

## *Monologue, Woman and Survival in Frank McGuinness's Baglady*

### *Monólogo, mulher e sobrevivência em Baglady de Frank McGuinness*

Wei H. Kao

**Abstract:** *Although it is true that women have received much attention since the mid-twentieth century and some have held major positions in public domains, not many theatrical works have given women a full spotlight on their less perceivable experiences, particularly those who are disadvantaged or struggling on the social margins. In those works that do indeed do so, descriptions of women's conditions do not always reflect their exact experiences and challenges. This paper will explore Frank McGuinness's Baglady (1985), which centres on a woman protagonist who discloses her painful memories and tries to cope with her suffering. In this play, the protagonist, stuck in the past, reveals her dark secrets in a narrative that is not always in a regular time sequence. Incidentally, by hearing how she makes sense of her troubles in everyday life, the audience seems to participate in the process of her self-examination and possible healing. This essay will also investigate how the character struggles with oppression in more radical ways, and how she fails or succeeds in breaking free from her hidden constraints.*

**Keywords:** *Frank McGuinness; Baglady; Monologue; Trauma; Healing.*

**Resumo:** *Embora seja verdade que as mulheres tenham recebido muita atenção desde meados do século XX e que algumas tenham ocupado cargos importantes em domínios públicos, não são muitas as obras teatrais que dão destaque total às mulheres em suas experiências menos perceptíveis, especialmente aquelas que são desfavorecidas ou que lutam à margem da sociedade. Nas obras que de fato o fazem, as descrições das condições das mulheres nem sempre refletem suas experiências e desafios exatos. Este*

*artigo explorará a peça Baglady (1985), de Frank McGuinness, centrada em uma protagonista que revela suas memórias dolorosas e tenta lidar com seu sofrimento. Nessa peça, a protagonista, presa ao passado, revela seus segredos obscuros em uma narrativa que nem sempre está em uma sequência temporal regular. Aliás, ao ouvir como ela dá sentido a seus problemas na vida cotidiana, o público parece participar do processo de seu autoexame e possível cura. Este ensaio também investigará como a personagem luta contra a opressão de maneiras mais radicais e como ela falha ou consegue se libertar de suas restrições ocultas.*

**Palavras-chave:** Frank McGuinness; Baglady; Monólogo; Trauma; Cura.

## Introduction

Although it is true that women have received much attention since the mid-twentieth century and some have held major positions in public domains, not many theatrical works have given women a *full* spotlight on their less perceivable experiences, particularly those who are disadvantaged or struggling on the social margins. In those works that do indeed do so, descriptions of women's conditions do not always reflect their exact experiences and challenges. There are, however, plays that present women experiencing emotional abuse, domestic violence, familial violation and gender discrimination, although the victims are not always able to speak for themselves. Monologue plays, as a type of drama that highlights women struggling to be seen and heard, might potentially counterbalance the tradition in which women's personal predicaments are seen as being less imperative than social or political crises, despite the fact that their hardships and dilemmas are common across cultures and borders.

This essay will focus on Frank McGuinness's *Baglady* (1985), which centres on a woman protagonist who suffers from certain mental conditions as she tries to come to terms with painful memories. In this play the protagonist, stuck in the past, reveals her dark secrets in a narrative that is not always in a regular time sequence. By hearing how she makes sense of her troubles in everyday life, the audience seems to participate in the process of her self-examination and possible healing. This essay will also investigate how the protagonist struggles with oppression in more radical ways, and how she fails or succeeds in breaking free from hidden constraints.

Before the essay enters the mindscape of the protagonist, it should be noted that monologue has been a popular form of choice for many contemporary Irish playwrights,

both emerging and established. They wrote monodramas or plays with extended monologues in different periods of their careers, experimenting with disjointed narrative and stream of consciousness to explore the troubled mind.<sup>1</sup>

To name just a few of those who have contributed to this chapter of Irish theatrical history: Dermot Bolger, Brian Friel, Jennifer Johnston, Marie Jones, Owen McCafferty, Pat Kinevane, Frank McGuinness, Conall Morrison, Conor McPherson, Donal O’Kelly, Mark O’Rowe, Eva O’Connor, Enda Walsh and Michael West, among others. They have all, without doubt, been influenced by their predecessors James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, whereas the social and political contexts in which they created their characters have significantly contributed to the art of playwriting in different styles.<sup>2</sup>

These contemporary Irish playwrights grew up in an Ireland which, as Brian Singleton puts it, “has been a particularly poignant battleground between traditional versions of masculinity and new questionings of gender identity” (287).<sup>3</sup> Their monologue plays outline the difficult process of this rapid transformation thanks to which a growing intellectual awareness has been initiated as regards the status of women and their marginalized experiences. Although not all monodramas feature women’s issues and voices, the interior monologues of their characters have disclosed how Irish life has been historically gendered but is yet to be addressed.

Differently from plays that typically involve several characters in which their opportunities for self-expression are often overshadowed by other dominant forces, monodramas can more fully present the complexities of someone’s inner life in various ways. The audience is consequently more capable of peering into his or her “internal experience and the realm of subjective perception” through the verbalized stream of consciousness on the stage (Wallace 12). Not only is a protagonist more capable of delivering intimate expressions, as well as being more provocative, but the audience gains access to someone’s “revision, reconstruction, the re-making, upgrading and recalibrating of narratives” (Jordan 153). In other words, monologue plays provide “structural freedom” for dramatists to conduct dramaturgical experiments (Bradby 64), while also allowing characters to distance themselves from their given surroundings and troubles so as to challenge and probably deconstruct the *fait accompli* with individual, alternative stories.

### **Frank McGuinness’s *Baglady* (1996): Heal to Hear**

Having reckoned that “after Beckett, nothing in the theatre was the same. . . . He gave me license to write about time” (Weber C2), McGuinness has written a number of

experimental works exploring human dilemmas, predicaments and mental conditions. His *Baglady*, in particular, has not only “a sense of *Happy Days*” (Hurtley 59), but has been described as a work to “repay consideration in relation to the work of Samuel Beckett” (Lojek 18). These comments emanate from the way in which the playwright steers the audience into the darkest corners of human nature as Beckett often does. *Baglady* features a woman who has suffered sexual abuse at a very young age and almost failed to survive because of it. However, McGuinness offers the protagonist a way to go beyond her dark days to embrace a happier time, if possible, in which she can trust humanity.

In contrast to Winnie’s uplifting love song “I love you so” from *The Merry Widow*, a 1905 operetta, in Beckett’s *Happy Days*, the unnamed Baglady’s song, “Who’s at the window, who?”, haunts the protagonist profoundly throughout the play. Being heard at the very beginning of this monologue play, this song depicts someone being spied on by a sex offender through a window: “A, bad, bad man with a bag on his back / Coming to take you away. / Who’s at the window, who? / Who’s at the window, who? / Go away, bad man, with the bag on your back, / You won’t take me with you today” (McGuinness 385). It is noteworthy that this song is often heard alongside the narrator’s disjointed, incoherent storytelling in the third-person narration. This prompts some bewildering and absurdist effects that the audience members have to take on board as they piece together bits of information as the play goes on. Put another way, the more the narrator reveals her fear and pain, the more the audience realizes that the victim has been torn asunder and badly traumatized by incest. Moreover, the resulting baby was drowned by her father and she had to witness it all. Even worse, she was forced to tolerate this family shame at the requests of her mother and the Catholic clergy. Ironically, without having a way out of her agony and unable to exorcise her troubled past, she learns to assume her father’s and mother’s voices to keep the secret. While she is confessing what went wrong, the audience is reminded of the systemic child abuse that has long been neglected in Irish society.<sup>4</sup>

As the audience sees it at the start of the play, the Baglady obscures her gender through her clothing: “The Baglady wears the heavy clothes of a farmer, rough trousers, dark overcoat, boots. She is feminized only by a grey scarf protecting her head, hiding her hair completely” (McGuinness 385). Her camouflage –with hair completely covered up– is to strategically save herself from being sexually violated, which her father had spared no effort in doing, and murdering the resulting baby, when she was young and vulnerable. The horrendous memory has prompted her not only to hide her gender characteristics, consciously or not, but to make herself homeless on account of the incest and infanticide. Losing her home and sense of security, this unnamed Baglady wanders aimlessly while

telling herself sarcastically that she can make everywhere home: “I call one home and the other one here. That way you can’t get lost” (McGuinness 386). Her incapability lies in the fact that she is a permanent wanderer by force and has lost the possibility of being a homemaker and is now a lone woman surviving in a wasteland.

It might be argued that the Baglady sets herself against the Cathleen ni Houlihan, who contributed to Irish nation formation as a heroine and an icon on banknotes. As the Baglady recalls, every time when she was raped by her father, it always ended with a money gift to keep her mouth shut. The little victim had not yet learned to recognize the political significance of the woman on the banknotes but remembered “[s]he looked like a mad woman, dressed all strangely, all in green” (McGuinness 389). For the father, money talks to meet his sexual needs and he would show much of it to her daughter as a lure “to buy the colours. . . . Wads of it lying on the table or smelling in his hands. Sometimes there was a picture of a woman in his smell” (McGuinness 389).<sup>5</sup> Presumably, the victim is far too young to understand the value of money but is well aware of the pain and discomfort during the forced sex acts. As an adult, not really pleased to receive banknotes imprinted with Cathleen ni Houlihan, she prefers to “give it away because money is a man’s thing . . . I don’t want it. It smells. . . . Don’t put out the light. Don’t leave me in the black room” (McGuinness 389).

The cynical point here is that Cathleen ni Houlihan, as a messianic icon of Irish independence, essentially caters more to her male supporters who look up to her for salvation and guidance than to women under threats of being violated and in desperate need of help. The violence that comes with this stereotype endorses the given roles of women in the conservative Irish cultural context, silencing those who are unable to protect themselves, including the Baglady and her own mother: “His wife and child walked in fear of his body and its strength” (McGuinness 394). It can be conjectured that the mother has no means of stopping the incestuous relationship in her family but tolerates it. Her tolerance, nonetheless, turns her into one of the Baglady’s victimizers for failing to protect the daughter and stopping the father from drowning the baby. That is to say, the Baglady’s loss of home and mental stability – which are manifest in her fragmented narrative, are not only the consequences of the sexual and emotional abuses within her family but are also results of the gender stereotype that has defined a role model for Irish women. In the case of the Baglady, the sexual violence she endures is acquiesced in by those who do not want to reveal it, either because of the mutual benefits they have gained or from a sense of shame. Cathleen ni Houlihan, playing a function in this institutional crime, casts a long shadow over the victim in many profound ways.

The shadow of violence that hovers over the Baglady lingers into her adulthood and cannot just be forgotten, despite the fact that she has been a nomad for quite a while. In her traumatic memory, her father used to be “a respectable man,” but could turn into a black dog that follows her everywhere: “When this man died, the dog lived on. . . . One day this dog grabbed the man’s daughter by her throat. She went hysterical but the dog wouldn’t let go. It chained her up” (McGuinness 394). This abiding nightmare of being sexually assaulted again and again has deprived her of hopes of becoming a more confident and competent woman but “a dirty girl for ever” (McGuinness 398). As an incest victim, she was taken to “the house of God” but was called “a liar” by “a man in black” and washed by “women in black . . . in fire, not water. They nailed her son to a river” (McGuinness 398-9). Noteworthy, although she has been shattered by the “monstrous apparitions of her father, her mother, and the priests and nuns” (Weaver par. 5), she manages to *repair* herself by opening up her heart to the audience through the disclosure of her forbidden shame. In other words, she is reluctant to entirely fall victim to her haunting memory and would not like the audience to be part of the continuing domestic abuse as much as onlookers.

The retelling of her own stories may be an effective strategy for saving herself from the trauma. Ironically, her salvation cannot be sought elsewhere but within herself before her fear of the “black dog” completely overwhelms her. Having failed to obtain moral support from the clergy in her community, the Baglady has to give absolution to herself through her own means of self-transubstantiation: “*the Baglady takes a slice of bread and a bottle of red lemonade. She sits, eating and drinking*” (McGuinness 389). This act resembles the holy communion in commemoration of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for human sins, whereas the Baglady has to redeem the crime of others all by herself. Most importantly, she, being isolated with no one to turn to for help, manages to purify herself by self-serving the holy communion, regardless of whether the purification takes effect in the eye of church practitioners.

It is also interesting to note that her account of the incestuous abuse is given through role-play with a pack of poker cards in a third-person narration, rather than “I” as the storyteller. The cards she selects to lay out the misconduct of people in her dysfunctional family and community include the king of diamonds (father), the five of clubs (mother), the queen of hearts (baby), the queen of spades (the Baglady), and the seven of diamonds (priest). Strategically, these five cards are used to illustrate the closed network involving the victimizers among whom are the Baglady’s parents, the clergy and perhaps the members of the public who remain as silent as the audience in seeing her ordeal but are unable to help.

It can be argued that the role-play she creates is therapeutic in many ways. Firstly, she can rescue herself from the disastrous impact of incest and the death of the baby. Secondly, the way she tells her story *alone* on stage is consonant with confession to obtain forgiveness from God. However, what she is seeking is not really forgiveness but reconciliation with herself—in private and in public, followed by the symbolic holy communion she performs at the end of the play. She may thus purify the unspeakable shame and ease the tormenting pain. Notably, she is empowered for salvation not by the clergy nor God but by herself, while the poker cards and the role-play effectively alleviate the intangible yet enormous social repression given by the community. As the play goes on, she intentionally tears up her own card and “drops the pieces into the red lemonade bottle” as an ostensible attempt to regain her own power and subjectivity (McGuinness 398). That “she pours the contents [from the red lemonade bottle] on to the chain” represents how much she would like to release herself from the trauma and move to a better future (McGuinness 398).<sup>6</sup> That said, to consciously bid farewell to the past might be the only solution to her mental incapability and enable her to be stronger and more independent in the future.

The Baglady’s non-linear monological narrative is also noteworthy for being “cyclical and fluid” (Nally 199). Differently from most storytelling methods that are straightforward and realistic, the Baglady’s use of flashbacks and flashforwards allows her to be free of instructional expressions, merging “reality and fantasy . . . in an attempt to overcome the pain” (Nally 199). The fluidity of her narrative also foreshadows the possibility that her trauma might be healed through the use of liquids in symbolic ways, be they red lemonade or sacrament wine. Namely, having confessed to the audience (and herself) about her tragedy, the Baglady “walk[s] into her coffin. . . . tak[ing] the ring from her finger,” dropping it and exclaiming “drown” (McGuinness 399). It could be contended that the dropping and drowning of the ring –which is her mother’s wedding ring that her father passed on to her as a gift after incestuous sex– suggests her determination to counteract the lie that he had told her: “They say if a girl sleeps with a wedding ring in her bed she will have lovely dreams about the man she’ll marry” (McGuinness 396). Meanwhile, her walk into the coffin is not exactly a suicidal act but might be symbolic of the Baptism of Jesus, a Christian ceremony for those who have repented and expected a regeneration.<sup>7</sup> The red lemonade, the fluidity of her narrative, as well as her exclamation of “drown” all facilitate the symbolic baptism and the rebirth. Having done so, she could expunge the sense of shame over her father’s wrongdoing, announcing for herself that “God forgive me. I saw” (McGuinness 399). She therefore recovers not only her subjectivity but her sensibility, so

that she could move on to the Promised Land, where her dignity as a woman would be respected and her exiled mind re-anchored.

Although the Baglady seems to be eloquent in demonstrating her ups and downs, the information she delivers is often so disjointed –with flashbacks and flashforwards– that it would puzzle the audience as to what exactly happened, when, and why she is distressed. The challenge in understanding her monologue lies in the fact that her interior landscape is so fragile she cannot be straightforward enough to unveil her traumas and shame. Specifically, her walk often “along the edge of space” suggests that the incest and her father’s murder of the baby have been so tormenting that they could cause her downfall at any time, if she fails to rescue herself. The stark simplicity of the staging is, incidentally, illustrative of the Baglady’s mental condition consonant to her interior wasteland in desperate need of healing. Interestingly, at the end of the play, after the Baglady exposes all her disturbing secrets, she “removes her scarf, showing her hair” (McGuinness 398). The revealing of her hair and the dunking of the torn-off cards in the red lemonade, as mentioned above, also indicate that she is longing for a change. To some extent, she spares no effort to recover her femininity as a step towards reclaiming her value as a woman.

One notable matter about *Baglady* is that the protagonist owns a bag that seems to be her most intimate and trusted companion. The bag never hurts or betrays her owner, compared to the protagonists’ family and community members who hurt them badly. Although the bag functions as personal storage space for physical items, it can also be seen as the reification of the character’s individuality, experiences and memories. That said, the Baglady’s personal items are either in her “grey, woollen sack” or a pocket of her coat (385). By the end of the play, all her belongings, namely a pack of playing cards, a bottle of red lemonade, an iron chain, a scarf, a white dress, and a ring, have all been taken out and piled in a heap, before she verbally exclaims “drown” (399). Despite the audience not seeing water on the stage to physically drown these props, they carry certain significances relating to her painful days. To part with these items suggests her refusal to carry them indefinitely. It is likely that her future happy days will be built upon independence and her direct faith in God as an individual.

It could be pointed out that McGuinness’s characterization of the Baglady’s challenges could result from the social background and historical context in which he grew up and developed his theatrical vision. McGuinness, born in 1953, had seen the rise of feminism and its growing impact on Irish society and beyond, despite the fact that the Northern Ireland Troubles and increased civilian casualties had always been in the headlines. The awakening of the Baglady reflects public attention being drawn to the

oppression and silencing of women victims who experienced sexual assault or misconduct, particularly when the Catholic Church dominated the everyday lives of Irish people. It might be argued that by portraying the Baglady as a dominant character who heals herself without relying on institutional support, the audience sees the transformation of mental weaknesses into genuine abilities. The efforts that McGuinness makes to have the Baglady seen and heard not only pay tribute to his Irish activists striving for gender equality but throw light upon women's power in being their own saviours, yet not losing their Christian faith.

### **Conclusion: Her New Road Ahead**

*Baglady* illustrates how a woman protagonist tries to disown her past and troubles by fighting against the tremendous forces that have regulated and confined her. For McGuinness, who has been familiar with Christian philosophy, his writing is clearly not endorsements of the allegory in Genesis that “woman serves man as his mirror, his temptress, a seductress of the evil powers of his own unconscious” (Benstock 173). Instead, he presents the Baglady who is the victim of patriarchal violence and shows how she is able to heal her scar and recover from traumas, be they mental or physical, visible or invisible.

Although the Baglady can, to some extent, speak for herself or demonstrate her mental constraints to the audience, what is not much noted is the ways in which she is still subject to violence, implicit or not, in her community. As Michel Foucault notes, the network of discourse has created a “historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning” and reinforces the given hierarchy (Adams par. 2). Specifically, by presenting the Baglady as being not entirely under male surveillance and giving her more opportunities to unfold her thoughts and feelings, this social confinement might thus be counteracted and examined theatrically. Having said so, this monodrama illustrates how the woman protagonist persists in unwinding her secrets and unlocking her emotions after experiencing sexual violation and how she processes her traumas and sense of shame. The dramatization of her painful past might therefore contest and invert the violence on her unregarded existence, offsetting historical patriarchal domination over women who are disrespected and stigmatized.

McGuinness's *Baglady* features a woman surviving under the shadow of sexual violation and her hard battle against herself and society, even when the male victimizer is no longer around to threaten her further. Arguably, for the Irish audience, the closer they encounter the darker truths, the more questionable is the myth of Cathleen ni Houlihan

standing for women in Ireland. Although the *Baglady*'s predicament results from the traumas she has experienced and that can hardly be forgotten, the audience joins the protagonist in and out of her mindscapes, witnessing how her story is not purely fictional but contains echoes of themselves.

## Notes

- 1 Despite the fact that early twentieth-century Irish theatre produced very few monodrama or play that involved a significant use of monologues under the influence of cultural nationalism and social realism, novelists were more courageous in devising interior monologues in their works following the advent of psychoanalysis and psychopathology on the European mainland. They aimed to reflect innermost voices, lives in chaos, and even the suppressed libido, which realistic approaches could only portray with considerable difficulty. The most notable works included James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, which were largely written in the style of the stream of consciousness. Joyce's later work, *Finnegans Wake*, further prompted its readers to sink into the unconscious world that the writer peered into. In the 1960s, Samuel Beckett, under the lingering impact of Joyce, produced many absurdist and radio plays, exploring seemingly unimportant trivialities through a more extensive use of monologues.
- 2 The foci of their creations are diversified, including historical events, class struggle, the gulf between rich and poor, parent-child relationships, the mentally and physically disabled, war memories, religious antagonism, labour issues, gender stereotypes, illegal immigrants, sex and drugs, domestic violence, adolescent crime, and so forth. The dramaturgy is not limited to conventional realism but challenges the intangible fourth wall of the stage by the mixed uses of stream of consciousness, metafictional devices and much more. These all demonstrate the ways in which Irish dramatists have succeeded to the Joycean and Beckettian radicalities with monodramas—which are relatively easy to produce in terms of performance costs yet, in terms of their theatricality, are almost as provocative.
- 3 Although most contemporary Irish playwrights have been devoted to the writing of monodramas to a certain extent, and the number of their plays is impressive, the study of this genre is still far from being comprehensive. Some notable researches on monologue as a theatrical expression, not limited to works by Irish playwrights, include Deborah Geis's *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary Americana Drama* (1993), Clare Wallace's *Monologues: Theatre, Performance, Subjectivity* (2006), Brian Singleton's *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* (2011), and Michael Raab's essay "A Nation of Soliloquists? The Irish and the Dramatic Monologue."
- 4 Despite McGuinness saying in an interview that it was "a pure coincidence", the story of *Baglady* is resonant with the shocking 1984 "Kerry babies" incident in which two babies were found murdered in rural Kerry (Mikami 133). In the same year, a fifteen-year-old girl, Ann Lovett, was found dead in a field in County Longford, having been in labour. Apparently, these tragic events resulted not only from the lack of support for unmarried mothers but the tremendous pressure put on teenage girls who were sexually abused.

- 5 Other gifts that the father has given to his daughter include a ring and a golden necklace. However, he threatens that “if she breathed a word of their secrets, the necklace grew black, blacker and blacker, and it tightened about her throat, tighter and tighter, twisting her face up, . . . until she said she was sorry” (McGuinness 397).
- 6 On the stage the Baglady is constantly troubled by a chain that she hauls from her sack. The chain is symbolic of sexual abuses and social restrictions she has suffered: “Her hands start to beat against her body. She fights her hands away. They reach for the chain. She curbs it with her foot. Her hands free the chain and raise it to her neck. It starts to coil itself tightly about her” (McGuinness 397).
- 7 The Baptism of Jesus is documented in Matthew (3:16-17), Mark (1:10), and Luke (3:16-22) of the New Testament. In Matthew, for example, after Jesus was baptized, “the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him. And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (3:16-17).

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