

The Sanctuary Lamp:
Thomas Murphy's Metatheatre

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Thomas Murphy writes controversial drama for the Abbey Theatre. In his *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1976; revised 1984), the characters, trapped in a cathedral, are led to existential questionings through physical objects of the church such as the sanctuary lamp. They are very conscious of those physical objects surrounding them but are fundamentally unaffected. The objects function as merely transmitters to their constant questionings. In a deeper structural layer of the play, are the Liturgical Rite of the Mass, overlapping with primordial procedures of the human psyche which proclaims a rite of its own. *The Sanctuary Lamp* is an unprecedented metatheatre which is the expression of Murphy's analysis of the present world under an Irish-Catholic cover.

Thomas Murphy is an excitingly controversial dramatist. From the start there was a striking virility in his plays, but his more recent plays acquired a depth which allows him to be ranked among the best dramatists of the world today. He was born in Tuam, County Galway, Ireland, in 1935. He began writing plays in 1962 when he was living in London. In 1970, he returned to Ireland, and is now working closely with the Abbey Theatre.

It is for this paper to see how, in *The Sanctuary Lamp*, the physical objects of the church (e.g., the sanctuary lamp) conduct the characters to primordial questionings, and to see how the ritual of the Mass forms the deeper structural layer of the play, and thus to indicate how this play constitutes a metatheatre of a kind that expresses Murphy's "passionately religious and mockingly disillusioned"¹ attitude.

The Sanctuary Lamp was written in 1976 and performed the same year at the Abbey Theatre. Murphy had written several powerful plays before this on the plights of the Irish cottiers and the destitute in naturalistic style which had hitherto been the accepted method in the Irish theatre. In 1971, he wrote a fierce iconoclastic play, *The Morning after Optimism*, which stood out as his most experimental work so far. Although it still retained the realistic and naturalistic style, he adopted a more symbolical and poetic method which enabled him to address more deepened and expanded themes. Christopher Murray says of the play that it "marked a radical challenge to Irish realism in all its manifestations, linguistic, stylistic and nationalistic".²

His themes and the unique style of *The Morning after Optimism* was carried into *The Sanctuary Lamp*, but Murphy's talent in this

1. Christopher Murray, "Introduction: The Rough and Holy Theatre of Thomas Murphy", *Irish University Review* (Thomas Murphy Issue), ed. Christopher Murray, Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 1987, p. 13. Hitherto this issue will be referred to as IUR Murphy.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

line manifested itself most distinctly in the next play, *The Gigli Concert* (1983), a play which expresses the most painful urge for an understanding of The Word under cover of an ambivalent and frenzied action. *The Sanctuary Lamp* is taken for analysis here because it offers a middle course in studying this unique style of his. That is, this play has acquired enough maturity over the experiments of the former play, but it has not yet arrived at the stage of the latter play where the style has an accomplished purity and simplicity, thus affording interesting points for study.

We are confronted with some complications here which have to do with Murphy's revision of *The Sanctuary Lamp*. He revised it in 1984, apparently a year after *The Gigli Concert*. This could mean he made a better play of it. Indeed *The Sanctuary Lamp* of 1984 has much to be appreciated equalling *The Gigli Concert* in its impact and originality. Harry White points out that the second version has lost a great deal in both content and structure because of the drastic changes made in cutting scenes and shuffling them about.³ Unfortunately, I had no access to the first version, but on the other hand, it was fortunate that I came across this revised text, for as it is, it is a work mysteriously illuminating.

The Sanctuary Lamp dramatizes a 'discourse' on the necessity of love and forgiveness against a religious background. Its style is part dream-like expressionism, part naturalism and part peasant realism. The characters move and talk in the interior of a Catholic church, very conscious of the physical objects surrounding them but fundamentally oblivious of them. These objects retain their symbolic function in the development of the play. However, their symbolic significance do not ultimately affect the characters: the objects function merely as transmitters. That is, the objects channel them to questioning and self-reflection. They touch the characters but do not affect them. They are a part of the setting

3. Harry White, "The Sanctuary Lamp: An Assessment", IUR Murphy, p. 74.

but fail to explain the characters.

The same can be said of the Church as institution. The Church is discussed and disputed but it merely *channels* the characters to contemplation of existential questions. There are, also, many occasions when the characters seem to be symbolically following the procedures of the Liturgical Rites of the Mass, but they are actually putting into action the primordial procedures of the human psyche which proclaims a rite of its own. Here is presented an unprecedented metatheatre which is the expression of Murphy's analysis of the present world under an Irish-Catholic cover.

Forgiveness works as a saving panacea in *The Sanctuary Lamp*. But this forgiveness is not that which is defined in terms of Christian belief and theology. It is defined in humanitarian terms coincidentally *channelled* through "things" of the church. Even the Monsignor functions as a part of the cathedral as do the pews, the confessional, the pulpit and the sanctuary lamp. Concerning the setting of this play, T. Gerald FitzGibbon says,

... the setting is a darkened church and carries obvious figurative resonances. These possibilities, however, are never directly adumbrated in the dialogue, and the physical objects of the set ... operate as pure theatre symbols. This is not to say that there are not connections between setting and dialogue—the dialogue of the play is full of moral and metaphysical argument—but any easy assumption that the church of the setting signifies 'The Church' is avoided.⁴

Sophia S. Morgan's study of metaperformance gives light to the understanding of the unique method taken by Murphy.

In *Don Quixote*, while the knight does all he can to live his

4. T. Gerald FitzGibbon, "Thomas Murphy's Dramatic Vocabulary", IUR Murphy, p. 41.

life as if it were the ritual incarnation of the romances of chivalry, the narrating voice which constitutes a first frame of the inner action constantly undermines the link which the Don tries to effect between action and the text by persistently focusing on the frames which in reality keep them separate. It [the ritual formula] comes to the foreground of the action and turns the very activity of writing into a paradox. For here the text sets out to undermine what precisely allows it to speak. In this case, it [the status of the ritual formula] is of the order of both signifier and signified and, as such, is one of the key factors in the metatextual function of the text.⁵

Although there is a similar "metatextual function" in *The Sanctuary Lamp*, it is more ramified, therefore more complex. Harry, the non-believer, arrives at 'forgiveness' through his interest in 'things' (the signified) of the church, while Francisco, the Catholic, arrives at the same understanding of "forgiveness" through his disdain for 'things' of the church. 'Forgiveness', in this case, is understood in humanitarian terms, so that while the 'things' retain their original significance, they acquire other significances given them by the two characters and the girl, Maudie.

Harry is a "half-lapsed Jew"—a shocking realization to the Monsignor after he had hired Harry as a clerk-curate, but pride on both parties allowed them not to probe into the affair any further and to leave it untouched; Francisco is a declared blasphemer of the Church, and Maudie is simply ignorant. In any case, because the characters are Irish and the setting is somewhere in Ireland, it is taken as granted that they are not entirely ignorant of The Church and its furnishings. Harry did not have to be

5. Sophia S. Morgan, "Borges's 'Immortal': Metaritual, Metaliterature, Metaperformance", *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John J. MacAloon, (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), p. 80.

told that when the candle was burning in the sanctuary lamp, it indicated the Presence of the Son of God, although the Monsignor took the trouble to explain. Maudie could point to the statue of Jesus and say that it signified love and forgiveness. Francisco's knowledge of The Church could not be questioned because he was brought up by the Jesuits. These characters are directed to conversing the metaphysical through the details of the church. 'Forgiveness' is discussed and experienced in humanitarian terms and not according to Christian doctrine. Murphy could have substituted a Buddhist temple for a church had his background been oriental. 'The Church' remains a colossal monument coated in tradition and constitution, and functions only for *channelling* the characters to questions that are universal and fundamental to man.

Metatheatre of this kind which uses the method of *channelling* is not new to *The Sanctuary Lamp*. It is noticeable in *The Morning after Optimism*, but Murphy's technique of this method reaches its zenith in richness and complexity in *The Gigli Concert* (1983). In each case, Murphy is attacking the traditions and institutions which serve as the setting of each play, but through them he is leading the characters to a more essential and primordial quest over and above the immediate problem. We realize eventually that his concern is not the violent attacks but is at a much deeper level. Murphy is not talking about religion but revealing characters who are "of a certain class, placed on the edge of the accepted world looking beyond the comfortable and established, the cocoon of the town, to destiny, eternity, truth".⁶

There are two acts in this play. Harry used to be the strong man and Francisco the juggler in a circus, but being fired, they teamed up with Olga, Harry's wife and the dwarf, and made their living by being hired temporarily as entertainers. Harry allowed Francisco to make love to his wife, but when he lost his only

6. Colm Toibin, "Thomas Murphy's Volcanic Ireland", IUR Murphy, p. 30.

daughter, Teresa, because of allowing such adultery to continue under his very eye, he was angry at himself and Francisco, and he left his group. In the first act, Harry appears in the church and addresses the sanctuary lamp where we learn that his hatred of Francisco has mounted and that he is thinking of killing him. He meets the orphaned Maudie there and his sense of compassion is aroused. Francisco enters in search of Harry. In the second act, Francisco is with Maudie before the altar. Maudie's story of how her newborn baby died appeases Francisco's bitterness against the Church and his anger toward Harry for ill-treating Olga. Francisco then approaches Harry with compassion, and Harry gives up the idea of revenge.

Harry is highlighted in the first act and Francisco in the second, each given the opportunity for a lengthy soliloquy which suggests the 'Confiteor' and the 'Credo' of the Mass. They narrate their experiences while they declare their conviction and confess their guilt.

Harry is meditating in one of the pews where a shaft of dim light comes through the stained-glass window. He is stranded; providence seems to have led him to this place. Confidence in his prowess as the circus strong man used to bring him luck, and although he is now destitute he still tries to hang on to his memories: "Quite frankly I'm intelligent, I'm a very strong man," and then he confesses, "you [Monsignor] may think it a paradox but I do not know how to get out of the puzzle I am in." That "puzzle" is "The compulsion...to go back and do it [to kill Francisco and his wife, Olga] now. And a feeling of wrong-doing because I haven't gone back to do it. A terrible deed!" (10) This "terrible deed" is not of course disclosed yet. The underlying importance in this scene is Harry's submission to the atmosphere of

7. Thomas Murphy, *The Sanctuary Lamp*, (Dublin, The Gallery Press, 1984) 2nd edition, p.19. Hitherto the page number will be mentioned after a quotation from this play.

the church, to the dramatic effect of the "mystery" of "the Presence" emitted through the red light of the sanctuary lamp. Ironically, it is to the non-Catholic that the light of the lamp sheds its shafts. The Monsignor too approaches Harry not as a formidable prelate but a Hesse fan, reading his poetry before the Eucharist, and who is pliable enough for Harry to confide his troubles. The Church presents itself to Harry as the House of Jesus who, as Harry defines Him, "stretch[es] forth [his] mighty arms" (16) to those in want. It is an open house for any non-believers who knock at its door. The atmosphere of holiness, sanctity and mystery is in full effect as Harry addresses the sanctuary lamp in a kind of prayer-confession in the dimly lit darkened vaults of the church. He sees Christ locked up in the sanctuary lamp silent in His loneliness, and he equates his own misery with His and offers to alleviate His "holy loneliness" by talking to Him and keeping Him company until the time to change the candles at perhaps three a.m. In the lamp he sees Jesus Christ and he addresses Him as "You who rule the heavens and earth" and implores him to help him "to forget" about Teresa and therefore about murder. Harry is tortured by the innocent "bright little eyes" of Teresa who could have been saved if only Olga had stayed by her bedside and not succumbed to Francisco's approaches. But the next moment, Harry is addressing the lamp as Lord of Death: "Oh Lord of Death, stretch forth your mighty arms, therefore! Stir, mover, rouse yourself to strengthen me and I'll punish them [Olga and Francisco] properly this time!" (18). Harry's attitude to God is ambivalent. He addresses a God of Compassion but the next moment a God of Wrath and Revenge, a God of the Old Testament. Harry cannot forgive. He carries a penknife, ready to kill.

Harry is in his forties. His clothes are dishevelled and "though the worse for wear...reflect former better years". He has an affectation of the "British officer type" (9). We see the opposite

of Harry in Francisco. "He is in his thirties, Irish, self-destructive, usually considered as a blackguard" (30). Francisco is the prototype of the sons of those evicted because of famine, and their violence and self-demolition is an inbred characteristic. He feigns madness by getting drunk with the altar wine. His blasphemies against the Catholic Church are virulent, but strangely poetic.

God made the world, right?, and fair play to him. What has he done since? Tell me. Right, I'll tell you [he is addressing Maudie]. Evaporated himself. When they painted his toenails and turned him into a church he lost his ambition, gave up learning, stagnated for a while, then gave up even that, said fuck it, forget it, and became a vague pain in his own and everybody else's arse.... We know each other alright.... Take Jesus. Jesus was A-one. Know what I mean? But they've nearly written him out of existence.... (30)

A "self-destructive blackguard" can be more far-reaching than the one who has the touch of affectation, because he has nothing to loose so that his perspective is free and clear. Francisco's soliloquy therefore is more impersonal and his 'Confiteor' and 'Credo' less private. He carries on thus:

...as a fairly experienced punter, in the three horse race of the Trinity, 'I'm inclined to give my vote to your man, the Holy Spirit. Alias the Friendly Ghost! He's the coming man...him being symbolised by a dove and all that, I'm inclined to agree that he was the original bat in the belfry. What? So how are you going to get forgiveness from that lot? Have you ever thought who's going to forgive them? Who's going to forgive the Gods? Hmm? So the state they must be in! What? There's no such thing as forgiveness. (30-31)

Francisco, being *channelled* through the altar wine, declares his 'credo' in the God who has disappeared leaving behind "the Friendly Ghost" stranded in "the belfry". For him, there is no such thing as love and forgiveness because there is no God who will forgive, not even a God who will forgive 'the Gods'. His reasoning is sinister, that of the madman alias the poet, disclosing a mind embittered by generations of being sacrificed as political victims.

Vivian Mercier points out that Murphy was very conscious of Job having read about him about the time he was writing *Famine*. He affiliates Murphy's characters to Job by pointing out that "although Job's 'patience' has become proverbial... [Job] is in fact the bitterest complainer in the whole Bible".⁸ In this respect, Francisco can be categorized with those that Mercier calls "Murphy's comic characters".

In the program for the production of *Famine* in Ireland in 1984, Murphy wrote:

I wrote *Famine* in England. I couldn't have written it in Ireland. It's not about the history of the Irish Famine. Living in the 1960's, I found that I was a Famine victim, that it wasn't over... *Famine* to me meant twisted mentalities, poverty of love, tenderness and affection; the natural extravagance of youth wanting to bloom—to blossom—but being stalemated by a nineteenth century mentality!⁹

As seen above, Murphy's characters like Francisco and Harry are written out of Irish history. Their spiritual dispossession originates

8. Vivian Mercier, "Noisy Desperation: Murphy and the Book of Job", IUR Murphy, p. 19.

9. Thomas Murphy, quoted in the Programme for Druid's production of *Famine*, 1984, p. 7. Quoted in Riana O'Dwyer, "Play-Acting and Myth-Making: The Western Plays of Thomas Murphy", IUR Murphy, p. 33.

in endemic experience. They depict those who "have never settled down in post-famine Ireland, having been forced as Dan in *Famine* says to 'put a bag on your back, like many another done, and take to the roads'".¹⁰ Out of the enduring famine comes the crippled, the self-demolishing, inimical to freedom and honesty, class-hating and therefore most cynically self-hating man. But behind the cynic is a terrible anguish of fear and loneliness and a touch of futility. Harry's pity for Jesus in His "holy loneliness" imports his own loneliness. Murphy's view of the Irish today, alias the contemporary man as such, has won great sympathy with the younger generation. Francisco's violent tirades secret a despair too great for pity induced by physical and spiritual starvation. Since the despair is great, it becomes a metaphysical despair. "Behind the iconoclasm and rage there is a yearning for the divine which lends great poignancy to the urge for community among the three main characters".¹¹ Thus his violent diction contradicts or perplexes the superficial meanings of dialogue.

Christopher Murray thought that Murphy's violence was refreshing, cleansing and invigorating when he heard *On the Outside* on Radio Eireann in 1962.¹² Murphy's violence functions to cleanse and therefore can be affiliated to the 'Confiteor' and 'Absolution'. As with Francisco, his characters resort to the dramatic conventions of alcohol and lunacy to give vent to a volcanic mind. FitzGibbon says

... by making his characters drunk or 'crazy' he gives them the freedom to lash out at others and at themselves, to confront the contradictions of their own behavior and perceptions, to cut across normal situational logic into areas of intuitive-

10. Colm Toibin, p. 30. (Dan's dialogue is quoted from Thomas Murphy, *Famine* [Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1977, 1984], p. 15.

11. Christopher Murray, p. 14.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

symbolic communication.¹³

Francisco's immediate concern is to find Harry and accuse him of deserting their group at a time when he was most needed, and of ill-treating Olga. His 'credo' was also his 'confiteor' in which he declared his 'sin' to be unforgiving, as did Harry. The irony is that they voice their 'confiteor' only to reconfirm their determination to kill, Harry by the knife and Francisco by language.

At this stage Harry and Francisco are on equal footing in their relation to the church. Francisco has had enough from his childhood with the Jesuits and he "aim[s] to go on disproving" any child to be educated by them (35-6). Francisco has "lost [himself] in a place like this [the church]," whereas Harry, the half-lapsed Jew, "ha[s] found [himself] here" (40) in the church. They have met half way in the church and are both of them in a situation where they will either fall or be saved. They are on the verge of translating their unforgiving spirit into action. This is when Maudie makes her entrance.

Maudie's influence works miracles on both men. She is in her teens, still innocent although she has had experiences of a life-time. She has been *channelled* through the statue of Jesus placed near the sanctuary lamp, and saw through the statue, love and forgiveness. She reiterates, "That's Jesus, isn't it? He gives forgiveness!" (19). The tales she tells of her visions and experience to Harry and Francisco subsequently in the two acts are scoffed off by each of them as silly day-dreams, but her accounts have sunk deep into their bosom without their being conscious of it. To Harry, who cannot forgive Olga for deserting their daughter, Maudie gives the account of the dreams she had of her mother. Maudie has never seen her mother who was reputed to have been a notorious whore. She left Maudie in the

13. T. Gerald FitzGibbon, p. 49.

gutters the minute she was born. Her mother appeared in her dreams every night but then one night she suddenly ceased to appear. Maudie's grandmother told her it was because of "forgiveness". To Francisco, who hates the Jesuits, who cannot forgive Harry for ill-treating Olga and for blaming her for the death of Teresa, Maudie gives the account of her dead baby, Stephen. She, like her mother, was left to roam the streets and gave birth to a baby too weak to survive. He barely had time to be baptized and christened Stephen by a nun. This nun told Maudie that there would be forgiveness when the baby stopped appearing in her dreams. Maudie was preparing Harry and Francisco for a symbolic 'Consecration' and 'Communion'. Harry dismisses Maudie's concern for 'forgiveness' by reverting to a noisy outburst of singing popular songs (24), and Francisco 'feels commiseration' but instantly feigns harshness and negates her insistence on 'forgiveness' (33). Nevertheless, her tales have had their effect.

In the latter half of Act II, scene ii, Harry and Francisco share in the scene of the sermon which directs them to the consummation of their action. From the beginning of the play, the pulpit was approached by Harry off and on to test his strength by trying to lift it up, but continually failing. Now for Francisco, the pulpit becomes a convenient platform from which he can look down on Harry and accuse him. He showers abuses on Harry in the manner of a sermon.

Don't let your soul suffer from neglect! .'. But the pattern of man's sins will be the pattern of his punishment. See the depraved ones, who so loved their own pleasures, now bathing in black, hot, bubbling pitch and reeking sulphur! See the gluttonous pigs, now parched and hungry! (42)

Francisco hires menippean visions and his 'sermon' mounts to a most venomous accusation.

And what of the tardy-footed giants who did not lift a finger? See them: masters of sorrow, go howling like dogs for very grief! Do you want absolution, Har?... Know what I mean, Har? The ones who didn't lift a finger—but who claim they know better.... There was no one but myself to kiss away the tears of that poor, unhappy, lost, unfaithful wife.... Everyone to blame but you, Har? (42-43)

Francisco is insinuating that Harry is "the tardy-footed giant who did not lift a finger" but Harry remains deaf.

At the moment when Francisco's accusation reaches its climax, Harry too cannot contain his anger and aiming to overthrow Francisco, musters up all his strength and lifts the pulpit high above his head with Francisco inside it. This action visions the uplifting of the chalice in the rite of 'Transubstantiation' and 'Consecration' which is the dramatic moment of the Liturgical Mass. Francisco, transported to an ecstatic condition, wills the uplifting. "Hup! Hup! Voilà!" he encourages, as Harry lifts the pulpit higher up.

They have both exerted and consummated their energy and have exorcised the evil within them. Harry puts down the pulpit and Francisco resumes his 'sermon', in a way that resembles a denouement to the dramatic climax. Francisco continues and recounts the last days of Olga in a quiet tone of detachment hardly enabling Harry to realize that he is talking of the death of Olga. Then before the cleansing and the exorcising are finally complete, Francisco must once again give vent to his anger at the Roman collars who have joined hands with the business tycoons and who have invited the death of Olga. When he suddenly puts a stop to his tirades, he descends from the pulpit, kneels before Harry and asks for his blessing, as if asking for absolution to cleanse his anger. At this, Harry throws away his penknife.

But to what extent can man forget? He may be able to reason

himself to forgiving, but the memories remain forever choked in one's breast. Harry acknowledges Olga's death, but Teresa, he cannot forget. In turn, Francisco cannot forgive the Jesuits for a child's loss of innocence. Thus they contemplate where the souls of the dead children drift to. Harry says they drift into the clouds and become visible to the living as silhouettes. Francisco talks of Limbo where the souls of the babies go who have not had time to be baptized, but because of it, were fortunate to remain clean. He talks of how painful it is to think that he hadn't died before "they got to baptize" (53) him. Thus Harry and Francisco are able to share. Together with Maudie, they partake in the manna in communion in the form of the altar wine and the bread and fish which Harry had purchased. The three reach the stage where it is possible for them to share in 'communion'. *The Sanctuary Lamp* brings the characters to this stage through a complex weaving of multi-factual, multi-ritual and multi-psychic levels, a metatheatre.

At the beginning of the play, the Monsignor had commissioned Harry to rekindle the sanctuary lamp when the candle had burnt down. Harry's attention therefore was constantly turned toward his duty. He noticed gradually that three a.m. would be the appropriate time to rekindle it. This would be just before matins. He carried out his duty as planned. Naturally, for the three characters, rekindling the light at such a time would signify a new beginning, which lends poignancy to this last phase of the play. When this action is given such a quality, it seems to effect a trivial cliché. Actually, Murphy refrains from any obvious signifying and Harry's action of replacing the candle is incorporated into a number of other important incidents. At this time, Francisco finally and flatly discloses Olga's death to Harry, and the clock strikes three. Harry goes to light the lamp. He therefore can conceal his shock and anguish. We may add another point to this situation: that of a greater significance which is Harry's renewal, brought about by

his recognition of Olga's death.

Decoding Murphy's use of physical objects is often a dangerous undertaking, even more so since his theatre is formidable in respect to its metatextual quality. Murphy's use of the confessional is such. It is first mentioned when the Monsignor points out that it is used to keep brooms. At the end of the play the three characters turn in for sleep in the overturned confessional. Its original function is ignored and used only as appliance denoting a disregard of the Church. However, looked at from another level, we may assume that the characters have entered the confessional for absolution, just as they went to sleep in order to be freshened in the morning for a new beginning.

In one way or another the characters are led to narrate their experiences through the *channelling* of things of the church. Narrating is a vital method in this play, and the language used is unique.

Murphy's powerful style in his language connotes two points: to convey "the crucial failure of language and to deliver its burden of feeling, insight, and meaning".¹⁴ Taxed with such a 'burden' his language naturally has an unexpected and wayward flexibility. He gives to language a "liberation of a new language-range".¹⁵ There are "characteristic turns and syntactical short-cuts of Irish talk, elisions which incorporate TV jingles, folk-saying, the self-mocking grace-notes of Irish rural slang, and the awkward struggle with 'good English'",¹⁶ all with a Rabelaisian flow. This style at first seems coars and prosaic but it gradually builds up to be more poetic of a far deeper and greater range. All three characters tell their tale in such a manner, but the style of each is fascinatingly distinguished. Harry with faked politeness but with sincerity;

14. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

16. *Ibid.* Only a native of Ireland can thus name the quality of Thomas Murphy's language for its unique connotations and style.

Francisco, obscene and violent but profound and compassionate; and Maudie, innocent and whorish, faltering but often gushing.

Harry's talking to the sanctuary lamp; Francisco's blaspheming with the bottle in hand, and on the pulpit; Maudie's account of her mother and the babe conducted through the statue of Jesus—these are done in the story-telling method. Story-telling is a particularly Irish habit imbedded traditionally into the culture as a means of confirming their beliefs and the ways of life of the community. As method, it dominates the Irish theatre. Murphy too makes use of this for many reasons. His characters tell their tale to explain themselves to others and to themselves. In the process of story-telling they undergo catharsis. Story-telling for these characters is a 'Confiteor' and 'Absolution'.

Story-telling is itself a ritual. When a ritual can no longer explain the individual and the community, that ritual has become problematic. The formula of the ritual remains but the story-telling will turn on itself as a paradox, for here "the text sets out to undermine what precisely allows it to speak".¹⁷ Here, the signified and the signifier begin to demonstrate an order each in its own right, thus making the text function as metatextual. When the curtain opens on *The Sanctuary Lamp*, the most one can assume is that the church as setting establishes some religious points of reference to act as a context for the play's arguments but Murphy overturns such clichés assumptions. His theatre is a dangerous theatre. Colm Toibin points out that religion

...has ceased to hold the dispossessed in post-Independence Ireland where Church and State exist beyond the reach of the people at the edge of the town.... The priesthood has ceased to signify power or sanctity but has been reduced to status.¹⁸

17. Quoted in p. 4 of this paper.

18. Colm Toibin, p. 27.

Toibin goes on to say that with the loss of both religion and nationalism, Ireland "has nothing" while the establishments remain as hollow forms, and in such cases the people can only take "an ambivalent view". *The Sanctuary Lamp* emphasizes this aspect. The Church is negated in the very place of holiness, but it remains intact. On the other hand, the characters touch and talk about The Church but they remain innocently oblivious. "Murphy takes two worlds of experience, metaphysically forced together in all discordancy, and out of the violent yoking together creates an unsettling defamiliarized"¹⁹ action.

Like Beckettian characters, Harry and Francisco are stranded in mid air, in the twilight zone, within the dimly lit church building. However, unlike Beckettian characters, they must move on. They are confronted by a situation where they are compelled to move on without a clear solution to their quest. In spite of that there is "a sturdy sense of resilience, of man resolutely scrambling for survival"²⁰ which makes them persevere and to start again at morn. The play is a "dramatic exploration of the possibilities of individual and human freedom"²¹ within the context of existing social codes. But the "possibilities" are bleak, for the echoes of the characters seem to be strung to the vaults and haunt its corners.

19. Christopher Murray, p. 13.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

21. Colm Toibin, p. 30.