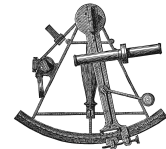


Men in crisis (and women in pain): The dual didacticism of contemporary Irish masculinist monologue drama

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Abstract

The dramatic monologue has been established by male dramatists in the twenty-first century as a key phase in the Irish theatrical tradition. These male monologists have often deployed the form to criticise the discursive production of crisis masculinity in Irish culture while representing men's lived experience of crisis. The progressive politics of this representation are ultimately undermined by the same text's ignorant treatment of women's subjectivity and their lived experience of an Irish culture of violence and rape. A textual analysis of Conor McPherson's *Rum and Vodka* (1992) and Eugene O'Brien's *Eden* (2001) reveals that these monologue plays operate in a dual didactic register by criticising the national discursive production of crisis masculinity while ignoring the systematic subjugation of women and girls in Ireland under the patriarchal power structures which underpin the very discourse these dramatists seek to criticise.

Keywords

Crisis Masculinity; discourse; monologue; rape culture; patriarchy

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Introduction

Michael, the speaker in Conor McPherson's monologue play *Rum and Vodka* (1992) is in crisis from the play's beginning. The young man's drinking problem is a symptom of his lived experience of crisis that is directly related to the state of his masculine identity and affected by discourse that fears the heterosexual 'real' man is endangered in this country and at risk of total extinction. O'Brien explains that 'masculinity in crisis' is the perceived threat to traditional modes of masculinity by the socio-political gains made by progressive movements like feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. The narrativisation of Michael's crisis is triggered by the loss of his job after causing significant destruction to his workplace and employer's car out of a drunken temper, and is exacerbated upon admitting his recent unemployment to his wife in the aisle of a local supermarket. She reacts to this news with explosive aggression and violence: "She hit me across the eye with a can of tuna. [...] I could hear Maria screaming and she was thumping my legs and stomach" (22). Michael's flight from the supermarket to a pub in the capital's city centre marks the beginning of a three-day drinking spree that allows him to claim victimhood and avoid the consequences of his actions and the pressures of being a father, a husband, and a patriarch in general.

Acknowledging the limited use of reported speech by Michael to self-victimise and protest his position within the social order that is produced by his non-hegemonic masculinity amongst other shortcomings of his character, Singleton (2006) uses this scene to conclude that: "Overall, though, he is not a violent person. His violence is expressive, driven by emotion, and it is not directed at women. In fact, the only violence in the play is the reported physical assault on him by his wife" (268). The problem of this observation is that in absolving Michael of any violence perpetrated, it outright refutes the rape of his wife that occurred only the previous night within the diegesis as an act of violence. Singleton's argument conflicts with Foucault's theory that rape is inherently an act of physical violence, a theory that is accepted though critically developed by feminist scholarship (Fitzpatrick 2018, 8). Moreover, Singleton's argument betrays the objective violence of rape: "precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things" (Zizek 2008, 2). His analysis reflects the failure of the text to properly interrogate the residual culture of rape in Ireland in the aftermath of the Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act of 1990 outlawing the act of marital rape that the fiction represents: "And all this... aggression. This is

my house. I'm in bed with my wife. And I'm going to fuck her now" (19). This reveals a paradox within the Irish theatrical tradition, in the more recent use of the monologue form to express the 'crisis ordinariness' of masculinity in crisis while at the same time perpetuating the 'crisis ordinariness' of rape culture experienced by women and girls in Ireland (Berlant 2011, 10).

This essay will argue that contemporary Irish monologue drama operates didactically and in a dual register to interrogate crisis masculinity in Ireland as a discourse that is produced in culture by national media and politics, while still investing in a culture of misogyny and gender-based violence that is endemic to the perpetuation of patriarchy underpinning such nationally-specific discourse.

McPherson's *Rum and Vodka* and the monologue play *Eden* (2001) by Eugene O'Brien are examples of the monologue form used by contemporary Irish male dramatists to critically engage with the discursive production of crisis masculinity that confuses the loss of hegemonic patriarchy and its traditional values with men's lived experience of crisis. Despite the progressive politics of this criticism, the less-than-complex representations of women and girls in these texts engenders the erasure of female subjectivity, and the omnipresent culture of rape and violence that reproduces the female body in pain across these plays fails to sufficiently investigate and criticise this culture in Ireland and the systems that enable it. The popular *seanfhocal* (proverb) translated in English: "Your son is your son today, but your daughter is your daughter forever", is bifurcated to title the two sections of this essay, and should infer the transformed ideological conditions of masculinity and manhood by dominant discourses in Irish culture compared with the sustained experience of violence among other forms of subjugation that are inextricable from women's lives in Ireland.

Is é do mhac do mhac inniú

Despite its roots in romantic poetry and performance, the monologue form is emblematic of postmodernist philosophy's investigation of the condition of the 'self' (Wallace 2006, 8). Within the nationally specific theatrical tradition: "the form has been the preserve of male writers" (Singleton 2006, 260) and was deployed to express and engage with the purported crisis of masculinity in Ireland throughout the 1990's (Jordan 2006, 131). Both *Eden* and *Rum and Vodka* produce masculine identity formations that

are presented from the biased perspective of the male monologist to reveal a critical subtext and indicate the discursive production of masculinity in crisis, and explore, the harmful role of hegemonic models of masculinity that regulate the performance of masculinity in general.

The role of the audience in the production of meaning by a dramatic text is asserted by Fitzpatrick's post-structuralist argument that theatre is dialogic and speaks to its own social movement (2018, 2). Jordan (2006) further explains that: "audiences can fulfil a dialogical, adversarial function by grasping the unsaid and re-configuring the narrative" (148), to engage critically with the text and its social and political ideology. Given the privileging of subjective and biased narratives by the monologue form, it is the subtext of *Eden* and *Rum and Vodka* that critiques the discourse of crisis masculinity. The significant disparity between the narratives of the two monologists in *Eden*, the middle-aged married couple Billy and Breda, creates much of the subtext. Their respective hopes for the impending night out reveal their differing perspectives; Breda expects the attention of her husband following her weight loss; "I want to say tonight's the night, wait till ye see me tonight, you'll want me tonight" (12), while Billy is concerned with pursuing a much younger woman altogether; "that's where it's goin' to happen, me and Imelda Egan, in front of everyone" (13). This schism speaks to the fundamental disconnect within the relationship that is directly figured as a consequence of Billy's specific performance of masculinity by the play's end and the overall naivety of both monologists. This naivety is characteristic of the monologue performance and dictates that the audience; "may be thus positioned by being more aware than the character" (Jordan 2006, 148). Billy exhibits this naivety in his inability to process his own complex emotions within the conditions of his gender performance; "I'm gettin' the queer feelin' again and, 'cause I'm thinkin' of Breda, and that maybe I will go home with her, I think of me two girls, and the days they were born" (25). The feelings of guilt and shame are easily identified by the audience rather than by Billy himself to foreground and criticise the negative effects of crisis masculinity discourse that demands the suppression of emotion and affection in favour of stringent patriarchal values. This naivety is also exhibited by Michael in *Rum and Vodka*. His inability to process his feelings of guilt properly: "I suddenly wanted to play with the kids or have a bath with Maria sitting on the toilet talking to me. I put it down to being drunk" (25), reveals to the audience the character's internalisation of traditional patriarchal values. The role of the audience in the production of meaning and criticism by a dramatic text is made explicit by the monologue form as a postmodern

non-naturalistic mode of theatre and the establishment of this dialogue by contemporary Irish monologue plays criticises the discursive production of crisis masculinity while still effectively presenting a male character and his lived experience of crisis.

Despite the multiplicity of masculinities performed by the men of these contemporary Irish monologue plays, Singleton (2006) concludes that: "None of them could be described as hegemonically masculine as they have no social agency" (263). However, the extent to which models of hegemonic masculinity function to regulate masculine identity performance is still evident in the strict compliance of these male characters with 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Singleton 2006, 263). This sexuality often manifests itself in objectifying and predatory behaviour around women; Billy ambushes Imelda alone in the bathroom to explicate his explicit fantasy: "I tell her about the two of us, behind the tree, me as hard as a rock, how she's kissin' me, all over me" (109). Other rigid codes of behaviour are also internalised by Billy in *Eden*: "readin' about yesterday's soccer 'cause the boys will be shittin' on about it in the pub and ye kinda have to know what went on" (10). This strict adherence to gendered rules and regulations is explained by Middleton (1992) in 'the fantasy of manhood' which makes strange the invisible performance of masculinity to problematise the notion of being a 'real man' that men like Billy aspire to: "a fantasy ideal representing aspirations neither realisable, nor necessarily desirable if they were" (2). Billy's imagined escape into paintings of rural landscapes, and the traditional patriarchal social order that these images signify, is but an instance of his impulse to experience the 'fantasy of manhood' that blinds him to the warped logic of his sexual desire: "I have to be James Galway, I have to go to the party, I have to get off with Imelda Egan, get back on track" (27). Both of the male monologists in *Eden* and *Rum and Vodka* are pursuing the performance of hegemonic masculinity to the detriment of their responsibilities as husbands and fathers, and Michael Kimmel (2008) explains that these men are instead occupying both the timespan and spaces of Guyland: "Guyland lies between the dependency and lack of autonomy of boyhood and the sacrifice and responsibility of manhood" (7). Michael is disillusioned with his role as a familial patriarch and the obligations placed upon him within the domestic space: "But as they got older I sort of felt like I was just playing at being Mr. Daddy" (13), and instead retreats to spaces of Guyland that specifically enable his excessive drinking to escape such pressures and engage in a more desirable performance of masculinity. Ultimately, both Michael and Billy are unable to attain the

status of a hegemonic masculine figure and are left further dejected and emasculated, and this ending signals the text's criticism of aspirational models of hegemonic masculinity that serve to regulate Irish definitions of manhood and are promoted by crisis masculinity discourse.

Both monologue plays criticise crisis masculinity discourse as guilty of promulgating such a state of men's crisis and reflect Cormac O'Brien's (2021) conclusion that: "It is not, therefore, masculinity that is in crisis, but patriarchy" (29). The subtext and non-hegemonic male protagonists produced by these texts reveal the extent to which the progressive loss of traditional patriarchal values in contemporary Irish society and culture are figured as the root of lived crises by crisis masculinity discourse in order to criticise this discursive rhetoric.

Ach is í d'iníon d'iníon go deo

Though it is evident that the monologue was a well-established form within the Irish theatre tradition by the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jordan (2006) clarifies that its deployment was overwhelmingly masculinist: "Monologues increasingly became a staple of Irish drama, or more accurately, monologues written mainly by men, for male characters, with female characters all too noticeable by their frequent absence" (125). Women's representation, and lack thereof, in these male-authored monologues and the subjection of the represented female bodies to pain and violence, further perpetuated women's subjugated position within the Irish social order.

Beyond the lack of female representation generally found in Irish dramatic texts, *Eden* and *Rum and Vodka* are complicit in the erasure of female subjectivity as the characterisations of women and girls throughout these male-authored texts are filtered through the Madonna-Whore complex. This psychological complex is observed primarily in heterosexual men and explained by psychoanalytic theory as the cause of physical impotence: "Where such men love they have no desire and where they desire they cannot love" (Freud 1997, 52). Billy suffers from such physical impotence throughout *Eden*, and it is a key driving force of his narrative. Imelda is figured in the narrative provided by Billy as the object of desire and that which will cure his impotence, thereby restoring his masculinity: "me as hard as a rock and her lovin' every minute of it ... back on track" (93). Her configuration as the 'whore' that Billy would exploit to fulfil his own sexual fantasy and desire indicates that women's representation is

marred by the Madonna-Whore complex in this text. The monologue's delivery of a subjective female voice and perspective in *Bred* is undermined by her character arc that is predicated upon her desirability to men and this foregrounds the text's erasure of the complex subjective experiences of women like Imelda, which are imbricated within the narrative but represented almost exclusively from a biased and predatory perspective. The dichotomous paradigm of women's representation that results from this complex is also observed in *Rum and Vodka*. Singleton (2006) argues that the multiple different women in this play: "are constructed as servants or sites of solace" for Michael (268). Though in the beginning, their relationship was purely sexual, following their marriage Maria is now expected to be a wife and a mother. Michael and Maria's relationship is thereby illustrative of the Oedipal Complex; "There'd be dinner on the table. I stopped worrying". (25). In comparison, Myfanwy is a more easily objectified female figure and allows Michael to sate his sexual desire without having to commit to or even respect her: "I thought about what a slut she was taking a complete stranger to bed" (35). The binary approach to women's representation that is observed to a significant degree in these monologue plays rejects complex female subjectivity in service of the masculinist narratives provided by privileged male monologists.

The violence against women that is represented in *Eden* and *Rum and Vodka* is readily contextualised within the history of Irish theatre and drama. Jordan (2006) explains that: "innocence or the violation of innocence [...] is the default setting for much of Irish dramaturgy" (151), and the gendered implications of this thematic tendency are revealed in the language of rape and husbandry that is historically used to describe the colonisation of Ireland to figure this process as a defilement of innocence (Fitzpatrick 2016, 183). Rape and gender-based violence permeate the narrative of *Eden*. From the omnipresence of domestic abuse in Breda's life as it is experienced both by friends and those known to her in the community: "starin' up at her bruised eye and wonderin' how she got it" (31), to the reduction of rape to the content of gossip and chat: "he broke into the mental hospital next door and had a go at some retarded woman" (23), the female body in pain is frequently presented in the text. This acknowledges Irish women's experience of a culture of violence and rape, without committing to interrogate this culture and the normative systems that produce it. Fitzpatrick (2018) further highlights the complicity of pornography, among other high and low-culture forms of art and entertainment that include theatre, in the perpetuation of rape

culture: “Despite the emphasis in many texts, critiques, studies and performances on empathetic engagement with the victim of sexual violence, rape remains a potentially erotic subject for representation” (5). The consumption of explicit erotic fiction by Breda in the play subverts preconceptions of female sexuality that conflate it with passivity (82-83), but, this fictional and erotic representation of rape is glorified as it is insufficiently interrogated in comparison with Imelda’s very real assault by Billy that is told exclusively from his perspective. The failure of the text to sufficiently engage with the incident as it affects the female victim is also observed in *Rum and Vodka*. Other than the aforementioned instance of marital rape in the text, Myfanwy’s withdrawal of consent during sexual activity is glossed over in the narrative with little acknowledgement let alone critical engagement: “Myfanwy saw me and started kicking him away. But he kept hold of her” (46). A culture of rape and violence against women in contemporary Ireland is represented in both of these plays in the context of a lengthy history of Irish women suffering under patriarchal power systems, but the monologue form’s exclusion of victim testimony and the subjective female experience of such culture asserts that these texts fail to challenge the responsible systems and instead maintain that patriarchy is the essence and reality of Irish culture.

Irish womanhood is characterised by silence and violence in these male-authored monologue plays. This representation of Irish women’s experience of crisis fails to critically engage with the systems that produce and perpetuate this lived reality at a level of national culture beyond acknowledging its existence, and thereby the texts fail to divest in patriarchal power structures as the fixed and socially constructed cultural contexts of their fiction.

Conclusion

The ubiquity of male-authored monologues in Irish theatre is expressed in the almost identical endings of *Eden* and *Rum and Vodka*, with both of the male monologists retreating to their daughters’ bedrooms to escape and sleep. These endings once again articulate the paradox of monologue dramas in contemporary Irish theatre by presenting the harsh reality of men inculcated by discourse declaring that masculinity is in crisis, while relegating the women and girls also affected by such discourse to purely symbolic positions in the background that serve the masculinist narrative. Middleton (1992) asserts that historically; “Men have written plenty about themselves as men, little of it consciously” (4). Male dramatists of the last

few decades including McPherson and O'Brien exhibit an increased awareness of masculinity as it is performed by their male characters and the cultural and socio-political contexts of this gender performativity, and yet their evident inability to represent the complex subjectivity of their female characters and criticise the systems by which women are comparatively subjugated along the essentialist axis of the gender binary undermines the progressive politics of their dramatic texts. However, more recent dramatic productions signal hope for the future of the theatrical tradition. Monologues such as *A Cure For Homosexuality* (2005) by Neil Watkins are in effect a queering of the monologue form and serve to disrupt its established didactic tendencies, and the staging of monologue plays that include *If These Wigs Could Talk* written and performed by Panti Bliss and *Haunted* written and performed by Tara Flynn by the Abbey Theatre in 2022 signal a transformation of the monologue form from the masculinist tradition that has dominated it in Ireland.

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