen or offstage character, the present onstage characters must mention them, thus verbally conjuring them into being. This utter dependence upon onstage characters to define and facilitate the knowledge of their absent or invisible counterparts seems to imply that the onstage characters have power over the offstage characters, as they then control the narrative through which the offstage characters are made real. However, in both *Harvey* and *Aristocrats*, that expected power dynamic is flipped.

The opening scene of *Harvey* features neither the titular Harvey nor his main advocate, Elwood P. Dowd. Instead, it shows Elwood’s sister Veta and her daughter Myrtle Mae hosting a party while Elwood is out. Although Elwood and Harvey are not present, Veta and Myrtle are irresistibly drawn to mentioning them. Elwood’s insistence upon keeping Harvey’s company has so dominated their lives that they cannot help but dwell upon it even in one of their rare moments of freedom from his influence. “The only reason we can even have a party this afternoon is because Uncle Elwood is playing pinochle at the Fourth Avenue Firehouse. Thank God for the firehouse!” (Chase 3), Myrtle Mae moans to her mother. The influence Elwood’s friendship with Harvey has over their entire family dynamic, and Myrtle Mae’s ability to socialize in polite society, is so enormous that they must plan all of their social events around Elwood and Harvey’s absence. Although Harvey, as an invisible and inaudible presence, must be described by characters like Veta and Myrtle Mae in order to become present in the minds of the audience,

they make it clear from the beginning that Harvey's presence in their lives makes them powerless, an inversion of the expected power dynamic.

When Veta and Myrtle mention Harvey, which inevitably occurs immediately after the first mention of Elwood (as Harvey always, inevitably, follows along after Elwood in the action of the play), it has the effect of an incantation:

VETA. Now when the members come in here and you make your little welcome speech on behalf of your grandmother—be sure to do this. (*Gestures toward portraits on mantle.*)

MYRTLE. (*In fine disgust—business with flowers.*) And then after that, I mention my Uncle Elwood and say a few words about his pal Harvey. Damn Harvey! (*In front of the table, as she squats.*)

VETA. (*The effect on her is electric. She runs over and closes doors. Crosses behind table to c.*) Myrtle Mae—that's right! Let everybody in the Wednesday Forum hear you. You said that name. You promised you wouldn't say that name and you said it (Chase 3).

Veta's fear in this moment is tangible. She runs over and closes the doors to ensure that the party-goers in the next room cannot overhear any talk of Harvey. Strikingly, the effect is also one of barricading: not only does she confine Myrtle Mae's talk of Harvey to the room, but in shutting the door so defensively that she also gives the appearance of wanting to keep Harvey out. The gesture invokes the idea that Harvey is a malevolent spirit that can be summoned merely by speaking his name. Her dialogue reinforces this impression, particularly with the repetition of the phrase "that name." Even in talking about Harvey's name, she cannot actually say the name "Harvey" out loud, as if she knows that to define an absent or invisible presence is to allow the audience to imagine it into being. Although Veta has the power to incarnate Harvey through speaking of him, in this scene she sees it as a burden. Harvey is not defined, classified, and thereby caged by the language of visible and audible characters, as might be expected—instead, the power of the language surrounding Harvey cages them, restricting what they feel they may and may not freely say. Harvey is not confined by language, but liberated by it.

The introduction to Father in *Aristocrats* is similarly undertaken by invoking Father's offstage character through the dialogue and action of his onstage counterparts. However, despite that fact, much more weight is given to Father's voice. The very first action of the play, delivered via the stage directions, occurs when Willie installs the baby-monitor, or the vehicle through which Father speaks and thus impacts the world onstage from his position in an offstage space: "*Inside the door leading out to the hall is WILLIE DIVER. He is in his mid-thirties and is from the village. He is standing on a chair and attaching a small speaker to the door frame (he is standing on his jacket to protect the seat of the chair)*" (Friel 253). Although it will take a few lines of dialogue for the audience to understand that the baby-monitor is the portal to Father, it is immediately apparent from Willie's attitude toward the installation that he holds great respect for this house and its residents: although the room is described as dilapidated and with furniture in disrepair, Willie protects the furnishings as much as he can by standing on his own jacket rather than directly upon the seat of the chair. Willie's familiarity with the house and its inhabitants, established within the following scene, indicates that this care he takes is not that of a cautious visitor or handyman but rather the care of someone who reveres and even fears the owner of the property he is protecting.

The first auditory reference to Father occurs on the first page of the play, from Tom, who as an outsider can be trusted to comment without bias upon the inhabitants of Ballybeg House. Tom refers to Father as "the District Judge" (Friel 253) rather than as "Judith's father" or "the head of the household" or any other such domestic name for the long-retired patriarch, now bedbound and senile. This choice, reinforced by Willie, who also adheres to use of this title, implies that Father *is* his former career; that more than anything else it shapes his identity—and, in so doing, the audience's impression of his absent character.

Typically, those who speak and those who are present are conceived to have power; however, in both *Harvey* and *Aristocrats*, the very absence of the offstage characters is what gives them their power. William Gruber notes that:

In a number of recent discussions of political and social power as they are made manifest in the theatrical performances of ancient Greece and Rome, it is frequently assumed that those characters who are represented onstage and endowed with the opportunity to speak are thereby “empowered,” while those who do not speak, or those who are given limited exposure or are excluded entirely from the stage picture, are assumed as a consequence of their absence or silence to lack power or in some way to be disenfranchised (Gruber, 145).

Harvey, who never speaks audibly (such that the audience can hear and recognize his speech), could easily be conceived as un-empowered or disenfranchised character. However, Harvey as a character is not powerless—indeed, he is perhaps the most powerful character in the play, able to enact his will whenever and upon whoever he wishes. His silence, rather than stripping him of power, actually increase his power, because the “normal,” societally visible characters are unable to track his movements or action.

That said, Harvey is intended to be a representative of disenfranchised groups, and the audience’s and other character’s initial assumption of his powerlessness (due to his visible and vocal absence) highlights that fact. Mary Chase, as a female writer operating in the 1950s, is certainly cognizant of the fact that women’s voices were not taken as seriously as those of men, and for most of the play Harvey is not taken seriously by characters other than Elwood—in fact, they literally cannot hear him and assume he is imagined. The main plot of the play revolves around Veta’s attempts to have Elwood committed to a psychiatric institution and injected with an experimental serum that would supposedly prevent him from being able to see or hear Harvey ever again; Veta’s ultimate change of heart and grudgingly sincere acceptance of Harvey at the end of the play symbolizes the triumph of tolerance over narrow-mindedness, the implication



being that, so long as no harm is being committed, people should accept eccentricities and differences in one another. The play's ending indicates that Elwood's ability to hear Harvey's voice is due to the fact that Elwood is the only one truly *listening*. However, due to the wartime environment and the red scare soon to erupt, Harvey is likely to represent not merely eccentrics but a number of truly marginalized groups—the mentally ill, racial minorities, communists, or merely anyone existing outside of accepted societal norms. This reading gains weight when one considers that the characters who dismiss Harvey are concerned to the point of comedy about mundane aspects of society life, whereas Elwood, who socializes with the fringe members of society, is able to see Harvey for a companion rather than merely an oddity to be overlooked.

However, Harvey is not merely *saved* by Elwood's tolerance; instead, he wields enormous power throughout the play. Chase's decision to make Harvey a character both visually and vocally absent, and therefore assumed at the beginning of the play to have no power, makes his actual magical powers all the more amazing. Dr. Chumley, a psychiatrist who initially dismisses Harvey as a psychosis that will vanish once Elwood is given the appropriate drugs, is by the end of the play so in awe of Harvey's abilities that he begs to make use of them. Harvey's very real power in the play, given his representational status as a stand-in for mistreated groups, is a powerful statement on the value of diverse members of society, who, Chase implies, have value for their communities beyond the mere fact of their diversity.

Harvey's magical powers, which (beyond his invisibility) are only detailed near the end of the play, are deliberately vague and undefined. Elwood says that Harvey has power over time and space, but doesn't elaborate much beyond his ability to "stop clocks" and go to wherever he pleases while time stands still. Chase's decision to reveal Harvey's magical powers near the end of the play, and leave them largely undefined and uncontained, invokes the potential in minority

and underserved communities. While women, the poor, and ethnic minorities are portrayed as invisible or useless in society, they will effect no positive impact on society at large. However, if they are acknowledged and given equitable treatment, their potential is boundless, having never before been tested in American society. Harvey's power is completely at the service of Elwood, his friend, because Elwood treats him like an equal person: "Mr. Dowd, I would do anything for you" (Chase 28), Harvey is reported to have said. This offer is not extended to the populace at large, who fail to see Harvey due to their own narrow-mindedness. Chase here is making a statement about the potential for social advancement and progress with the inclusion of the socially marginalized, whose potential contributions to the social project can only be accessed if they are seen and heard.

Unlike Harvey, Father in *Aristocrats* is not a silent absence, as the onstage characters and the audience can hear his voice over the baby-monitor. The monitor serves as a portal between Father's diegetic world offstage and the main action of the play. Friel makes explicit use of this audible but invisible character to present the audience with a paradox of power: Father's voice gives him power over others, even though it at times reveals his physical weakness.

Although Father is frail and bedbound, his first words through the monitor are incredibly powerful, and have an exhilarating effect upon Willie—who has already shown himself to have a reverence for the house and its occupants.

*(Father's voice suddenly very loud and very authoritative.)*

FATHER: Are you proposing that my time and the time of this court be squandered while the accused goes home and searches for this title which he claims he has in a tin-box somewhere?

*(WILLIE is startled and delighted.)*

WILLIE: Himself by Jaysus!" (Friel 258).

Father's first words over the monitor are loud, authoritative, and sudden. They rejuvenate Willie, who until now has been the calmest of all the characters. Father's voice, however, sends him into

a boyish excitement—appropriate, considering that Father’s prime years, the ones in which he would have been speaking these sorts of powerful lines while presiding over the District Court, would have occurred during Willie’s boyhood. However, this line comes as a shock to the audience, who unlike Willie have already heard Father’s labored breathing over the monitor. Because Father has never yet appeared visibly in front of the audience, their imagined image of him as a frail old man has just been challenged. While contemporary audience members will of course quickly recognize that Father’s confusion about time is a symptom of dementia, the fact that he remains unseen lends a level of uncertainty to the extent to which we can completely dismiss him, particularly given the effect his outbursts have upon his progeny.

Willie and Tom, prompted by these first words from Father, discuss his past self and give the audience further imagery to add to their mental picture of the elderly patriarch:

WILLIE: D’you hear that for a voice, eh? By Jaysus, isn’t he a powerful fighting aul’ man all this time, eh?

TOM: Would you believe it! I’ve been here four days and I’ve never seen him yet.

WILLIE: Sure he hasn’t been down the stairs since the stroke felled him. But before that—haul’ your tongue, man—oh be Jaysus he was a sight to behold—oh be Jaysus!

The preponderance of exclamations in Willie’s dialogue here says almost more than his actual words do, given that his conversation with Tom before Father’s voice came over the monitor had been so calm and measured. Tom’s line, however, is particularly intriguing. He jumps from the sound of Father’s voice to wondering about actually seeing Father in person, as both he and the audience have yet to do. This is particularly important to consider in light of the fact that Tom was alone when Father’s labored breathing and Judith’s nursing comments came over the monitor earlier. Tom has now heard both Father the invalid and Father the incarnation of past vigor, whereas Willie has only heard the latter, and of course remembers Father as a once powerful figure. The audience is invited to share Tom’s position: we imagine, in response to

labored breathing and Judith's nursing, a frail and weak invalid, when all of a sudden we are presented with the voice of a powerful authoritarian, and our mental image of Father, lacking any physical descriptors or visual indicators, morphs to reflect the physically powerful man he once was. Due to the fact that Father remains heard but not seen for the first act of the play, confined as he is to an offstage room, his crazed outbursts are not merely symptomatic of tragic dementia. Instead, due to the effect they produce upon his progeny, Father's vocalizations have the effect of producing small moments of time travel: they transport the onstage characters back to a time in their childhood, just as Father is, in his mind, reliving those days.

The power Father still wields despite his invalidity is evident in Willie's defensive urge to reinforce a past image of the District Judge. The use of the word "Sure" as a prefix to an acknowledgement of Father's stroke and subsequent immobility functions not only as one of the "Irishisms" typical to Donegal natives and Friel's dramaturgy, but also as a diminutive, lessening the severity and importance of the following statement (concerning the stroke). Furthermore, the choice of vocabulary specifically elevates Father's former station: any man can be injured or incapacitated by a stroke, but the word "felled" implies that Father is being likened to a giant, or a sturdy old oak tree.

The characterization of absent figures through onstage dialogue is given a twist in *Harvey* when Elwood provides just this sort of narrative dialogue to, rather than about, the absent figure, which grants said absence much more personal agency. Unlike a soliloquy directed to an unhearing offstage (even dead) character, Elwood speaks directly to a presumably "onstage" and actively listening character when he addresses the invisible and inaudible Harvey. The stage directions indicate that Elwood speaks "*To invisible person*" when he utters his first line: "Excuse me a moment. I have to answer the phone. Make yourself comfortable, Harvey" (Chase

4). His voice, then, conjures up Harvey's presence, just as the dialogue between Willie and Tom in *Aristocrats* conjures up the upstairs and past presence of Father. However, Harvey's presence actually occupies the onstage space. Harvey's first presentation in the play, through the dialogue between Veta and Myrtle, is standard for an absent character, and the introduction sets the audience up to expect an offstage and essentially unreal presence. However, having Elwood actually speak to Harvey, rather than just telling other characters about him, allows Harvey to interact directly with the action of the play, unlike the perpetually offstage and hands-off Godot. Harvey, although visually and vocally absent, is when addressed given space to occupy onstage. He is a diegetic character invading the mimetic space of the play, just as Father's voice travels from his offstage abode to impact the characters onstage.

The use of other characters to describe an absent figure isn't particularly unusual for mid-century plays. Safi Mahfouz writes that postmodern dramatists use "indirect characterization" to illustrate an offstage creation: "The onstage characters frequently keep mentioning such absent characters and talk about their predicament in details thus bringing them back to life from their graves and hiding places" (Mahfouz 396). She also points out that this "decentering" of the narrative is key to postmodern ideas of drama. What is so intriguing about the examples in *Harvey* and *Aristocrats*, however, is what the characters do not mention. For *Harvey* in particular, the interest that is generated in the minds of the audience for Harvey as a character occurs due to Veta's superstitious refusal to talk about him, and the fact that we are fed only scraps of information about him, quickly hushed, until Elwood's arrival.

By contrast, in *Aristocrats* Willie Diver seems happy to discuss Father, but only in terms of his power and grandeur in the past. Willie and the other characters are more hesitant to comment upon the realities of Father's present invalid state. Furthermore, later in the play we

hear descriptions of Father through his profession and his social persona, namely his reputation in the village, but the characters consistently avoid talking about his domestic personality, often deliberately thwarting Tom's attempts to discover it. The deliberate absence of information about Father's domestic side magnifies its importance in relation to the action of the play, drawing attention to it which is fulfilled when Casimir finally gives in to pressure and describes a rare scene of Father's actual fatherhood: Father says "If you were born down there you would have been the village idiot. But because you were born up here, we can absorb you" (Friel 267). This statement haunts Casimir for the rest of his life, completely dominating his self-image and self-worth—and yet it leaves the audience wanting. The statement could be that of an abusive extension of Father's merciless District Judge persona, or that a clumsy father who truly wants the best for his son, but unlike in the courtroom, finds his rhetorical skill entirely unequal to the task of family matters. Certainly, his outbursts over the baby monitor jump from the feeble mumblings of an invalid to the sharp condemnation of a judge with nothing in between. The ambiguity forces readers and audiences to hunt in the rest of the conspicuous absences in dialogue around home life with Father. The fact that so few family members seem to have happy memories of their childhood in Ballybeg after their mother's death implies the former interpretation, but there remains room for complexity.

It is critical at this point to emphasize that the performative nature of theater as an art form is what allows these absent characters to embody such complexities. The key word, of course, is "embody." In a prose narrative, such as a novel, an absent character described by other characters, even one who has an important impact on the plot, is essentially treated very little differently from the characters present within the action. All are described by the narrative voice of the author. A play, however, mostly shows an audience the central characters, rather than

telling the audience about them verbally as a book does. One could argue that a script serves the function of a verbal narrative when analyzing a play; as Issacharoff rightly says, “Unlike buildings and décor that can be visited and viewed, photographed and filmed, and thus studied at leisure, semiotic space in the theater is by definition ephemeral” (Issacharoff 59). The script is therefore the only way to truly study the dramatic space “at leisure,” as it functions as a blueprint for the production of the play. However, it is only that—a blueprint, not the finished building. Plays are in part critically fascinating because they are a fundamentally collaborative effort between playwright, director, actors, set designers, costume designers, et al. At their core, scripts provide a guide with which the collaborators can put on a play, but it is not the play itself. While still the best method to study the play, as it contains within it every clue to the structure of the production, each production will still be fundamentally different. How, then, do I make these claims about the effect these absent characters have upon the audience?

Theatrical criticism, and even theory, hesitates to say anything definitive about the role or the experience of the theatrical spectator. How can conclusions be drawn about something so dependent on a given production of a play, on its interpretation, its execution, its space? A play is written once and interpreted for production many times, in an infinite variety of spaces, from a 60,000-seat open-air amphitheatre to a 200-seat darkened studio (Martin 239).

Martin’s expression of frustration is on the money: every production of a play will be different. Elwood P. Dowd could be played as the melancholy, tragic, but ultimately optimistic young man, as seen when played in the movie version by James Stewart, or he could be portrayed as a hilariously clueless but completely harmless goober, as played in a stage version by Jim Parsons. However, the blueprints to a play do give us clues fundamental to the purpose of a play. What textual evidence can be found in the script is enough to portray that the authorial intent is to produce the effects I have so far described, and as such the playwright has included such dialogue and stage directions as necessary to convey this intent. Due to the collaborative rather

than competitive nature that typically exists between playwright and director, these subtleties of absence will almost always come across when performed.

Although voice, both of onstage visible characters and of offstage and thus invisible characters, can define absence, absent figures are not themselves necessarily static. Father and Harvey, rather than merely being described throughout their respective plays, are able to use voice and sound to enact action onstage. While both characters are initially invoked in the minds of the play's spectators through references made by others, neither is content to remain silent and inactive, as is usually the role of absent characters in drama. Unlike Godot, who is referred to by visible characters but never actually interacts with them in any meaningful way, both Father and Harvey directly impact the onstage characters that initially invoked them.

That the voice of an absent character can influence onstage characters can be seen clearly through Father, whose vocal intrusions into the onstage space despite his physical absence, or even because of it, severely disrupts the course of the action. At a pivotal moment near the end of act one, Father issues a command so powerful that for a moment Casimir, his son, believes Father is really there in the room with them, and is affected to the point of actually following the command:

CASIMIR: [...] And it'll be so appropriate now that we're all gathered together again.

*(As he is saying the last few words he is also turning the handle on the phone.)*

FATHER: Don't touch that!

*(CASIMIR drops the phone in panic and terror.)*

CASIMIR: Christ! Ha-ha. O my God! That—that—that's—

TOM: It's only the baby-alarm.

CASIMIR: I thought for a moment Father was—was—was—

TOM: Maybe I should turn it down a bit.

CASIMIR: God, it's eerie—that's what it is—eerie—eerie— (Friel 263)

Casimir, in his moment of “panic and terror,” does precisely what Father commands. Despite being physically absent, Father is nonetheless able to affect what the other characters do onstage.



And yet, Father is not merely physically absent but also mentally absent: as a result of his dementia he has no idea where he is or what period of his life he is living. His effect upon the other characters is thus not intentional in terms of what they are to do at this moment in time, but rather his intention is to effect change at some undetermined point in the past. Despite Father's complete inability to recognize that his commands are heard by his children downstairs, Casimir is in this moment powerfully transported back to whatever time Father is mentally inhabiting, a time when Father was physically strong and present. Father's voice is so powerful, largely because his physically decrepit body isn't visible, that it pulls Casimir into Father's delusion, if only for a moment. This scene presents the crux of Brian Friel's innovative use of absence in the character of Father: whereas most absent figures impact the drama of the play through their continued absence, Father, despite his physical, visual, and mental absence, is able to intrude upon the onstage space through his voice and directly—not indirectly—influence the actions of the onstage characters.

At absolutely no point do any of the characters acknowledge the suggestions of Tom, the outsider, to turn the volume down. While Tom is able to suggest volume control, thus minimizing the influence of Father's ghostly presence (as a spectre of his own past self), the actual members of the family are too closely tied, in identity and in place, to Father and his house. The thought of any of them having actual control over Father, even as they are caring for him, is unthinkable. Although Tom is physically present, his suggestions are ignored and lost among the other characters—something that stands in direct contrast to Father's vocalizations, which effect immediate change and obedience from the onstage listeners. Although Tom is physically present and capable, Father's voice has much more power in this space largely

because, due to Father's physical absence, his voice can call any type of physicality and incorporeal threat into mind, whereas Tom is limited by his visible physicality.

Father's baby monitor acts as a vehicle that communicates aurally between two worlds: that of the onstage and offstage spaces, that of the past, occupied by Father in his confused mental state, and that of the present, lived by the characters onstage. The baby monitor is not the only aural gateway to the past, however: Claire's piano-playing serves the same purpose.

Friel, who often uses music in his plays, insists in *Aristocrats* upon the music being performed live by Claire instead of merely in a thematic background from the radio or phonograph, which serves the function of making every note an intentional form of speech enacted by Claire, easily the most vocally quiet of the onstage children. Although Claire insists to her siblings that she is happy with her life and her fairly depressing prospective future with a middle-aged grocer, her heartbreaking Chopin sonatas reveal the sad truth. They also provide a gateway to Father's space in the past: it is no accident that Claire's piano-playing is only ever heard from an invisible offstage space, thus fundamentally linking it to Father. The first time Claire's piano is heard onstage, the stage directions instruct that "*Casimir is suddenly excited, suddenly delighted. He rushes to the step*" (Friel 261). The effect of this music on the most sensitive of the O'Donnell children is immediate and transformative. Casimir rushes away to engage in what he describes as a favorite game: "A test! She's testing me! A game we played all the time when we were children!" (Friel 261). Casimir does not fondly recall childhood antics when the music brings them to his mind, he re-lives them, childishly ignoring his onstage companion and re-entering his past, via a game which conveniently places a name to all of Claire's haunting pieces as Chopin compositions. McGrath observes that "Appropriately named after a Polish prince, Casimir evokes the nineteenth-century, post-Romantic ambiance that

Chopin so perfectly articulated for the elite of Vienna and Paris in the 1830s and 1840s” (McGrath 150). Claire’s music gives voice to the past in which Father lives—a past of grandeur, now faded and in decay. However, the fact that Chopin composed before even Father’s birth taints the past he now inhabits with a false nostalgia, suggesting that the O’Donnell family was in decline even in Father’s time. Given this information, Father’s confused shouting over the baby-monitor is revealed as the death throes of the landed aristocracy, almost wiped out and yet still strong in the cultural imagination. Father is the ghost of the O’Donnell family’s delusions of grandeur. It is this ghostliness, exemplified by his physical absence but strong atmospheric and audible presence, that gives the past and the main characters’ childhoods such weight in the present-day drama of the play.

While Father is visibly absent but audibly present, Harvey is both invisible and inaudible; however, his very silence is an auditory indication of his absence. Walsh writes that “Silence is experienced as an absence, but since silence itself is something perceived, this absence also becomes palpably present to our consciousness” (Walsh 6). Harvey’s silence is powerful precisely because it is confounding to our senses that a character constantly present and constantly referred to by the other characters should never speak. Furthermore, Harvey is not merely referred to, he is directly addressed. Early on in the play, Elwood interrupts a phone conversation with Miss Elsie Greenawalt, offstage, to consult his friend Harvey, invisible but undeniably onstage: “Harvey, don’t you think we’d better freshen up? Yes, so do I” (Chase 5). Presumably Harvey has answered, but we cannot hear him. Even more conspicuously, Elwood is sometimes made to “listen” to the inaudible:

ELWOOD. [...] (*Turns toward air beside him.*) Harvey, you’ve heard me speak of Mrs. Chauvenet? We always called her Aunt Ethel. She is one of my oldest and dearest friends. (*Inclines head toward space and goes “Hmm!” and then listens as though not hearing first time. Nods as though having heard someone next to him speak.*) Yes—yes—

that's right. She's the one. This is the one. (*To MRS. CHAUVENET.*) He says he would have known you anywhere (Chase 7).

Here, the audience understands that Elwood actually hears an answer, instead of merely inferring one. Walsh theorizes that "Generally speaking, absence can be registered only when the expectation of something is thwarted or deferred" (Walsh 26). These one-sided (from an audience perspective) interactions with Harvey are not merely funny, they are also crucial to establishing Harvey's absence. Were Harvey merely silent and referred *to*, his absence could be overlooked; however, the fact that we the audience are made to expect an answer to a vocalized question, and then see a response to that answer despite never actually hearing it, makes the silence and, therefore, the space in which Harvey resides, abundantly clear.

One of the most curious aspects of the above quotation is that Elwood feels the need to "translate" for Harvey, telling Mrs. Chauvenet "He says he would have known you anywhere." However, at the same time, he expects Mrs. Chauvenet to speak and interact directly with Harvey as if he were anyone else. So, although Elwood acknowledges that Mrs. Chauvenet cannot understand or interpret Harvey's response, his actions normalize this, making it seem almost as though he is translating from a foreign language rather than hearing something unspoken. Walsh again provides a useful frame with which to view this scene: "Once an absence has been made conspicuous, once it has been "implicated" in some fashion, we are forced to accommodate some degree of uncertainty in our interactions with that larger entity of which the absence is a part" (Walsh 25). The absence, in this case, being the absence of a vocal response to Elwood's question, and the larger entity being the invisible Harvey himself. Chase has certainly made Harvey's absence explicit in having him directly addressed, rather than merely referred to. Thus, his explicit presence, despite his visible and audible absence, presents the audience with something of a paradox. Is Harvey real? Can Elwood truly hear him? The answers in this

particular scene seem contradictory, which is a part of Harvey's power: no one can really define him, and as such no one can really anticipate or control him. In the second act, Harvey uses the power his invisibility and inaudibility grant him to wreak havoc on the characters he dislikes, Dr. Chumley in particular; he assaults and harasses them without giving them any avenues through which to fight back.

The closest Harvey ever comes to true "speech" despite his absence is when Elwood speaks for him, "translating," as it were, for those who cannot hear him. However, at one point Harvey has a second person speak for him, literally putting the words into his mouth. In one scene, upon learning that Harvey is a "pooka," Mr. Wilson looks up the word in the encyclopedia:

WILSON. (*Goes above tables, picks up book, looks in it. Runs forefinger under words.*) P-o-o-k-a. "Pooka. From old Celtic mythology. A fairy spirit in animal form. Always very large. The pooka appears here and there, now and then, to this one and that one at his own caprice. A wise but mischievous creature. Very fond of rum-pots, crack-pots, and how are you, Mr. Wilson." (*Looks at book startled—looks at C. doorway fearfully—then back to book.*) How are you, Mr. Wilson? (*Shakes book, looks at it in surprise.*) Who in the encyclopedia wants to know? (Chase 33).

As Mr. Wilson reads from the encyclopedia, Harvey, who we are currently learning is a magical mythological creature, mischievously adds a few lines to the dictionary, which Mr. Wilson reads aloud. The lines directly address Mr. Wilson, providing, for the first time in the play not mediated by Elwood, Harvey's own words. Harvey is thus made very real, and his silence, his auditory absence, is clearly a choice, not a handicap. Harvey makes himself absent to use that absence to gain power, using words selectively and with great effect.

Harvey not only makes himself inaudible, however, as Chase indicates that he can also make other noises absent or inaudible as well. After we see Sanderson ringing a buzzer for one scene, eventually he is rejoined by Nurse Kelly, where the following exchange takes place:

SANDERSON. Why didn't someone answer the buzzer?

KELLY. I didn't hear you, Doctor—

SANDERSON. I rang and rang.

We, the audience, know that the buzzer was pressed. However, Kelly indicates that its ring never reached her, though she was well within earshot. The delay in Sanderson's summoned assistance, however, ultimately benefitted Harvey, as it added to the sanitarium's confusion and prevented Elwood from being medicated. Harvey is clearly not a figure made absent, but a figure that controls absence, and this makes him both powerful and dangerous.

Father's disembodied voice in *Aristocrats* becomes the root of his power over the physically embodied characters onstage. Because he is manifested entirely through voice, his presence lacks the physical restrictions of the characters onstage. "Absolute verbal purity is eternal life: the projected voice is the power of sentience separated from the fragility and vulnerability that attend sentience at its projected site and source" (Scarry 210). Throughout the play Father continually chases his ideal, and indeed when he is manifested solely through a projected voice he appears to be strong and powerful, and only when that verbal purity is shattered by bodily implication does he die and take his illusions with him.

Both Harvey and Father are innovative and decidedly modern creations in terms of how they use absence to interact directly with present onstage characters, rather than hovering over the action as gods or arbiters of fate. In particular, both Brian Friel and Mary Chase use voice from out of absent space as a tool to give their characters power and significance. In *Aristocrats*, Father is a physically and visibly absent figure who is made into a specter of the past when his voice invades the onstage space via baby-monitor, as well as by the atmospheric use of the Chopin piano compositions which recall his past grandeur. Becoming ghostly through the projection of his voice allows Father to invade the onstage space rather than be confined to his

weak physical body. Harvey, rather than being forced into absence by age and impotence, like Father, chooses absence for himself so that he might remain unpredictable and unstoppable. Both characters are magnified in the mind of the audience through their absence, which allows them to become larger than life rather than confining them to the portrayal of an actor—at least until act two, when Father is suddenly and horrifyingly embodied, which only serves to magnify the difference between his strong vocal offstage presence and contrasting visible frailty, and immediate subsequent absence through death: “To have a body is to be describable, creatable, alterable, and woundable. To have no body, to have only a voice, is to be none of those things” (Scarry 206). Neither Father nor Harvey is voiceless—Father literally screaming over the baby-monitor, and Harvey making his voice heard pointedly by those he chooses to hear him. Both, however, are disembodied, and it is this very detachment from physical limitations that, rather than taking power from them, gives it to them.

## Conclusion

Three main concepts stand out as distinctly important in discussions of absent characters in modern fiction: space, marginalization, and the audio-visual manifestation of absence.

Analyzing *Harvey* and *Aristocrats* through the visual and sonic presentations of absence shows how each play uses a centrally cast absent character to portray the societally marginalized, though Harvey's representation of potential power describes an emerging women's rights movement, and Father's absence paints a death mask for an antiquated ideology of Irish self-identification. These two plays stand out among modern drama for the ways in which they activate the potential for active power and agency in an "absent," be it offstage or invisible, position. While each is highly representative of a specialized period in history, both plays push back against marginalization of minority voices through the use of potentially absent characters.

The absent Father in Brian Friel's *Aristocrats* takes a standard trope of absent characters and deliberately subverts the expectations of that trope. Father's character is established as maintaining residency offstage, and yet in two ways he violates this contract: first, by intruding aurally into the stage space via means of the baby-monitor, and second, by intruding physically into the stage space to enact a melodramatic death scene in violation of established "rules" of mimetic action. Father's absence is innovative in that it manifests within two established forms of absence and subverts them both, the two forms being that of the deceased paternal figure, whose death and memory inspire and drive the onstage protagonist, and that of the character framed by onstage dialogue as an offstage resident. The result is a physically absent character who rails against the power structure assumptions given to the absent, a character who is very much present and resists the inevitability of his own curtain call. Since the Republic of Ireland only came into being as a free state in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, establishing a national identity



during this period became a cultural preoccupation. Characteristics of this newly-forged identity, however—such as Irish Catholicism and Gaeilge (the Irish language)—became symbolic of turmoil in the last half of the century due to IRA terrorism and repeated scandals in the Catholic church. In the play, Father represents the spirit of the invented national identity of the first half of the century, which had since come under pressure as a romanticized, highly politicized, and monolithic ideal. Father's offstage absence, unlike Harvey's onstage invisibility, is the representation of a dying power lacerated by modernity and politics. Friel's subversion of expected tropes of absence allow Father and the class he represents to maintain a kind of dignity in their passing.

The titular Harvey in Mary Chase's comedy uses space in a near-opposite way to Father in *Aristocrats*, though both equally subvert expectations of their absence. Harvey as a character moves invisibly and inaudibly through the stage space amongst embodied characters portrayed by actors. Throughout the play he makes more and more of a physical impact upon his environment despite not being portrayed by a physical body in the form of an actor. Mary Chase's decision to leave Harvey's physicality absent from the play and communicating his presence via dialogue, gestures, and prop movement rather than by an actor in a bunny costume is extremely powerful, as an actor is real from the moment he steps onstage, whereas Harvey, whose very existence is dubious at the top of the show, becomes more and more real throughout the drama, until his invisible existence is proven in the second act. Harvey's quiet occupation of onstage space, and his poor treatment by the other (embodied) characters, who at first don't believe he exists and later determined to exploit or remove him for their own personal gain, provide powerful parallels to the treatment of marginalized groups in Mary Chase's society—

particularly women, who were only just entering into male-dominated fields and would soon be uprooted once again by returning soldiers.

Mary Chase wrote *Harvey* in 1944, near the end of World War II. Although by this time women were assisting in the war effort by taking over traditionally masculine occupations in society, Chase's play depicts both the pre-war patriarchal society and anticipates the disenfranchisement of women to come when soldiers return to the country after the war. Her main female character, Vera, is an accomplished woman who runs her household and manages the family finances, yet her role is legally usurped by her brother merely because he is the man of the house. Vera's accomplishments and capabilities are rendered invisible throughout the play by her gender. Similarly, Harvey is reportedly a hugely powerful character, with control over time and space, but the onstage characters never learn about these extremely useful powers because they are too preoccupied with trying to discredit Harvey and remove him from the place he has taken in society. Harvey's invisibility also contains a racial dimension, as even though he is invisible and thus his color cannot possibly matter, all of the onstage characters repeatedly insist in referring to him as a "white" rabbit. The insistence upon ordering and categorizing Harvey's physical appearance aligns with social attitudes toward race in Chase's America. The insistence that Elwood, whose acknowledgement of female capability is unique in the play, ignore and forget him, also allows Harvey to represent women in that America.

Although some of the conclusions drawn about the social representations implied by Harvey's absence may seem far-fetched, the very magical element of Harvey's invisible incarnation suggests a deeper meaning. Harvey's powers hint at a genre gaining traction in Chase's time in Latin America, magical realism, and makes use of some of that genre's innovations: "what makes magical realism powerful is its blend of the fantastic and the real. As

much as magical realism makes demands on your imagination, it requires your thoughtful perceptions of the “real” world” (Spark 87). The blatantly fantastic element of *Harvey* flirts with the social potential available to works operating within the genre of magical realism, and invites the audience to examine the rules of the real world just as they examine the rules by which Harvey himself is characterized.

Even in Friel’s *Aristocrats* there is the suggestion of a magical realist influence in the character of Father, whose actions are for the most part ghostlike and suggestive of voice-induced time travel. Magical realism can be defined as a genre “in which two contrasting views of the world—one rational and modern, the other magical and traditional—were presented as if they were not contradictory” (Spark 78). Father’s traditionalism is based upon a mythology, both of his own family and of Irish national identity itself, which famously drew upon folklore and fairy tales in the days after the establishment of the republic. Father’s continued influence upon the family is the influence of this apocryphal history, which forces the viewer to question their perception of Big House families and of the Irish identity itself in a changing modern world.

In *Aristocrats*, Father subverts expectations of characters confined to offstage space and insists upon diegesis through speech and an eventual invasion of the stage space, while Harvey mimetically conveys himself through the apparent diegetic space of the onstage scenery, but both subvert expectations of spatial configurations of absence, and their presence is manifested in ways all the more powerful because they are unexpected of the invisible. While Harvey reveals gradually more power throughout his play, suggesting the marginalized communities he represents campaigning for their rights, Father’s intrusions onto the stage space read instead as the death throes of a social group no longer relevant to society. Both forms of absence make powerful statements about the marginalized groups they represent, precisely because they imbue

their absent characters with agency and hinted illusive power unknown to the social majorities of their respective historical periods. Mary Chase and Brian Friel take full advantage of the power of the unknown to present their absent characters with dignity and grace.

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