

# THE DRAMA OF LOVE, RESENTMENT AND FRUSTRATION; SUPRA-REALISM IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *LOVERS*

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to trace Brian Friel's ironical views of love and marriage in his play, *Lovers* (1967), with emphasis on the supra-realistic techniques that he manipulates in his play. Love among family members is a recurrent theme in most of Friel's plays. However, it is only in *Lovers* that Friel's talent of humor, irony and satire demonstrates itself in handling the theme of romantic love. The study focuses on Friel's innovative use of retrospective time techniques and his manipulation of some devices borrowed from Berthold Brecht's epic theatre, Samuel Beckett's absurd theatre, and expressionism to express his satirical views on the Irish society where familial and religious authority may devastate romantic love.

**Keywords:** Irish Drama, Brian Friel, Epic Theatre, Supra-realism.

## INTRODUCTION

Although realism clearly stamps the majority of his drama, Brian Friel (1929-2015) has a recurrent tendency to liberate himself from the fetters of traditional dramaturgy. The study at hand will furnish the reader with a variety of supra-realistic methods and techniques that he manipulated in the play under study and that influenced Friel's drama in general. These include expressionism, Brecht's epic theatre and the absurd theatre of Beckett. *Lovers* was first produced at the Gate Theater in 1967. It is distinguished from the other plays of Friel by being composed of two separate plays: *Winners* and *Losers*. They are recommended by Friel to be billed together, though each one can be presented separately. In *Lovers*, Friel pursues the supra-realistic devices that he has already manipulated in *Philadelphia* and *The Loves of Cass Mc Guire*. Moreover, other new techniques are introduced. Andrews observes:

In both plays (*Winners* and *Losers*) Friel evinces an interest in exploring a kind of "supra-naturalism" in the use of the chorus-like commentators in *Winners* and of the Beckettian monologue in *Losers* (1995: 111).

However, *Lovers* is much simpler in technique than *Philadelphia* and *Cass*; and it is based on much more realistic grounds in terms of theme, character and language. *Lovers* is always classified with *Philadelphia*, *Cass* and *Crystal and Fox* as plays of love. It's pivotal theme, as its title suggests is love. In *Lovers*, however, love is handled from another angle; it is no longer the father-and-son love, or the love of homeland and family. The central point is the man-and-woman love, a theme that is marginally handled in *Philadelphia* and *Cass*.

The two most outstanding features of supra-realism in *Lovers* are the free handling of the issue of time and the use of commentators or stage-mangers; both devices being already familiar in *Philadelphia* and *Cass*, but they are handled in *Lovers* with a new touch of innovation. In *Winners*, Friel uses a retrospective method by telling the audience – through the commentators – that the two lovers are already dead, or by "splitting time to foreshadow death" as Pine puts it (1990: 116). This device – the use of dead characters – is frequent in expressionistic drama, and it is to be used later on in *The Freedom of The City* where the action begins after the three main characters are shot down. In *Losers*, Andy speaks directly to the audience, narrating to them his life story of love, marriage and frustration. His narrative monologues are being intermingled with scenes of the past enacted on stage with Andy himself sharing in them. Thus, Andy acts as the stage-manager of the play, a device we have already met in *The Loves of Cass Mc Guire* and is to be used later on in *Living Quarters* in the character of Sir. The presentation of the characters of Man and Woman as two detached commentators in *Winners* is closely related to the Storyteller in Brecht's epic theater, and is to be later developed in *The Freedom of The City*.

As the title indicates, the two plays *Winners* and *Losers* are thematically related, both being concerned with the issue of love. In both plays, Friel expresses an ironic skeptical attitude to love and marriage, a skepticism justifiable through latent frailties and shortcomings in the lovers' relationships. The first play is ironically titled. The two lovers, Joe and Mag win because they meet a premature death by drown being thus spared the future frustrations of an unhappy marriage. In the second play, the two middle-aged lovers, Andy and Hanna lose the vigor of their love after marriage; their passionate emotion are victimized by the pressures of family and false piety.

### **1. WINNERS**

*Winners* revolves around Margret and Joseph, two teen-agers who fall in love as students. They decide to meet on a sunny morning to study on top of the Hill of Ardangeeha that overlooks the town of Ballymore, their hometown. They prepare to pass their leaving examination at school. We are told by the two commentators that Mag is pregnant and that the couple is to get married within three weeks, after the examinations. Then, the two commentators run ahead of the action and tell us that after spending few hours on the hill, Mag and Joe take a rowing boat in a journey on the lake of Laugh Gorm where the boat upturns and they are drowned. "The greatest element of non-realism in *Winners*", Dantanus remarks, "is the experience of watching on stage characters who are supposed to be dead" (1988: 112).

### **STRUCTURE**

The play has a permanent setting, the only stage furniture is the two chairs of Man and Woman and the Hill of Ardnageeha suggested by "a large pentagonal platform, approached by four or five shallow steps all around" (Friel, 1996: 11). The play is composed of two Episodes, and its ultimate cast consists of four people: Mag, Joe, Man and Women, the latter two being the commentators who are ultimately detached of the action. Episode One opens on the two commentators sitting on each side down stage. They read often in turn from a book on the knee of each. Both of them tell us in detail about the lives and family background of Mag and Joe. Besides studying, Mag and Joe spend the time chatting, joking, mimicking the adults, clowning, quarrelling and making peace. Mag speaks incessantly while Joe is absorbed in study. Their speech is cut occasionally when Man and Woman read information about their lives in the manner of a news bulletin. Their "helpless laughter", and ridiculous imitation of adults create a humorous atmosphere that occasionally enlivens the scene. It also compensates for the lack of action in the play. A certain degree of parallel can be noticed between the Commentators' speech and the couple's chat. For example, Mag's speech about her and Joe's parents is preceded by detailed information about each one's parents. Moments of high intensity occur when they quarrel and when Mag feels the pains of pregnancy.

The tension begins to increase when details about the drowning of the couple are being told as a matter of fact. Therefore, Mag's speech begins to hold an ominous significance especially her complaint: "Joe, I'm frightened, Joe; I'm terrified" (Friel, 1996: 28), being followed by her speech about "a woman's intuition". The Episode ends on a high note of tension between the two lovers when they resume quarrelling as Joe gets exasperated at Mag who "(hasn't) shut up for five consecutive minutes since we got here!" (32). He says angrily: "You trapped me into marrying you" (3), and she calls him names for neglecting her speech. This is followed by the cold report about the search for the bodies of Margret Enright and Joseph Michael Brennan who "had disappeared" (31). "In a key moment of the play", Dantanus remarks, the Commentators transfer the central action into the past by revealing that the young couple will drown.... As this happens, the time in the scene is prolonged into near eternity, and the trivial central action takes on a more general meaning (1988: 111).

Ironically enough, Friel follows the quarrel scene with the report of their death to suggest that death has saved them similar quarrels in the future.

Episode Two opens with Joe and Mag already having had their lunch, with Joe trying to make it up to Mag for losing his temper. Again, they indulge in mimicking and clowning with "spontaneous helpless laughter" (34). On top of their hilarity Mag remembers a saying of one of the nuns: "she says that for every five minutes you laugh you -... you cry ten". Then she adds on the crown of their laughter: "we'll cry for weeks!" (35), an ominous note for the soon to be declared piece of information by the Woman that the bodies of Margret and Joseph were found "floating, fully clothed, face down in twenty-seven inches of water" (36), on Tuesday June 21. This time, Joe has his turn of lengthy speech while Mag is asleep. Throughout his speech the theme of father-and-son estrangement is reinforced. Joe tells Mag of the distance between him and his father: "We never speak at all, except may be 'Is the tea ready?' or 'Bring some coal'" (39), an image of non-communication that immediately recalls Gar and S.B. in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* When she gets up, they quarrel again and as before, Joe reconciles her by mimicking and the scene ends with laughter. On top of their delight and emotional harmony, their post mortem report is recited by Man and Woman telling us about the state Pathologist's report on the dead bodies and about the mass that was held and attended by the pupils of the two schools of Joe and Mag. "The bodies were buried in separate graves in the local cemetery, each in the family plot" (45). This statement sheds a significantly ironical shadow on Joe and Mag's intimate chat:

Mag: Someday we'll be buried together.

Joe: you're great company.

Mag: I can't wait for the future, Joe [...]. The past is over and I hate this waiting time: I want the future to happen I want to be in it - I want to be in it with you! (47).

They decide to take a boat and go in a picnic on the lake. The play ends with the following statements of Man and Woman:

Man: In the past eight months the population of Ballymore has risen from 13,527 to 13,569

Women: life there goes as usual.

Man: As if nothing had ever happened.

(Man and Woman close their texts, stand up and exit, one left, one right) (49).

Supra-realism pervades primarily the play's structure, which does not depend on a linear conventional plot; the three unities of time, place and action are rendered meaningless and needless, since the commentators control the play by their account of past, present and future events. "Man and Woman", Andrews states, are the custodians of the facts of history and their version of events foregrounds a mechanistic, linear process of cause and effect, suppressing expressive personality and concrete relation. Man and Woman are, in effect, the chill voice of doom (1995: 115).

### **FRIEL'S VIEWS OF LOVE**

Throughout Mag and Joe's speech, we are aware of certain destructive elements that might have corrupted their lives had they lived to get married. In this sense, their premature deaths spared them the trouble of being enthralled in an unhappy marriage for the rest of their lives; so, they are – in Friel's view – the "winners". Among the love-eroding elements is the flying ambition of Joe to "get a degree and be a math teacher", which he feels this marriage may hinder. In their quarrel at the end of Episode One Joe says to Mag:

You trapped me into marrying you– that's all right– I'll get a degree and be a math teacher. And no body, neither you nor your precious baby nor anyone else, is going to stop me' (31).

However, towards the end of Episode Two, Joe decides to give up studying.

It's may be not what I want but that's the way things have turned out. A married man with a family has more important things to occupy his mind besides bloody books. (47)

Maxwell argues that this may be a future "spur to the resentment over unplanned parenthood and marriage." (1973: 80). Along with lost career chances, the lack of communication and failure to express love overshadows the young couple's romantic relation. It is most apparent in Episode One in the lengthy speaking turns of the talkative Mag who disparately asks Joe to talk to her: "Joe, you'll have to talk a lot more to me, Joe. I don't care if it's not sensible talk; it's just that – you know – I feel lonely at times." (28) On the other hand, "Joe gropes for something tender to say. But he is too embarrassed." (24) Ironically, when Joe is more talkative in Episode Two, it is while Mag is fast asleep. Joe says to the asleep Mag all the "kind words" she has been craving for; a situation quite reminiscent of S.B. O'Donnell in *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, when he recalls past happy moments with his son Gar, while the latter is out in the shop. Moreover, Joe's habit of atoning for his insults to Mag – not by giving her more attention or love – but by forcing her to laugh through his ridiculous imitation of the adults, may prove unworkable in solving serious problems in the future. Another important seed of future unhappy marriage is Mag's latent class prejudice towards Joe's parents (his father is unemployed owing to his asthma and his mother is a charwoman). Her insult provokes Joe's vicious retort, which may seem too early for a couple who are to be married in three weeks' time:

Joe: Well, let me tell you madam, that my father may be temporarily unemployed, but he pays his bills; and my mother may be a charwoman, but she isn't running out to mental hospital for treatment every couple of months. And if you think the Brennans aren't swanky enough for you, then by God you shouldn't be in such a hurry to marry one of them (42).

### **FATE AS A PREDOMINANT FORCE**

The element of fate as an irresistible force predominates the play. It is an element that is newly introduced in a Friel play. It has not such a clear stamp in *Philadelphia* or *Cass*, and it will be dealt with later on in *Living Quarters* with much more emphasis. Early in the play, we are acquainted of the death by drowning that awaits Mag and Joe, a fact that spells a sense of doom on the rest of the scenes despite the fits of hilarious laughter in which Mag and Joe indulge. Their happiness is foreshadowed by our pre-knowledge of their tragic end, a device that the play shares with classical Greek plays in which the tragic end of the hero is known to the audience before the play starts. Shortly after the commentators' recitation of the report on the discovery of the drowned bodies of Mag and Joe, Mag is made to quote Shakespeare: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport;" (Friel, 1996: 40). Elmer Andrews observes: "The drama of their relationship is, from an early point, tinged with a fatalistic sense of their necessary and imminent end." (1995: 114) Moreover, the presence of the commentators emphasizes the irresistible power of fate, of which the young couple is unaware, however near it might be to them. "The commentators", Dantanus maintains, "in revealing and controlling not just past, but also future events, become a manifestation of fate." (1988:111) This is further affirmed by O'Brien's remark: "The ultra-rational, even-tempered character of their roles underlies the cruelty and irrationality of the young couple's fate." (1990: 61)

### **THE TWO COMMENTATORS AS AN ALIENATING DEVICE**

The commentators themselves are regarded by Dantanus as a modern variation on the classical "chorus" in a Greek tragedy. They provide information on the characters as the action is held during their speech. However, unlike the classical chorus, Man and Woman sit on two chairs on each edge of the stage, read from books and they are not supposed to have any personal or emotional attitude towards the characters. "Their reading is impersonal, completely without emotion: their function is to give information. At no time must they reveal an attitude to their material", as Friel stipulates in his stage directions (1996: 11). "The comments," Ruth Niel observes, "appear to give the action a very 'realistic' basis, but actually the very opposite is implied, as such information can only be given by completely unrealistic figures" (1987:

354). Their presence has a chilling and alienating effect that forces the audience to share the author's multifarious approach to the theme. In this respect, they are typical Brechtian narrators; they destroy the illusion of reality. Their narrative formal speech alternates with the dialogue of the young couple. Andrews states:

The intrusion of man and women's objective narration dispels, at least momentarily, the illusion of reality and complicates a simple empathy by enlarging our perspectives and forcing us to stand back and view Mag and Joe under the aspect of eternity." (1995: 115)

The device of the commentators shows Friel's indebtedness to the narrative form of the short story with which he started his career. George O'Brien complains: "there is something not altogether satisfactory about them on an intellectual level. Their relation to the theme is too static, too predetermined, too cerebral." (1990: 62)

The commentators' language is typical of a news-bulletin. It is a detached language that states facts objectively. Non-important but true details are included in their account of the death of Mag and Joe:

The months of June and July 1966 were the warmest and driest Ballymore has had since records have been kept. The water supply of the town had to be cut off for three hours each morning because the level of Laugh Gorm dropped by almost two feet. (Friel, 1996 :32)

Dantanus observes: "the absurd attention to irrelevant details in some of their reports... make the irrelevance of the deaths in cosmic terms even greater." (1988: 111) In their speech, the passive form is frequently used to signal impersonality and neutrality. It is only in their last lines that an attitude is shown:

Woman: life there goes on as usual.

Man: As if nothing had ever happened (49).

While Dantanus argues that "in these lines the commentators go against Friel's stage directions" (111), Niel believes that "they can only be seen as ironic and strengthen the assumption that Friel considers individual feelings and problems to be far more important than the true but meaningless facts" (354-5).

### **DIALOGUE AS A METAPHOR OF LACK OF COMMUNICATION**

The language of the lovers is naturalistic and it is used on more realistic grounds than that of *Philadelphia* or *Cass*. No fantasies, no disconnected memories or rhapsodies are there. However, Friel's theme of lack of communication is more successfully illustrated through the actual discourse of the two lovers. Almost most of the interaction between them is infelicitous. In Episode One Mag is talkative and dominating the discourse by lengthy speaking turns. Her speech is characterized by frequent pauses and topic shifts to which Mag resorts owing to the irresponsiveness of Joe who is totally absorbed in study. In Episode Two, however, they exchange roles. When Joe finishes his study, he starts to dominate the conversation. Ironically it is the sleepy Mag who is irresponsive this time. Moreover, the conversation texture is rather unfamiliar in the light of their being young lovers on top of a hill in a sunny morning. This linguistic defamiliarization is used as a means to convey the play's message. Mag and Joe are regarded by Friel as winners to meet their premature deaths; if they had lived to get married, they would have become a silent non-communicative married couple.

### **BECKETTIAN TRACES; A HOVERING DOOM**

*Winners*, like its predecessors is characterized by the quick shift of moods. The sense of a hovering doom is immediately established by the commentators' impersonal reports. The lively mood affected by the young couple interpenetrates that sense of doom. The cleverness of Joe at mimicry and the child-like, easily won Mag, enhance the joyful atmosphere of the scenes, yet the commentators' reports defeat any trace of elation. For example, Episode Two opens with Joe trying to reconcile the angry Mag. Winning her round by laughter, "they both howl with spontaneous helpless laughter, when they try to speak, they cannot finish." (Friel, 1996: 34) Immediately after that, "a wistful mood creeps over them now that the laughter is forgotten." (35) Another quarrel and another mimicry show by Joe shortly follow this. The fine romantic mood arising while the lovers are kissing is abruptly crossed by the Woman's declaration of the state Pathologist's report that "death was due to asphyxiation as a result of drowning." (45) This shift of moods contributes to the rise and fall of dramatic tension and enlivens the theatrical effect of the play that is nearly void of action. Finally, the repeated cycle of quarrel, mimics, laughter in both Episodes, the scarcity of the play's dramatic content, as well as the characteristic shift of moods and lack of action, draws the play very near to Beckett's absurd drama.

### **2. LOSERS**

*Losers* is a comedy on the plight of a love relation doomed to failure after marriage by the two lovers' submission to the forces of family. It is originally a short story titled "The Highwayman and the Saint" that has the same story and theme. John Cronin denotes that some additions were made to change the short story into a dramatic form. These include the addition of one character and the "Elegy" by Thomas Gray that replaced "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes. "The short story", Cronin states, "which is very much a satire in the O'Faolain manner on sexual repression and crawl-thumping religiosity, is very close indeed to the play it becomes." (1993: 8-9).

Like *Winners*, four characters compose the entire cast of *Losers*. They are the two middle-aged lovers (Andy Tracy and Hanna Wilson), Hanna's Mother and Cissy Cassidy her neighbor. Andy and Hanna's marriage had to be postponed

because of the death of the latter's father and the sickness of her mother who did not (and does not) want her daughter to leave her. Bed-ridden, Mrs. Wilson has a huge brass bell by her bed to call Hanna whenever she wants anything. The problem of the two lovers – while still unmarried – is that whenever the old woman suspects that they go courting downstairs, she uses the bell to disturb the couple under trivial pretexts. Every night, Andy and Hanna are called upstairs to the old woman's bedroom to share Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Cassidy their nightly rosary and prayers to St Philomena, the latter being the favorite saint of Mrs. Wilson. She has turned her bedroom into a small altar with candles and flowers and the saint's statue. Every night she significantly insists on quoting Father Peyton's saying: "The family that prays together stays together" (66), which turns to be true in Andy and Hanna's story. Getting married at last, Andy and Hanna had soon to move to the Wilsons' house because of the bad health of the old woman. Thus, the mother's wish to keep her daughter beside her is achieved. A struggle of power took place between Mrs. Wilson and Andy, which ended by the latter's defeat. The authority she derives from feigned heartache and false piety causes the passion of the two lovers to die out. Hanna gradually turns to be another copy of her mother. Andy withdraws into the backyard of the terrace house with the binoculars of his deceased father-in-law who used to spend most of his time staring at the gray wall through his binoculars. History repeats itself and Andy takes to the same habit, staring at nothing on the wall of the backyard garden. This is where Hanna's father was found dead. Ironically, this is where we find Andy in the beginning and leave him in the end of the play.

### **SUPRA-REALISTIC EFFECTS**

In *Losers*, the supra-realistic effect is immediately settled from the very beginning. In his direction for the setting, Friel stipulates: "there should be no attempts at realistic division of the stage areas, no dividing walls, no detailed furnishing: frames will indicate doors etc., etc." (51). Non-realism is further asserted, as Andy [...] when he becomes aware of the audience, he lowers the glasses slowly, looks at the audience, glances cautiously over his shoulder at the kitchen to make sure there is no one in the house overhears him, and then speaks directly and confidentially down to the auditorium. (Friel, 1996: 51)

By directly addressing the audience, Andy belongs to Friel's group of non-realistic characters, including Cass and the Commentators who readily destroy the fourth wall convention required by the illusion of reality. Through Andy's speech, that is interpenetrated by scenes from the past in which he is involved, the story is unfolded.

### **THE STRUCTURE BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT**

*Losers* is a one actor in which the scenes follow one another according to the narrative of Andy who acts as a stage manager and controls the unfolding of the story. In this, he is reminiscent of Cass in *The Loves of Cass Mc Guire*. Unlike her, however, Andy is not haunted unwillingly by past memories. It is he who summons those memories from the "good times" of the past and enacts them on stage. While the past reminded Cass of failure and frustrations, it represents for Andy the glorious days of real love and passion, which the present denies. There is no conflict within him between the past and the present because he has already laid arms and withdrawn into the past, leaving the present to Hanna and her mother. He proves to be a more easily yielding fighter than Cass. Through Andy's narration we become aware of two stages of the story: before his marriage to Hanna who was warm and devoted to him, and after marriage with a climactic confrontation scene with Mrs. Wilson. The two stages are separated by a slow coming down of light and "a total black out for about a minute" (Friel, 1996: 68).

Andy's narrative speech predominates the play that includes five scenes being linked by Andy's speech to the audience. The play begins and ends with Andy looking into the binoculars and speaking to the audience. The binoculars and the direct address to the audience serve as metaphors of loneliness, non-communication and the estrangement of family relation, a recurrent theme of Friel in most of his plays. Andy speaks confidentially to the audience, telling them of the old days of love and passion with Hanna and also about the present alienation between them. The unity of time is nonexistent; Andy speaks to the audience in the present, while the scenes are summoned from the past to dramatize certain situations in which Andy himself is involved. Thus, at the end of a past scene, Andy returns to speak to the audience. Thus, the scenes are arranged neither chronologically, nor according to the chain of cause and effect, but according to the sequence of Andy's memories.

### **LOVE AS LOST BETWEEN TWO STAGES**

The first stage in the story of Andy and Hanna is dominated by the struggle of the two still unmarried lovers against the strict vigilance of Mrs. Wilson. They discover that "long silences (make) her suspicious" (Friel, 1996: 55). Hanna suggests that Andy recite poetry during their courting "just to make a bit of a noise" (56). Ironically enough, Andy knows no poetry but Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". A hilariously farcical lovemaking scene is dramatized when very suddenly almost violently, Hanna flings herself on him so that he falls back. He is momentarily at a loss. But this has happened before, many times, and he knows that this is his cue to begin his poem. His recitation is strained and too high and too loud – like a child in school memorizing meaningless facts. Throughout his recital, they court feverishly (57). The farce is culminated when [t]hey forget everything. The clanging of the bell shatters silence – and Hanna breaks away roughly from him, jumps to her feet and is almost trembling with fury. Her jumper and skirt are twisted (59)

In spite of all this Andy believes that “they were good times”, “they were rare times too” (56), for Hanna was devoted to him and she hated the tricks of her “crafty” mother.

In the second stage of the story, after the two lovers’ marriage, it is only Andy who is struggling against Mrs. Wilson, as Hanna has submitted to her mother’s wish to stay with her. She no longer gets as furious as before at “the bloody bell”, when the old woman calls her to end a nice session with Andy. She even turns gradually to be like her mother:

But whatever it was that happened to her – well, I mean to stay, I think I know what happened. But, like, to see a woman that had plenty of spark in her at one time and then to see her turn before your very eyes into a younger image of her mother, by God it’s strange, I tell you, very peculiar. (59)

As a gesture of revolt, Andy refuses to join the three women in the rosary upstairs at Mrs. Wilson’s bedroom, and insists on saying his prayers downstairs. The strategy of the bell has also changed markedly. Before marriage, it was the long silences that caused the old woman to use the bell to destroy their courting. After marriage, however, “it only went when Hanna and me started talking [...]. Let us start chatting and the clanging would damn near shake the house!” (69).

The climax of the power struggle between Andy and Mrs. Wilson is reached one night when he knows from the paper that the Pope has announced that “the devotion of all Roman Catholics to Saint Philomena must be discontinued at once because there is little or no evidence that such a person ever existed” (70). Andy intended to explode the news at Mrs. Wilson’s face in a dramatic scene. In a boisterous scene he comes to the house late, drunk, singing and blaspheming the retired saint. Unable to bear the shock, Mrs. Wilson has a heart attack and goes to Cissy’s house with Hanna who swears: “He’ll pay for this. By Good he’ll pay for this.” (75) From that day on, Hanna sides with her mother and turns against him. Thus, the power struggle ends with Mrs. Wilson victorious and Andy quite subdued:

And then, when the bell rings I got up to the aul’woman’s room for the prayers. Well, I mean to say anything for a quiet life. Hanna sleeps there now, as a matter of fact, just in case the aul’woman should get an attack during the night. Not that that’s likely. The doctor says she’ll go on forever (75).

Ironically enough, the old woman still preserves the nightly rituals with the altar, the flowers and the candles for a secret saint in her mind. When Andy asks Cissy about it, she says: “We have no statue, true enough; but we have a saint in our mind even though we’ve no figure for it. [...] Wild horses will not drag that out of us.” (76) The play ends with a short scene between Hanna and Andy who tries timidly to remind her of their happy days, but the attempt falls flat to Hanna and he withdraws back to the binoculars and the empty wall where we found him in the beginning. The play ends with a bitter note of loneliness, illustrating the distance that has come to separate the two lovers.

### **FRIEL’S COMEDY AND HIS SATIRICAL VIEW OF LOVE**

Friel manipulates his talent for comedy to convey his ironical view of love and marriage. He regards Hanna and Andy as “losers”, as they lost their love, or perhaps they sacrificed it “for a quiet life,” as Andy puts it. They did not have the strength and courage enough to defend their love against the stifling authority of old age and false piety. So, they chose to live in a state of death-in-life, a state that is no better than Joe and Mag’s premature death. They lead a life void of the passion that was once between them in the past. Apparently, Friel wants to say that this is the life that would have awaited Joe and Mag had they lived to get married. In this sense, all of the four lovers are “losers”; none of them wins.

*Losers* is a highly comedic play with apparent satirical aims. It is among few of Friel’s plays – Kathleen Ferris tells us – that “provide outright belly laughs” (117). Kathleen Ferris tells us that *Winners* and *Losers* “were very successful” both in Dublin and on Broadway. In his review of *Losers*, Ulick O’Conner wrote: “*Losers* is perhaps the funniest play to be seen on the Irish stage for many a year. At times the audience were reduced to that state of chaotic disruption which only high comedy can bring” (1967: quoted in Ferris, 1997: 120).

A great deal of laughter is aroused by certain absurdities, such as Andy’s binoculars through which he stares at the empty wall. “There is nothing to watch” (51) “Anyway, most of the time I sit with my eyes closed.”(52) There is also the ridiculous recitation of an elegy during courting, which adds to the absurd flair that is crowned by the loud ringing of the “bloody bell” that “would be enough to waken the dead.”(49) The comic effect arises also from the unequal and not openly declared power struggle between Andy and his mother-in-law, against whose weapons (including the huge bell, heart attacks – feigned at needed moments – and excessive religiosity), he could do nothing. Even in the rebellious scene in which Andy revolts against her and her saint, Mrs. Wilson’s position is markedly strengthened and Andy is ultimately defeated for he loses Hanna. Kathleen Ferris’ commentary is worth quoting:

Even though all our sympathy goes out to Andy, even though we cheer him on in his rebellion against the tyranny of old age and false piety and feigned weakness, which stifles love and passion and all hope of happiness, yet we laugh at his defeat. In Irish comedy, laughter and defeat frequently go together. (1997: 121)

### **FRIEL’S SATIRICAL LANGUAGE AND HIS ANTI-CATHOLIC ATTITUDE**

The way Friel presents the Catholic characters in the play reflects an anti-Catholic attitude that recurs in many of his plays, like *Philadelphia Here I Come!*, *Faith Healer*, *Wonderful Tennessee* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Friel’s overuse of religious terms in *Losers* uncovers his fore-grounding Catholic education at St. Patrick’s College, at the age of 16. He left school two years later after a failed experience at priesthood, and gave up the cleric for the rest of his life. The attempt at priesthood was for him as he himself states, “A very disturbing experience.” (Friel, 2000: 30) The repetitive use of

worshipful cliches and prayer's diction, 'by God' 'Thanks be to God' 'God, have mercy on us this day and this night', 'I'm blessed' 'rosary' etc., emphasizes Friel's satirical attitude of false piety and repressive religiosity that stifle human sensation. Typical of this also is the reversion of father Peyton's saying: "the family that prays together stays together" by the drunk Andy into "the family that drinks together, sinks together."

The comedy derives also from the clear satire at Mrs. Wilson's and her next-door friend, Mrs. Cassidy's religious piety. The altar, the rosary, St. Philomena, Father Peyton, and the empty pious statements of Mrs. Cassidy are all targets of unfailing satire. Although Friel uses the everyday speech of realistic drama, religious language is cleverly used to highlight the play's message. There is an obvious contrast between Andy's colloquial speech and Mrs. Wilson's language that tends to the formal register. She insists on calling him 'Andrew' and the diction of repeated prayers endows her speech with high formality.

### **SUPRA-REALISTIC SETTING**

As in *Philadelphia*, the stage in *Losers* is divided into three equal areas: the backyard terrace on the right, the kitchen in the middle and the bedroom on the left, which is raised on a shallow platform to suggest upstairs. The imaginary divisions between the stage areas, the simple furnishing and the frames that are used to indicate doors suggest the fluency of the setting. The supra-realistic touch is clear in the large draft screen that hides the bedroom when it is not needed for the action. During the scenes, the characters are made to place it or remove it when needed, a device that jars with the illusion of reality.

Unlike *Winners*, the alienating effects are not observed in *Losers*. Andy's presence is by no means comparable to that of the two commentators who are ultimately detached from action in *Winners*. Although he resembles Cass in that both of them speak directly to the audience about their past life, there are remarkable points of dissimilarity between them. In Cass's case, we feel alienated from her because it is made clear from beginning to end that she does not belong to the world of reality. In the beginning, she is haunted by memory sequences and dreams, which she is at pains to fight and by which she is finally, defeated. By the end she learns the trick of transforming the sordid realities of the past into an idealized myth of a happiness that never was. As for Andy, although he cannot hold to the present and consequently, he withdraws to the past with his binoculars and empty wall, his past is real and not transformed into fantasies; "they were good times" which his present denies him. This is why we sympathize with Andy though we cannot help laughing at him. *Losers* partakes of Beckett's comedies in certain aspects. These include the simplicity of action, or as Richard Pine remarks, it has "little dramatic content in the conventional sense. In this sense, it has more in common with Beckett's work than anything else Friel has written, except *Faith Healer*." (1990: 75) There is also the sense of poignancy and distress that is carefully blended with high comedy. To this point Ferris refers in her statement: "*Losers* illustrates perfectly the human tendency to laugh at that which is unhappy, the principle upon which Samuel Beckett based his comedies." (1997: 121) Most significant also is "the nihilistic visual imagery" – as Pine describes it (1990: 75) – of the binoculars that Andy resorts to in a "gesture" to escape an unhappy emotionless present just to kill time. Andy calls it "a gesture I make" (52); it is a futile gesture of escape, of male defeat within a female victorious majority. Ironically enough, he "learned the dodge" from his deceased father-in-law; "these are his glasses. And this is where he was found dead." (52) Apparently, both men resort to the same "dodge" for nearly the same reasons. The binoculars become, as Dantanus puts it "a supra-real symbol of escape and isolation." (1988: 113)

### **CONCLUSION**

The 1960s witnessed the emergence of Friel's dramatic talent. In this decade he wrote the three consecutive experimental plays: *Philadelphia Here I Come!*, *The Loves of Cass Mc Guire* and *Lovers*. In those three plays, the tendency for supra-realism and experimentation with form and technique began to show up in Friel's dramaturgy, a tendency that is to be further developed later on in his later plays. Most of the experimental techniques that he adopted in *Lovers*, including expressionism, epic theatre and Beckett's absurd drama, are like promising seeds that are to flourish later on, to enrich his dramaturgy and established a sure-footed hand in the theatre

Despite the humor and the highly comedic tone of many scenes in both *Winners* and *Losers*, the two plays represent Friel's dismal view of love and marriage. In both plays, He ridicules all the forces that defeat love, including family pressures, old age, fake religiosity, and lack of courage on the part of lovers. Dantanus observes, "In spite of the energy and the will to live and love that those characters so obviously possess, circumstances combine to frustrate them." (1988: 114). However, it is not only circumstances that kill love; it is rather certain inherent weaknesses in the lovers themselves that entail the tragic destiny of a noble passion. In Andy and Hanna's case, it is their lack of enthusiasm to defend their love against the stifling authority of a tyrannical mother that turns their love into resentment. In Joe and Mag's case, it is made clear through the delineation of their characters that they have the seeds of potential estrangement and lack of communication. Such faults would have plagued their love, had they the chance to live and get married. As Claudia Harris puts it, "the message resounds: marriage is at best, an enterprise to avoid." (1997: 67).

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