

# Frank mcguinness essay sample



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One of the most outstanding Irish playwrights of the twentieth century, who is generally recognized not only in his native country, but internationally as well, is Frank McGuinness. Born in County Donegal he graduated from the University of Dublin after having studied mythology and medieval literature. His writing career started with poetry, which consequently transformed into plays that are now performed all over the world. His celebrated works include *The Factory Girls*, *Mary and Lizzie*, *The Bread Man* and many more.

McGuinness, like every outstanding artist of the world, has put most of his hidden intrinsic abilities into his plays. From 1982 onwards, the writer has been contributing the inmost writing abilities on the dramatics that reveal important social and psychological problems of modern society. One of McGuinness' most outstanding plays *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* was inspired by a series of hostage sieges in the 1980's. Although he did not touch the political motives of the executioners in his play, McGuinness devoted the major part of the text to the problem of relationships between the three imprisoned men.

He revealed what he considered was most important in human relationships in this kind of extreme situation: he tried to show what strains of personality might uncover when one is captured and held in prison in enormously atrocious conditions. The three imprisoned men are the representatives of England, the United States and Ireland: Michael, a British professor, Adam, an American doctor, and Edward, an Irish journalist. A dreadful boredom together with the horror of facing death is the basis for all the other anxieties they feel.

At first the three men are aggressive and hostile, treating one another as though they are enemies. They fail to realize that the real enemies are those political terrorists who keep them imprisoned in Beirut. Initially the hostages fail to understand that they need to support and help each other, rather than constantly causing assault and offence. However, over time they recognize that they are the only real support and salvation left for each other. It is only through this understanding that they find the compassion and the imagination they need to enable them to survive their ordeal.

Through time they also accept the fact that it is highly probable that they would not get out of the prison in the nearest future; if they could actually ever get out of it alive. The author reveals a completely new understanding of life conditions that are not frequently encountered by a normal modern person. In fact, most people cannot imagine their behaviour as a reaction upon such matters as terrorism, imprisonment and the fear of death.

McGuinness' play helps the audience to get a better understanding of what people feel under such terrible circumstances.

The protagonists of the play at the very beginning of their suffering find it impossible to accommodate the despair and horrors that surround them, but still they manage to save respect and understanding of each other. When their isolation increases and they lose hope for freedom, they find strength in caring for each other, even though they know they might face the reality of death soon. The conditions, in which the three prisoners spend most of the play, are intolerable: the three men are chained to a wall, which is covered with Islamic graffiti.

The few possessions they have access to are the Bible and the Koran.

McGuinness does not highlight the political aspect of the plot. He pays great attention to the isolation and depression of those men, who are seized as hostages and kept imprisoned by the will of fate. The playwright detaches the protagonists from time and place: the cell has no windows and the guard is never seen. This isolation enables McGuinness to emphasize the boredom and horrifying thoughts that are based on their uncertain destiny.

McGuinness dramatizes these feelings of the imprisoned men by making the audience realize: they have actually committed no crime except for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The playwright also pays particular attention to the change in moods and attitudes of these men towards each other. These attitude changes are referred to by Michael who refers to the Old English poem “The Wanderer” from which he narrates ‘Oft him an haga are gebideth’, when translated reads ‘A man who is alone may at times feel mercy, mercy towards himself.’<sup>1</sup> They have discussions on various topics: movies, sports, family, sex, and religion.

They tell different stories, recite poems, sing songs, hold arguments on historical and political issues, and write imaginary letters home. All this makes the audience first feel the horror and depression of their situation and then great sympathy for the Lebanon prisoners. The “unseen enemy” (the hostage takers), who play an important role in creating the right atmosphere, are not actually seen throughout the whole play. This method employed by the author makes the role of the guards and their lack of physical presence even more frightening.

The existence of the enemy is the main reason of the initial isolation and fears of the imprisoned men. This is also the major psychological tool of intimidation. The victims have not seen the threat, thus they are able to create the threat in their own minds from all the things they fear most. This technique of a hidden threat makes the audience perceive the guards as a more severe and ruthless enemy. This is also used to highlight the so-called civilised world's ignorance of the Arab world and its problems.

As Claire Gleitman notes; ' The absent presence of Arabs, and the manner in which the characters continue to describe them in the language of the Orientalist colonial, suggests the West's inability to articulate the position of the Arab world. ' 2 Although McGuinness manages to create an intolerable and horrifying atmosphere, he uses other dramatic techniques in his play. In spite of the general depressing situation, the playwright filled the script with witty dialogue and light humour that eventually help the prisoners keep faith.

In *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* the prisoners do not actually know who their enemy is, and this lack of information is literally driving them insane. As Eamonn Jordan states in his book *The Feast of Famine: The Plays of Frank McGuinness*, ' There are no interrogations, no instruments of torture and no visible threats. Their absence avoids the difficulty of characterising them, of presenting the interrelationship between captor and captive and finally of adequately representing the group dynamic of the captors.

The American doctor, Adam, is especially fragile in this sense. He is imprisoned for a longer period of time than the others, and, his mental

condition suffers great influences of isolation and despair. Only with the help of his imprisoned companions is he able to get out of the depression and return to a more or less normal and acceptable condition. But nonetheless, it is clear that this “ normal condition” is far from being normal for a free individual. *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* was written in 1992.

The play gained popularity almost immediately first in Ireland, later in the United Kingdom, and eventually, the play has become so famous, that it is now staged in many theatres throughout the world. One of the reasons why it has become so famous is that only three actors are involved in the play. And the general success and recognition depend greatly on their ability to express the feelings of isolation, despair, boredom, hope, love, and friendship – the basis of the story of three prisoners in Beirut.

This is the reason I move  
In hunger and skill  
To give you the pick of my  
creatures. This is why I am willing to kill,  
Chill every created nerve. You have  
made me a savage master  
Because I know how to serve. 4  
The above lines are taken from the poem “ Sea” by Brendan Kennelly; they illustrate the psyche of the Ulster soldiers who are fighting in World War I as their nerves have been chilled and they are ‘ willing to kill’ they also ‘ know how to serve’, all of which contribute to their ambiguous participation in the war.

The Ulstermen appear in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, which was written in 1985. This work is quite different from the previous one. It does not depict the struggle in one particular place during the whole play; it rather describes particular facts from World War I. ‘ It is as much a reflection of a destructive masculinity, as it is a celebration of

comradeship, community, strength and defiance. ' 6 The battalions from Ireland were literally marching towards the Somme, one of the most horrible and ruthless battles of the War.

The 36th battalion had the eight sons of Ulster – the main characters of the play. These eight Ulster Protestants are the volunteers eager to fight against the German invaders. But as the War gains momentum, they find themselves far away from their homelands of Ireland fighting against an unseen enemy. Des O'Rawe states that the play appears ' to ' oppose' the refusal of Irish political culture to recognize the ' faultline' between ideology and ' desire", another unseen enemy which the Ulster soldiers are not equipped to deal with. Eventually, they realize that their role in the war is not what they expected. During one of the scenes of the play Pyper in the rage of the battle finally realizes that what they do is simply fight for their own land on their own land.

Meanwhile Craig, Pyper's comrade, realizes a more horrible occurrence; that everybody fights just because they want to die, and the reasons for their actions are not primarily patriotic, ' The enemy becomes less clear, less and less distinctive as the play develops, until the enemy is found within. 8 He finally realizes that what they want is not to win or lose, but to sacrifice themselves to World War I without any reason, without even being aware of the reason and of the genuine nature of their zealous actions.

However as Jordan also notes; ' They did not want to die, yet they saw no way out. ' 9 On July 1st 1916 the Germans used their new weapon, the machinegun. 10 The first victims of its fire burst were the men from Ulster;

McGuinness has introduced eight of them to the reader. Pyper is the only survivor, he survives by chance, but, as it materializes later, he wishes he had died right there next to his comrades.

This desire is noted by Hiroko Mikami in *Frank McGuinness and his Theatre of Paradox*; 'The memory of the Somme is a disabling trauma for the whole of Ulster society, but here it is dealt with as a personal horror from which Pyper cannot flee, because he cannot flee from his own mind.'<sup>11</sup> A failed sculptor, Pyper came to the war because he sought redemption from his family and believed he would get it in case of a heroic death on the battlefield.

McGuinness makes his points quite clear. Although this is a play that speaks of the horrors and wastefulness of World War I, the heroes, again, never meet the enemy.

The play focuses on forming these eight disparate men into a military unit of comrades ready to die for each other, their native country, and the British Crown. The German soldiers and the hostilities of the war are mainly unseen, but they can be easily perceived through the atmosphere of play and the protagonists' understanding of the enemy. This feeling of an omnipresent, but still unseen enemy instilled the fear and despair not only in the hearts of the main characters of the play, but the rest of the soldiers as well.

It is much harder to quell one's fear if he or she does not see the enemy; the fear takes greater and greater value due to the inability to locate the source of fear. Eventually, their vulnerability becomes so vivid that it then becomes very easy for the invader to implement their attack. The Germans are not trying to achieve victory through this particular behaviour because they had



their new weapon, the machinegun, and having armed their troops with such a powerful and devastating mechanism, there actually is no need for either frightening or teasing the enemy.

Their new weapon was literally mowing down dozens of Irish soldiers in seconds, so there is no need for them to apply other strategies, psychological or physical. The German soldiers are also symbolic of Irish Nationalism, which is the real unseen enemy of the eight Ulstermen; ‘ Yet the Nationalist is feared. This terror can be seen in Pyper’s tale of his Catholic wife. ’13 Ordinary man’s reaction to an unseen enemy in the majority of cases is shock and panic. While the passive side is trying to find out where the enemy is, the hidden active side usually implements the calamitous plan.

While still searching for the location of the enemy the passive side is exceptionally vulnerable; because the force is focused on locating the enemy not defending oneself from it, the active side has the best chance to attack. There are many examples that can easily prove once more that the unseen enemy is much worse than the apparent one; the hidden one can then be compared to a much more horrible hostile unit. In both plays *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* and *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, this feeling of opposing the unseen enemy has never left the heroes.

The three prisoners in *Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me* are constantly mentally attacked by the absence of the actual attacker. On the other hand, the Ulstermen in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*

are, in a very real sense, fighting against themselves, trying to prove to themselves and to their families in their hometowns that they are real men and worthy soldiers. The three men locked and chained in a cell in Beirut react in a positive way when they understand that they have to support each other.

If they had not realized that it had been their only way to survive in these horrible and intolerable conditions, they would all be open to the threat of mental despair aided by the obscured pressure of the unseen enemies, the Islamic terrorists. An ordinary person would lose faith very quickly; these three prisoners however are fighting against their fears with the help of each other. By using a form of national stereotypes, McGuinness depicts the changing patterns of alliances and hostilities, friendships and furies in the men's attempts to somehow break the boredom and the terrifying uncertainty of their future.

In both, the author draws this frightening uncertainty in nearly every scene. The closer the reader engages with his works, the more vivid the picture of the current situation becomes; the divergent ideologies cannot make a substantial impact on the characters when they are put in such horrible conditions together. The eight sons of Ulster are separated from the entire army during the play, and their actions and feelings do not seem to be presenting an explicit point. The central points from the play are revealed to the reader in a fragmentary way.

Although these fragments can be easily understood separately, it still requires effort to put them together appropriately and mould the original plot

which the writer implies. As Jordan once again observes: Throughout the play McGuinness reverses the audience's expectation of what a war drama might be. We are offered no frenzy of war, no chain of command, no motivating sergeant, no celebration of war as an existential paradise, no hero, no pin up girl, no girl waiting back home, no cheering of trains as they leave stations, no thousands climbing out of the trenches, there is little blood and we have no sense of victory.

Instead, we have fear and the waste of life that war brings and of course the frequent recourse to the symbolism of blood. We are reminded that the mythology of war appears to aestheticize the violence. <sup>14</sup> The aforementioned plays, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* and *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* have instigated an innovative examination on the human relationship in spite of ethnic, national, and ideological differences and identifications. They meticulously explore man's psychological ability to overcome or succumb to outside influences whether they are seen or unseen.