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**HUMAN ABSURDITY AND EMPTY IDEALISM  
IN BRENDAN BEHAN'S  
*THE QUARE FELLOW***



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**Human Absurdity and Empty Idealism  
in Brendan Behan's  
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Brendan Behan, the Irish playwright, is remembered for his quick retorts and incredible rapport with his listeners. Behan always had listeners for he always had a message. Only for some people the message was lost amidst the embroilment he generated when he was in sight. Now absent himself, the words remain stripped of the person who animated them but full of the zest that palpitates through his work.

Behan's work, and particularly *The Quare Fellow*, shares a twofold message: art is an agent of truth and the truth about society and the individual is that they have lost all moral being. Criticism is directed at both the individual and society for appropriating mechanisms of power and constructs of truth that make life easier but shallower. Humankind has broken out of a clear anatomy of values and into the entrapment of moral rubble. Therefore, the prison is the total world from which there is no escape. Behan's characters as prisoners are products of a culture and consciousness that alienates logic from reality and the image of authority from life. They are slaves, not to their acts, but to the rhetoric of power, dominance, and subservience, where human logic is dominant and human sensibility subservient. They are also mouthpieces of a playwright that believes that society's moral imbalances are demonstrated through the talk exchanges of its outcasts.

Behan investigates, not the relationship of characters *per se*, but their relationship to their own assumed categories of power. These dynamics he entertains through language. Language provides the structure in which they think and speak both as the characters of Behan, the Irishman who found himself at odds with Britain, the system, to say the least, and as the prisoners of a system that otherwise prohibits them. It is this language that we have to dissect if we want recourse to the political and social contexts which Behan castigated in person and which he explores in text. His characters chart the behavioral processes that marginalize individualism and morality and give rise to the reductionist logic of binary oppositions whereby utilitarianism assumes the foreground.

Coherent readings of his work and the study of specific passages not only do justice to Behan, the man of quick answers and concentrated wit, but also demonstrate the writer's condensed ability to communicate the gaps and absurdities in the logic of organized humanity. He criticizes the exploitation of potential and morality, a criticism evident even in small yet poignant passages, which represent the enormity of his desire to transform the world. It is not the nature of reality that concerns him but the logic that sustains it. Since such is his concern, the language in the conversational tid-bits and specific conversational topic-units within *The Quare Fellow* becomes the register of that logic that measures his indignation of the condition of the individual and society.

In *The Quare Fellow*, the characters share among themselves the production of spontaneous occurring speech. This speech is subject-colored by the fact that these characters reside in a prison and by the responsibility to carry over to the audience the playwright's concerns. In this case Behan's concerns manifest themselves in one main goal: that of passing judgement on society. Whether the characters talk about the weather, the hierarchy of convicts or their mattresses as opposed to feather beds, they always act as mouthpieces of the playwright and his indignation against society, society as the microcosm of the prison or as the macrocosm of the world outside.

Interspersed among the course of ordinary prison events such as the topping of a convicted prisoner are conversational topics whose contents are discussed with ardor by the prisoners whose verbal capacities point to the absurd qualities that human beings harbor. One of the conversational topic-units that is not sustained for very long but makes more than a resounding note is the one on how the prisoners prefer mattresses to feather beds since the former cater to better smoking. This quality smoking comes about especially if the mattresses have been donned with bits of the Bible since such a combination is irresistibly inflammatory. In the rest of the paper we will focus our attention on the following excerpt from the dialogue among the prisoners in the first act of *The Quare Fellow*, in which "quality smoking" is the main topic. We will approach it from the discourse analytic perspective.

PRISONER A. Them young gets have too much old gab out of them altogether. I was a Y.P. in Walton before the war and I can tell you they'd be quiet boys if they got the larrying we used to get.

OTHER FELLOW. And talking so disrespectfully about the Bible.

NEIGHBOUR. Belied and they needn't; many's the time the Bible was a consolation to a fellow all alone in the old cell. The lovely thin paper with a bit of mattress coir in it, if you could get a match or a bit of tinder or any class of light, was as good a smoke as ever I tasted. Am I right, Dunlavin?

DUNLAVIN. Damn the lie, Neighbour. The first twelve months I

done, I smoked my way half-way through the book of Genesis and three inches of my mattress. When the Free State came in we were afraid of our life they were going to change the mattresses for feather beds. And you couldn't smoke feathers, not, be God, if they were rolled in the Song of Solomon itself. But sure, thanks to God, the Free State didn't change anything more than the badge on the warders' caps. (21)

The conversational topic takes off when the characters Other Fellow, Neighbour, and Dunlavin are left alone by two young prisoners who go away leaving the impression that they are irreverent about the Bible. It is the Other Fellow's response to Young Prisoner 1's utterance "And talking so disrespectfully about the Bible" that ignites the discussion on the invincible combination of a mattress and a Bible. In fact the Other Fellow seems to serve as the person who titles the conversational topic and moves over for the Neighbour and Dunlavin to grapple with the issue while he remains silent.

The Other Fellow's utterance begins with "And" connecting what is to the right of the conjunct, "talking so disrespectfully about the Bible", with what is to the left of the conjunction which is left unsaid. What is left unsaid is the Other Fellow's reproachful attitude towards the two young prisoners that have just departed. They have been in general disrespectful to their elders and have talked "dirty" about women. To top it all up the last thing they do is engage in religion-bashing. Since it is their last ignominy, and the most negative one, the Other Fellow retains it the most in a trail of thoughts that exposes only this last part about religion, leaving all the other young prisoners' trespasses unmentioned.

This reproachful attitude is borne out in the Other Fellow's emotive use of language. The linguistic cues registering emotion are, on the one hand, the participial phrase used and, on the other, the intensifier "so", and, more significantly, the conjunct "And".

The Other Fellow's enunciation is not encoded in a complete sentence, but in a participial phrase. The lack of deictic features, such as tense and aspect, as exponents of features of specific events or processes, contributes to the generality of the concept encoded in the participial phrase, thus rendering it more of a comment than a description or narration of specific events. And, as is clear, emotive use of language is rather endemic to issuing comments and passing judgement than to describing states of affairs or relating events.

This clause, moreover, is conjoined to what is left unsaid with the conjunct "And". "And", as a structural cohesive device, is used to relate what follows it to Prisoner A's preceding enunciation. However, as discourse particle, "And" is used as an additive marker, the term *additive* being used "to suggest something rather looser and less structural than is meant by COORDINATE" (Halliday and Hasan:234), linking "a series of points all

contributing to one general argument" (ibid:236). In one word, the Other Fellow's choice of "And" here, serves to orientate his interlocutors, and ultimately his audience, towards interpreting his ensuing utterance as related to the previous one, i.e., within the same framework, in this case, of castigating the Young Prisoners' general misconduct. So, what is left unsaid, the first part of this conjunction, is the Other Fellow's concurrence with Prisoner A's utterance and, consequently, with his critical attitude towards the young prisoners' misdemeanor.

Indeed, the Other Fellow's utterance could be couched in the negative mode: "Not only that ... but also talking...", which would explicitly affirm and reinforce Prisoner A's point of view, but also emphasize the second part of his conjunction. Halliday and Hasan (:246) write that "there are specifically EMPHATIC forms of the 'and' relation occurring only in an internal sense, that of 'there is yet another point to be taken in conjunction with the previous one'. This in fact is essentially the meaning that is taken on by the 'and' relation when it is a form of internal conjunction".

Therefore, it could be claimed that, although "And" in the case at issue is part of the "ideational" component of the language used in this part of the discourse—since it relates the content of what is said to the semantic content of what has already been said—it primarily functions at the interpersonal level of the discourse, and, as such, it is used to register the speaker's attitude towards what he is saying. Consequently, "And", too, in this case, serves to encode emotive language, since it functions socially (interlocutors managing a certain topic), expressively (the speaker expressing HIS agreement non-semanticly with what has been said), and conatively (the speaker orienting his audience towards a certain attitude, registering his indignation) (Jakobson, 1960).

Van Dijk (1979) called this type of function of the connective "and" pragmatic, as it expresses relations between speech acts. He writes "its function may be characterized in terms of concepts like 'addition' or 'continuation', which are of course concepts to be defined in terms of relations between speech acts, or between moves or turns in a conversation" (450). Adopting this view, and since emotive language is more constructively analysed from the perspective of speech acts, we can claim that the Other Fellow's utterance constitutes a speech act whose illocutionary force can be subsumed under the intent of Prisoner A's speech act on account of the use of "And".

"So", as has already been said, contributes to the emotive language of the text, as it is used to intensify the semantic load of "disrespectfully". Moreover, as an intensifier, "so" cataphorically points to an *as*-indefinite-marked<sup>1</sup> clause, which is missing. This feature, not only adds an exclamatory tinge to the whole utterance, but also leaves it to the audience to conjure up images and degrees of disrespectful conduct regarding the Bible. This, too, is

another feature of the emotive language used in this discourse.

All in all, it is these features of the Other Fellow's utterance that strengthen and enhance the audience's complacency about and acquiescence to the "security" of the set frame of perpetuated ideologies and accepted morality, only to be later toppled at the stark realization that the convicts' reverence toward the Bible is not owed to its well apprehended and accepted religious and moral semiosis, but to its practical efficacy.

Saving the religion topic for last, the Other Fellow creates a stronghold that his interlocutors have to respect and probably dwell on. It seems as if the Other Fellow's utterance has more or less posited the domains within which the Neighbour and Dunlavin should now move, that of reverence toward the Bible, since the young prisoners, who exhibited such reprehensible behavior, are condemned and certainly do not need to be emulated. The Other Fellow does not only create the limitations within which the Neighbour's and Dunlavin's attitudes toward their conversational topic should move but he also reinforces the audience's expectations.

The word "Bible" has a certain meaning in that its use projects a version of reality determined by a certain ideology. This "reality" includes notions of reverence, worship, veneration, holy fear, piety, divinity, as well as of relief and consolation, to mention only a few, the whole set of which is "jogonomically" activated.<sup>2</sup> The audience, therefore, expects the alleged readers to be anything else but irreverent toward the Bible. All the more so because these expectations have been further heightened by the emotive language used by the Other Fellow, who, in his preceding speech act, not only joins forces with Prisoner A in disparaging the young prisoners, but also views their abuse of the Bible as the epitome of their misconduct.

But the Neighbour and Dunlavin trample on these expectations and do indeed talk disrespectfully about the Bible. But before they do, the Neighbour insists, in his next utterance, on feigning the expected morality and accepted ideology conjured up and perpetuated by mentions of the Bible. For a moment he confines his remarks about the Bible to the realm that the Other Fellow has posited and which consolidates the expectations of the audience with his utterance "many's the time was a consolation to a fellow all alone in the old cell". The ironical impact of this utterance lies in the fact that it further suspends what is to follow, which is the total reversal of all ideological complexes and logonomic systems, which constitute the reality for the audience, i.e., the reality of our western society.

From then on the Neighbour's and Dunlavin's utterances move away from showing respect toward the Bible and move toward being practical as they relate how the Bible, reduced to ordinary paper, can prove perfect igniting material along with a mattress for smoking. Such is their emphasis on smoking that Dunlavin relates how he was afraid that the Free State would upgrade their mattresses into feather beds, a case where not even the Bible can

help. So once again Dunlavin starts from the premise that the Bible possesses axiomatically limitless quality only to override that quality and produce a powerless Bible. The Bible starts out as a document to be respected in the Other Fellow's utterance, then as a document to be used jointly with another commodity in the Neighbour's speech as well as in part of Dunlavin's and then ends up being totally discarded as useless when its cognitable material, the mattress, is hypothetically done away with. Not only is the Bible discredited but is done so with Dunlavin's evocation of God's name twice ("be God", "thanks to God").

The Neighbour's first utterance, "Many's the time the Bible was a consolation to a fellow all alone in the old cell", issues a speech act which is an assertion. He is asserting, making a statement about the availability of the Bible in a cell and its mitigating effects on a prisoner. However, the language used in the discourse continues being emotive, since, apart from the use of vocatives, modals and the imperative form, even in the declarative mode, words used, such as "consolation" being predicated of the Bible, or value-judgement epithets, such as "good" and "lovely", render the statements non-amenable to any verification. What is significant, though, is that it is this type of emotive language used by Behan that bears the shocking impact that his "commentary" makes on his audience. The most productive perspective, as has already been noted, in which we could view the discourse generated by these specific interlocutors would be that of speech-act theory, which emphasizes the functional diversity of language-utterances.

Language is not just an instrument of communication. It is a way of being heard, not only of being spoken to, but of speaking to, of being understood, believed, obeyed or respected. In one word language is an instrument of power. However, for Behan's society's outcasts, the prisoners, language lacks all power because they cannot be heard, they cannot speak to, they cannot address the Free State about their grievances, they cannot be respected or obeyed; in one word, they do not have the power to impose reception of their linguistic acts. Their only listeners, their fellow prisoners, projections of themselves, are not worthy of listening to their speech acts.

It is this imprisonment of their language that saturates and corrodes their linguistic acts to the status of petty protestations, not about real issues that might concern human beings who have self-respect and dignity, but about issues that sustain and underpin their dehumanized condition. It is this knowledge that makes them use language for "communicating" amongst themselves at the level of exchanging petty linguistic acts stripped of any social significance, since there is no social structure in the microcosm of a prison constituted and reproduced by language. But they can still perform their linguistic acts parroting "real", "empowered" language.

It is in this framework, therefore, that their linguistic acts should be analysed. Since they cannot invest their linguistic acts with the intention to

command, request, complain, protest or warn, as they have no worthy listeners for meaningful uptake, they too are unworthy speakers. Their speech acts seem to have been divested of any social potential. They have been in fact divested of the linguistic "capital", which alone gives value to one's linguistic acts. Consequently, they are unworthy of grappling with real life issues and as such their existence is reduced to the dehumanized condition their speech acts seem to acknowledge.

The sense of the value of one's linguistic acts, the linguistic capital, which is inextricably tied up to his sense of his own position in a topography of the social space, is registered, not only in the locutionary part of the speech acts one performs, i.e., in the grammatico-semantic structure of his utterances, but primarily in the illocutionary force potential one is in a position to endow his speech acts with. It is the wide ranging potential of the illocutionary force, i.e., of the intent with which utterances are vested, that project speakers to a variability of roles in a structured social system. And it is this wide ranging potential that can effect linguistic as well as non-linguistic changes too, what have been called perlocutionary effects (Austin, 1962).

Not only is the potential for diversified illocutionary acts the hallmark of one's own social identity but it is one's capacity to manipulate language in subtle ways so as to encode more than one illocutionary act in the same utterance that enhances one's social prowess. Therefore, interacting speakers quite often consciously inscribe their primary intention in speech acts whose grammatosyntactic form bears very little resemblance to the grammatosyntactic structure of the paradigmatic illocutionary act for registering that intention. In such cases we speak of indirect speech acts which bear two illocutionary forces, a secondary or direct one and a primary or indirect one.

Behan's society's outcasts are also "linguistic outcasts" because language sustains our society as it is also sustained by it. Most of the speech acts performed in the short discourse we are considering are couched in the declarative mode, one of the three major sentence-types in English, together with the imperative and the interrogative. The predominant and literal illocutionary force associated with this mode is that of stating. However, since the prisoners' language is itself "imprisoned" and consequently impoverished, for the reasons outlined above, the use of this mode is primarily dictated by their predicament. But the social commentary intended by Behan emanates from the unforced attempt to "read" primary illocutionary forces in the characters' constative linguistic acts, even if their producers themselves are not, or cannot be, intent on communicating them.

In what follows, therefore, we will identify two sides to the speech acts issued by the characters of the play in this short dialogue. Firstly, we will analyse them as speech acts of the characters *vis-a-vis* each other. This aspect of the characters' linguistic behaviour in the play unfolds in the examination of the direct illocutionary force of their speech acts. However, at the

same time, we will examine the same speech acts as speech acts of the playwright *vis-a-vis* his audience. And it is in this dimension of the speech acts that we will identify their primary illocutionary force, i.e., the playwright's intent in putting these utterances in his characters' mouths.

Following Searle (1969, 1975), therefore, we can assume the simultaneous performance of two illocutionary acts subsumed in one speech act. These illocutionary acts are determined by distinct illocutionary forces vested in the utterance. Or, to be more specific, one can assume, giving a twist to Searle's (1975) theory of indirect speech acts, that the Neighbour's speech act of assertion harbors two illocutionary forces, the secondary being a statement of the reality that already exists. The primary illocutionary force, however, opens up vistas of conversation since lexical items such as "many's the time" and "a fellow" situate the episode in a generality that needs to be brought down to specific times and specific fellows, one of whom will be the speaker himself. The generalization punctuates the universality of what the Neighbour is going to relate and enlists his listeners' support since it lumps them together along with him in a larger framework, one in which a fellow, any fellow, any one of themselves, can find himself in the predicament of being alone in a cell. The assertion is measured on quantitative elements, "many's the time" and qualitative elements, "alone," "old cell," that set up a situation where the Bible fits in. The temporal element emphasizes repetition over vast stretches of time; the qualitative element stresses solitude in an old cell reminiscent of hermits. And of course the Bible commands situations where time and introspective solitude, both referred to in the Neighbour's utterance, are emphasized.

The Neighbour's next statement indeed reverts to the personal as he asserts his individual experience about the practicability of the Bible when he says "The lovely thin paper with a bit of coir in it, if you could get a match or a bit of tinder or any class of light was as good a smoke as ever I tasted". Even though the beginning of his utterance seems a little strange as he talks about the paper and the mattress, we are not finally hit with the realization of the fact that he is talking about the Bible as a felicitator of his smoking habits until the last part of his statement, "was as good a smoke as ever I tasted". The difficulty exists because we struggle to make out the relationship between the Bible and the "lovely thin paper". The Neighbour is not flouting the maxim of relevance (Grice, 1975) but is clearly subjugating the holy document to the material it is made out of. The Neighbour's speech act continues being an assertion and its secondary illocutionary force continues being a statement about his belief about the Bible. The emanating primary illocutionary force of the Neighbour's speech act, however, is a downplay of the importance of religion in view of material necessities.

The Bible starts off being a highly acceptable consolation gadget in the Neighbour's first speech act. The circumstance to which it is applied is

also reverential as the Bible can comfort the lost souls of prisoners. So, admittedly, the example moves in the orderly world of tragedy where we expect the thrust of institutionalized religion toward the direction of these lost souls and their rescue into the world of propriety. But the movement away from this orderly context comes when the Neighbour engulfs the Bible in the unusual context of derangement of the normal perspective from which we view the holy document. Not only is the character far away from the orderly context he should have entered, which is determined by the ideologies invoked via the Bible, but he consciously uses this machinery that would have aided his salvation in his movement away from it. Frustration, or at best humor, results from this clashing of incongruities between what we expect to be true and what actually the Neighbour tells us is true.

The Neighbour's purpose is to commit his audience to the belief that the Bible can console even though the way of consolation is, to say the least, subversive. Although his speech acts constitute assertions, he asserts a world that is created in his very utterances and it is this dimension that imposes a rather unusual for representative speech acts direction of fit (Searle, 1979), that from his words to the world. The illocutionary point of assertions is to get the words, or more specifically their propositional content, to match the world (Searle, 1976). The Neighbour's words, instead, are only the vehicle to bring him and his audience to portray a world of prison where the Bible assumes an irreverential role as far as its mainstream applications go. The Bible and religion in general are not totally discarded but they are put to material use.

After the Neighbour displays his opinion about the Bible, he asks Dunlavin's opinion, "Am I right, Dunlavin?". Although in the interrogative mode, the Neighbour's illocutionary act is a directive. It expresses the Neighbour's wish for Dunlavin's prospective verbal reaction. However, his utterance is yet another instance of the dynamics of the speech acts he issues, as it clearly functions on two levels. On the face of it, it is a question and as such it acts as a request. Searle (1979) would class it as a directive since it definitely purports to manipulate his interlocutor's verbal behavior. At a more profound level, however, it functions as a directive of a different kind, since it endeavors to enlist Dunlavin's support in the argument made about the Bible and its practicability. It solicits Dunlavin's response as if knowing beforehand that Dunlavin's statements will affirm what he has been saying. As such the primary illocutionary force of this speech act assumes the tinge of a predictive since the Neighbour expresses the belief that what he has said will be the case and the intent that Dunlavin believe that it is the case.

Dunlavin's utterances double the belief that indeed the Bible has proven indispensable on many occasions. "Damn the lie, Neighbour" emphasizes that the Neighbour is more than right. Dunlavin's first utterance, "Damn the lie ..." doubles the effect that the Neighbour's first utterance,

"Belied and they needn't; many's the time the Bible was ... old cell", had since they both start with the reverential order within which the Bible is placed at an indisputably high level. And as the Neighbour's utterance conforms to the expectations about the Bible, so does Dunlavin's, which echoes one of the ten commandments and which sets Dunlavin apart from any religious transgressors. Therefore, the primary illocutionary force of Dunlavin's speech-act, far from being an order—despite the imperative mode "Damn the lie, Neighbour"—is a concurrence with what has been said, asserts to the Neighbour's credibility and agrees to the claims made by his interlocutor. The secondary illocutionary force, however, is a mere declaration; Dunlavin declares the belief that lies are inappropriate and socially condemned.

Dunlavin's second utterance, "The first twelve months I done, I smoked my way half-way through the book of Genesis and three inches of my mattress", capitalizes on the Neighbour's similar utterance on smoking both the Holy book and a mattress. But this time Dunlavin specifies the relationship between time and how much of the Bible and how much of his mattress he had smoked during that time. The secondary illocutionary force of Dunlavin's speech act is still an assertion as he makes it a point to assert his individual example. The primary illocutionary force of the speech act, however, is an ascriptive since in uttering his individual example, Dunlavin attributes to it the same conceptual characteristics (smoking the Bible and a mattress) that govern the Neighbour's utterance. Dunlavin makes it a point to have his utterance fit the Neighbour's and divert from it only in the fact that his is an individualized instance of his interlocutor's generalized assertion about the joint smoking of Bibles and mattresses. So, in fact, Dunlavin joins forces with the Neighbour in completely destabilizing their audience, not by disparaging the Bible, but on the contrary by praising the gains afforded to them by its possession.

At the same time Dunlavin's second utterance, "The first twelve months ...", pulls away from his first one, "Damn the lie, Neighbour". If the first utterance moves within a reverent spectrum of behavior, the second one radically departs from it as it lumps together the Bible and the mattress, the medium of spiritual insight and growth along with the utensil for physical comfort. What is more, it dissects the Bible into books, not because in that way it is easier to read and comprehend the religious eras they comprise, but because some parts prove to have yielded chronologically prior to the rest, not to the human spirit which has mastered them, but to human habit which has smoked them.

Dunlavin's third utterance, "When the Free State came in we were afraid of our life they were going to change the mattresses for feather beds", sports a sentence structure that plays with the audience's sensibilities. The chronological/hypothetical conjunction "when" divides the sentence in two;

the first part gives the chronological setting within which something that happens is related and that relation is essentially the second part. In this arrangement, "When the Free State came in" is the first part which locates the audience in a chronological framework and "we were afraid of our life" is the second part, which would appear to talk about the understandable fear that would accompany people during and after the setting in of a new political scenario.

Dunlavin's sentence, however, does not only confine itself to the above structure but meaningfully exceeds it. The portion of the sentence that follows, "they were going to change the mattresses for feather beds" is the direct object of "afraid of" but the speaker displaces it until the end of the utterance with the dramatic effect of misleading the audience. Until it hears this last portion-object of afraid, the audience thinks that "our life" acts as complement of "afraid of". The speaker taunts the audience into believing that one can be afraid of one's life when what he only wanted to say is that one under dire political circumstances should fear only for one's mattress. The further twist comes when the audience realizes that the speaker is against having his ordinary mattress replaced by a feather bed. Instead of fearing for his life, Dunlavin fears for his mattress. Once this subversion is under way and Dunlavin has his audience situated in this subverted world, he subverts it once again. The audience could believe, once it is focussed in on Dunlavin's subverted world, that since Dunlavin is so keen on his loss of his sleeping utensil, he would welcome an improvement regarding that utensil and would be happy to replace a mattress with a feather bed. But no. Dunlavin insists on the mattress. While the secondary illocutionary force of his speech act is that of a statement, by continuing to affirm his ardent belief that mattresses are crucial to one's smoking, Dunlavin gives his speech act a particular twist, rendering its primary illocutionary force confirmative. Dunlavin vouches for the importance of smoking and mattresses since even the setting in of a new political era had him on edge about the mattress issue instead of the political issue at hand. This political era is only the framework that gives rise to the mattress issue without the political issue itself achieving any significance as should happen within a community that structures happenings according to their hierarchical value.

Dunlavin goes on further to dwell on feather beds and their inappropriateness in his phrase: "And you couldn't smoke feathers, not, be God, if they were rolled in the Song of Solomon itself". The secondary illocutionary force of this speech act is an assertion since Dunlavin explicates the reason of the inappropriateness of feather beds as he anticipates the audience's bafflement over the rejection of a much appraised sleeping gadget. The primary illocutionary force, however, is that of a dissentive. In uttering, "And you couldn't smoke feathers, ... itself", Dunlavin dissents from the silent claim made by the audience that feather beds are better than mattresses. Dunlavin's

disbelief about feather beds is utterly substantiated since they do not fulfill the prerequisite of presenting him with the ability to smoke. The issue of the Bible referred to earlier is brought back again with the reference to the "Song of Solomon" but only to reinforce the incompatibility of smoking and feather beds. "The Song of Solomon" does not prove worthy of referring to only of its one merit. The Bible proves adequate for a mattress but the "Song of Solomon" does not redeem a feather bed. Religion is subjugated to the use of commodities and sometimes proves inadequate even for them. By adding "be God", Dunlavin wishes to strengthen his assertion since calling on the name of God can grant words with truth and mightiness while in the same phrase Dunlavin discredits the "Song of Solomon" for its nonpracticability.

Dunlavin's last utterance, "But sure, thanks to God, the Free State didn't change anything more than the badge on the warders' caps", reports his relief on not having his mattress taken away and on the non reinstatement of a feather bed despite the coming to power of the Free State. The secondary illocutionary force is that of a responsive, since Dunlavin responds to the raising of an uncertainty about whether mattresses were taken away and feather beds were introduced that his own previous assertions on the question raised. It is as if such an issue has been raised and has been inquired about in the audience's mind because of the hypothetical structure of the previous sentence, "couldn't smoke ... if they were rolled in the Song of Solomon itself". The primary illocutionary force centers around a whole different issue. It is an indictment on the Free State and its unworthiness since it proved incapable of changing much other than appearances which included "badges on the warders caps". The Free State is a badge itself which substitutes for another badge on the same cap called *status quo* and as such can not change mattresses into feather beds, they can not effect the revolutionary change necessary for the radical and substantial refurbishing of Ireland. In fact the primary illocutionary force of Dunlavin's whole speech, of his whole anecdote, is a critical stance first on individuals, who in view of some silly habit refuse to respond to change and continue to cling to old ways, even when new ways can be more luxurious. It is also a slap on the political arena as a whole for having the power to change stagnant situations but who resolve to change appearances instead of going to the roots of the problems.

The movement away from the Bible towards the emphasis on the mattress is also accompanied by the movement from the personal to the public as the discussion shifts to a new subject, the Free State. Behan is passing judgement not only on individuals and their ridiculous insistence on petty things but on governments as well for changing appearance issues only instead of targeting real problems and furthering people's welfare by putting an end to their demagogic policies that reinstate them in the first place. On the surface, the conversation evolves around the prisoners' immediate concerns and their complaints about having their sleeping experiences

hypothetically frustrated. But at the same time this talk exchange stings the political system for not frustrating in reality such petty individual expectations so that a revolutionary world is effected where absurdity at both the individual and public levels would be eradicated.

The movement between the individual and public realms emphasizes also Dunlavin's attitudinal disparity towards them. Dunlavin does not want to have his mattress changed for a feather bed; the individual does not want to better himself because he wants to preserve his vice. The political system promises to change mattresses into feather beds but settles for changing "the badge on the warders' caps" and accommodates itself with changing the surface instead of digging into real problems. The irony in both cases is evident. Dunlavin intends the opposite of what he is saying in two ways. First the lexical items, "mattress", "feather" "bed" and "badge on warders' caps" stand for something more than themselves. They stand for life of which sleeping and security guarding are just small parts. Not only are humans concerned with the part instead of the whole, but the political system is concerned with the wrong part which is guarding and which gives rise to totalitarian systems instead of the system evoked by the lexical item "Free State". Second, it seems that Dunlavin is praising the political system, the Free State, for not changing the mattresses into feather beds, but for focussing their attention on a totally different detail, a badge on a cap which fortunately does not interfere with Dunlavin's and the prisoners' expectations. But irony reverses the polarity and praise becomes blame for a political system that proves not only ineffective since it leaves mattresses as are but also totally unfocussed since it directs its attention to unimportant details.

The ironical mode in which Dunlavin casts his indictment against the system allows it to be relentlessly scathing while at the same time he does not seem to transgress the limits of politeness. Negative politeness is avoidance of discord (Leech, 1983, Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987) but discord which Dunlavin intends to be understood while he so dexterously hides through his "praise" of the Free State for its petty accomplishments. The insincerity of Dunlavin's purported opinion is clear from its absurdity which he relies on the audience to recognize.

The ironic force of Dunlavin's remarks is signalled by understating the negative accomplishments of the Free State. These negative accomplishments are cast in the declarative second part of the sentence, "But sure, thanks to God, the Free State didn't change anything more than the badge on the warders' caps". The first part, "the Free State didn't change anything", is negative because Dunlavin wants to register the ineffectiveness of the new political system. But why does Dunlavin make the second part of his statement positive? A negative sentence would have been more obscure and thus marked. It would have carried implications of denial. Dunlavin wants to pay full credit to what the State did change. But by paying full credit to the State,

he also undermines it because, although the propositional content is positive (after all the State did change something), the implications (the State limiting itself to badges) are negative. "Free State" signifies a concept of a most powerful and authoritative apparatus, whose power and authority, however, are exhausted and consummated in trivialities. As Dunlavin substitutes what the Free State did change for what it didn't, which is noteworthy, he reverses the polarity of the message he wants to convey and, therefore, the implicature generated is something incompatible with what he says (Grice, 1975).

Dunlavin ultimately relies on the audience for the computation of his skilled criticism. This criticism is registered in the emotive language used by the characters, which, even in the deceptively innocuous declarative mode, seems to have a dual message to get across to the audience. This duality of the message, communicated rather surreptitiously—since the generators of these messages do not seem to be explicitly intent on communicating anything more than what they actually say—unfolds in the dissection of the speech acts that generate the discourse. It is in this process that the concealed intents vested in it are revealed.

The fact that such a text makes significant demands on its audience posits Behan in the field of social commentary. Behan is not merely interested in castigating human beings for reducing their lives to pettiness and absurdity. Criticism is directed at both the individual and the *status quo* for masquerading and debasing the human ability to prosper and make essential difference. Absurdity is celebrated on the individual level which maintains its grip on the absurd because of the help from political systems which supposedly represent humanity in its most organized form. Such organized forms of policies should adhere to values and commitments but instead prove the true offspring of the individuals who comprise them. Humans concern themselves with small and unimportant parts of everyday life instead of focussing on the whole which could give life meaning. States, on the other hand, focus on ideas and carry these ideas out in absurd ways instead of committing themselves to the truth and practicality of airborne ideas of uncompromising changes. The ideas remain uncompromising while humans find their very humanity compromised and wasted. The prisoners are spokesmen for a humanity that imprisons itself in irrationality and empty idealism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bolinger (1972:184) notes that intensifier "so" is structured with *as*-clauses requiring indefiniteness.

<sup>2</sup> "A logonomic system", according to Hodge and Kress (1988:4), "is a

set of rules prescribing the conditions for production and reception of meanings".

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