

**FATHERS AND SONS
AT THE ABBEY THEATRE
(1904–1938)**

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**A New Perspective on the
Study of Irish Drama**

Fabio Luppi



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PREFACE

The literary representation of fathers and sons goes back to the beginnings of poetry and drama, to Homer's *Iliad*, to the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, to Virgil's *Aeneid* and to the writers of the Old Testament. It was a figure or trope of central importance. Further, in ancient literature, assumed to be didactic, intent on teaching a lesson, the relationship of son and daughter to father is sacred. We see this in Hector's tenderness towards Priam, Aeneas's dutifulness to Anchises and, in the Bible, Isaac's submission to Abraham as an extension of Abraham's own submission to God's will. At its roots, the relationship is spiritual; it is a matter of reverence. It is noteworthy that in Ireland a priest is still addressed as 'Father' and on formal occasions 'Reverend Father,' grammatically drawing on the Latin gerundive signifying obligation, 'must be revered.' The priestly and the natural father always occupied kindred roles in society. Of all Irish authors, Joyce is the most aware of this sacred association: it emerges when Stephen Dedalus outlines his theory of *Hamlet* in *Ulysses* (1922), and can be seen at work in the beautiful late poem 'Ecce Puer' where Joyce as father himself looks back in remorse to his relationship with his own father: 'O, father forsaken, / Forgive your son!'¹

In family life conflict between fathers and sons is presumably timeless and universal. What was certainly anathema in all cultures was for a father to kill a son or daughter, and vice versa. The abomination of such a deed

¹James Joyce, *POEMS and EXILES*, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by J.C.C. Mays (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 111.

is inscribed in classical drama. In Shakespeare, although in comedy he can insist ‘To you your father should be as a god,’² in the history plays and tragedies he tends to coalesce and mystify fatherhood and kingship: for Hamlet, to kill a king is the most monstrous deed in society, as he informs his mother in Act 3, scene 4. Even in *King Lear*, where fatherhood and its abuse are most poignantly depicted, Shakespeare’s focus remains on the crown, the mystical image of sacred power. No such metonymy invades Irish literature. The clan system provided a patriarchy, and by definition the leader patronized all within the clan equally.

In any event, such Irish drama as existed before W.B. Yeats and his associates was derived from London and played in Dublin’s Theatre Royal: the repertory was a cultural expression of Ireland’s colonized situation, the laws governing Irish theatre mirrored those regulating the English stage.³ So far as Yeats and his friends were concerned, this British-born theatre was decadent. They looked to Europe for a model, and found one in the Norwegian national theatre, as served by Henrik Ibsen, and were aware also of the rise of the so-called ‘little theatre movement’ in the 1880s and 1890s, as developed in Paris by André Antoine, in Berlin by Otto Brahm, and in Moscow by Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. Yeats, however, was hostile to realism, the basis of this movement, and favoured symbolism instead. In founding the Irish Literary Theatre with Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn in 1897 he found a place for poetic drama alongside Ibsenist realism. The main ambition was ‘to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland’ in experimental fashion.⁴ In effect, this meant a focus on simple folk drama or peasant plays, into which powerful feeling could be for the first time injected by understated writing and a reined-in form of naturalistic acting. When Yeats and Lady Gregory got together to co-write *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* in 1902 they found not only an audience but a theme: national identity. Two years later the Abbey Theatre emerged from amateur beginnings, and with the patronage of Annie Horniman, a small, 500-seater theatre was opened, dedicated to Irish plays by Irish authors, which was to achieve world fame and to endure down to the present day (though not in its original structure).

It is a coincidence that the Irish Literary Theatre opened its first season in 1899 (with Yeats’s controversial *The Countess Cathleen*) in the year when Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* was first published in German.

²William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1.1 47, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London and New York: Methuen, 1979), p. 9.

³See W. N. Osborough, *The Irish Stage: A Legal History* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015).

⁴Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* [1913] (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1972), p. 20.

There is no direct connection, and yet it can be said that with his fascination for dreams, visions, séances, his interest in magic, how symbolism works in poetry (in Blake and Shelley, for example), and his preoccupation with masks in both their theatrical and psychic significance, Yeats had more than a little in common with the founder of psychoanalysis. After all, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* came to him as a dream: 'One night I had a dream almost as distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there was well-being and firelight and talk of a marriage, and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself [...] for whom so many have gone to their death.'⁵ He shared his dream with Lady Gregory, who helped him transform it, and ever after he relied on dreams for his dramatic imaginings. Freud discussed the Oedipus Complex in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, and later would write a whole chapter on Sophocles' play. As early as 1909 Yeats was working on a version of *Oedipus the King*, eventually staged at the Abbey in 1926, with the great F.J. McCormick playing the leading role. He who had played with huge success in Seán O'Casey's Dublin plays was able through Yeats's plain prose text to bring to the surface the implications for Ireland of this ancient tragedy. As the late Robert Welch has commented: 'While this tragedy is universal in its resonances relating to guilt and wrong committed in the heat and press of events, nevertheless it spoke pointedly to a deep sense of trouble about the nature of Irish society in the aftermath of independence.'⁶ To Yeats, the realization of Oedipus' dream could symbolize Ireland's nightmare.

In little, this successful transfer of a Greek play to Irish soil may stand for the wide and challenging enterprise that Dr Luppi here undertakes in this book. This is exactly what Yeats intended when he wrote his prose version of Oedipus. He wanted a text, he said, that would be intelligible on the Blasket Islands, off the coast of Kerry, a primitive setting. 'Greek literature, like old Irish literature, was founded upon belief, not like Latin literature upon documents.'⁷ He was convinced his version would prove successful on the Abbey Stage (December 1926), 'for I have made it bare, hard and natural like a saga.'⁸ He may have had in mind the style of J.M. Synge, in its recapture of Irish idiom and lyricism, in his *Aran Islands* (1907) and especially in his last play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910), which was based on an old Irish saga

⁵*The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 232.

⁶Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899–1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 101.

⁷*The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade. (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 537, n. 1.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 720.

(Synge had already challengingly parodied the Oedipus myth in *The Playboy of the Western World*). Yeats was right about the success of his own version of *Oedipus*: it was revived in 1927, alongside his version of *Oedipus at Colonus*, and again in 1930–31. He had somehow captured the mood and character of traditional Ireland while retaining the beauty of the choruses and the universality of the myth. Other Abbey writers may not have been so skilled or so learned, but under Yeats's influence and encouraged by Lady Gregory many of them were able to plumb the mysteries of the human soul in ordinary speech, and thereby to achieve a primary goal prescribed: 'A play to be suitable for performance at the Abbey should contain some criticism of life, founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer, or some vision of life, of Irish life by preference, important from its beauty or for some excellence of style; and this intellectual quality is not more necessary to tragedy than to the gayest comedy.'⁹

Fabio Luppi explores the wealth of new drama this little experimental theatre created over the golden period which ended with the death of Yeats in 1939. It is an oft-told tale, but Dr Luppi brings to it a crisp freshness and an original perspective by concentrating on the theme of fathers and sons in the best plays of the period. The result is a masterly re-interpretation of the forces underlying modern Irish drama.

Christopher Murray
Dublin, January 2018

⁹ADVICE TO PLAYWRIGHTS WHO ARE SENDING PLAYS TO THE ABBEY, DUBLIN,' in Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, p. 62. She states that this set of directions, briefly quoted above, was written by Yeats and used by the theatre to groom its playwrights.

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INTRODUCTION

F*athers and Sons at the Abbey Theatre (1904–1938)* is an exploration of those plays written for the Abbey Theatre,¹ which were most significant in representing the conflict between generations. The book explores how this theme was developed and how it was staged during those crucial years in the formation of the Irish State. This focus on a specific topic necessarily implies a selection, and in this case it is circumscribed within definite historical boundaries: from 1904, the opening of the Abbey Theatre, to 1938 and the performance of Yeats's play, *Purgatory*. The theme of intergenerational conflict is tackled from its origins—rooted in familial bonds and succession issues, in love affairs and (lack of) job opportunities—to its consequences, such as social and political friction, and emigration. Subsequent appendixes examine the role of religion, education and educators. The archetypal father-son conflict depicted in these plays is often particularly intense and dramatic: it includes sons claiming to have killed their fathers (*The Playboy of the Western World*), kissing and seducing stepmothers (*Autumn Fire*) or abandoning their country and their families

¹All the plays discussed here were intended for the Abbey Theatre. The one exception is Padraic Colum's *Glendalough*, written in the Sixties and never staged. George Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, Sean O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* and Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* were all written and originally intended for the Abbey, but eventually refused by Yeats and/or Lady Gregory. *John Bull's Other Island* was eventually staged in London as it was too long and too difficult to produce in the new Irish venue. However, Joseph Keogh revived it at the Abbey in September 1916; it was a great success especially as it was staged at a time when Shaw's reputation was particularly high among nationalists following his criticism of the British government's execution of the Easter revolutionaries.

(*The Land, Harvest, Birthright, Things That Are Caesar's*). Correspondingly, fathers threaten or wound their children (*Autumn Fire, Patriots*) and even kill them (*On Baile's Strand, Purgatory, The Blind Woolf*). While other plays do not go as far as imagining the slaughter of a parent (or a child), they often portray a father's refusal to assume full responsibility. In many Irish plays of the first decades of the twentieth century, the murder of a father is evoked but never actually accomplished. On the contrary, it is the father who kills his son. Often, a discredited or dysfunctional father figure is confronted with the difficulties of the younger generation who struggle to impose their own personalities. My focus on the father-son theme means I give little space to the father-daughter relationship, except in so far as it throws light on the Irish patriarchy of the time.

Along with the big fish of Irish theatre, such as Shaw, Yeats, Gregory, Synge and O'Casey, this book considers many other playwrights who contributed to this recurrent theme of the clash between father and son. The struggle of new Irish generations to obtain the recognition of a role denied by father figures, as well as their attempts to free themselves from emasculating authorities, was central for Padraic Colum, Thomas Cornelius Murray, Lennox Robinson, George Fitzmaurice, William Boyle, St. John Ervine, George Shiels, Paul Vincent Carroll, Denis Johnston and many other dramatists. No less important was the contribution² provided by women playwrights such as Augusta Gregory, Teresa Deevy and other minor figures as Suzanne R. Day and Geraldine Cummins. This is by no means a definitive list. Furthermore, the space devoted to each playwright in this book is purely based on demonstrating the pervasiveness of the issue at stake; it does not express a scale of values regarding the worth of each individual playwright. This book also aims to demonstrate how the literary archetype of the father-son conflict—either as a central theme or simply as a subtle undercurrent—permeated the work of both major and minor playwrights: it was a constant presence in a common culture and part of a shared understanding of that moment of Irish history.

While reference to specific dates is essential in any study of such a complex moment in Irish history, the overall structure of this book is not chronological, but thematic. Indeed, although plays are often considered in chronological order in the individual chapters, even those written at very different times may illustrate a particular issue. This division into thematic chapters also implies that the book does not analyse authors and plays separately. Each chapter

²Guiltily neglected by critics and theatre companies for several decades.

exploits an issue relating to the central theme: citing or quoting from a single play in one chapter does not exclude the same play from being cited and discussed in a different part of the book. It goes without saying that a play can be significant for, and exemplary of, several aspects of the father-son relationship, and consequently can be referenced in more than one chapter.

Despite the book not following a strict chronological order, it is clear that some distinction of the various moments of Irish history is taken into consideration. Thus, I generally make recourse to the divisions made by Lionel Pilkington (2001) in his *Theatre and the State in Twentieth Century Ireland*. Pilkington divides the history of these decades of the Abbey Theatre into four stages: the first, from the opening of the theatre in 1904 to the Easter Rising of 1916, when the plays reflect the prevalent idea of a non-violent opposition to British Rule, while denouncing the paralysis of Irish society. This was a time of cultural ferment that produced much heated debate.³ A second stage dates from 1916 to 1922 in which the plays mirrored widespread pro-independence views. This stage is followed by the period between 1922 and 1932, where the attacks on nationalist beliefs and orthodoxies, produced fierce debate and even riots. These might be seen as anti-Irish, but did not actually contrast with the policies of the pro-treaty government of the Free State. The period might well be considered the age of O'Casey, reaching its climax with Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No!* The final period goes from 1932 to 1938 and was less violent and innovative. Only at the end (1937) did it culminate in the production of plays that could match the combative approach of the earlier glorious moments of the Abbey Theatre: Paul Vincent Carroll's *Shadow and Substance*, Lennox Robinson's *Killycreggs at Twilight*, Seán O'Faolain's *She Had to Do Something*, and Hugh Hunt and Frank O'Connor's *The Invincibles* and *Moses' Rock*. The final play considered is Yeats's *Purgatory*, a gloomy reflection on the end of the dream of the generation that founded the Abbey, staged the year before Yeats's death. As Peter Kavanagh significantly stated in his history of the Abbey written in 1950, "The Abbey Theatre was a dream in the mind of Yeats... when he died the reality returned to the dream and passed away with his creator" (Kavanagh 1984: 184). Irish drama after 1938 is marked by an "unprecedented divide between writers and society" (Murray 2000: 7) that would only be repaired in the Sixties with the ascendancy of a group of major playwrights led by Brian Friel, Thomas Murphy and Hugh Leonard.

³Among which, those regarding Synge's plays, Padraic Colum's *Thomas Muskerry* and Thomas Corneliuss Murray's *Maurice Hartie*.

Dates can be functional, yet the father-son conflict represents a persistent archetype. Indeed, the issue at stake was of fundamental importance even after 1938. In 1987 Brian Friel wrote an adaptation of Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*, a choice that was not accidental. Revisiting a Russian story set in the middle of the nineteenth century was no archaeological operation, but proof of the topicality of an ever-present theme, valid anywhere and at any time, and not just in Russia in 1862. Like its source, Friel's play presents the archetypal breach between old and young generations, a theme that brings with it a series of dichotomies such as the country (the rural and agricultural provinces of Russia) and the city (St. Petersburg university),⁴ traditionalist views and modern political ideas, and old liberals and new radicals. With this adaptation, Friel proves that the representation of the clash between generations can be transposed temporally and geographically, and still be a human archetype. Friel had already tackled this issue in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1967), which centres on the complicated relationship between his young protagonist—Gar O'Donnell—and his widowed father. The intense attention given to such issues by the most important Irish playwright of the second half of the twentieth century testifies that while the father-son conflict is timeless, it is also a peculiarly Irish affair. Indeed, by purposefully referencing Friel's adaptation, the title of the present book also intends to convey a similar sense of temporal and geographical boundlessness.

Fathers and Sons at the Abbey Theatre (1904–1938) is organized in five parts plus an appendix, all of which are manifestly interrelated. The first section presents the central theme and provides a distinction between literal and metaphorical readings, arguing that the father can be conceived both as a historical/political metaphor as well as a real father in a specific historical and social context. These interpretations call into question basic concepts regarding social life: the concept of blood, intended as family values and the transmission of legacy; the idea of progress; the concept of familial cohesion that did not coincide with an increase in the Irish population; the natural conservative structure of rural societies in contrast with the need for change felt by new generations; social friction in urban areas.

The second section deals with prototypes of Irish fathers. In this regard, a recurrent archetype is the stubborn authoritarian figure who wants things to be run his own way. The natural urge of the younger generation to emerge

⁴The contraposition between Russian agricultural society and a cultural centre like St. Petersburg might well reflect the contrast between traditional Irish rural society and Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century.

with new personal identities—that differ from those of their parents’—often clashes with the need to preserve supposed family traditions and with the rigidity of traditional models. On the other hand, many plays also represent weak and ineffectual father figures, occasionally counterbalanced, or even substituted, by strong mothers.

The third part of the book takes into account the generational conflicts portrayed in the plays with recourse to theoretical tools which provide a modern reading of mythological characters. Sigmund Freud, Gustav Jung, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Richard Kearney, Luigi Zoja and Massimo Recalcati adopted mythological figures to explain the father-son relationship. Laius and Oedipus, Ulysses and Telemachus, Aeneas and Anchises, Priam and Hector, Hector and Astyanax: all of these pairings, together with Biblical examples such as Abraham and Isaac and Absalom and David, provide archetypes for the understanding of complex personal and familial dynamics.

The fourth section deals with institutional figures who can be seen as substitute father figures, namely schoolmasters, priests and political leaders. A short section also deals with sport activities, and their role in the education system, highlighting the issue of pursuing ideals of manliness and aggressiveness that are implicitly associated with the father figure.

The final part of the book deals with the aesthetic and artistic implications involved in the process of representing intergenerational struggle and focuses on a fact that cannot be ignored: the demythologization of the past. Most of the plays mentioned here—that stage dramatic instances such as the death of a father or son—are not necessarily the stuff of tragedy, but of hybrid genres such as tragicomedy and farce. The way things are narrated assumes a fundamental role. In Lacanian terms, language can be seen as the prerogative of the father: it represents the law imposing its first limitations on the child.⁵ Here the very idea of narrating, of uttering a word, assumes negative connotations. From the principle of freedom of speech, denied by censorship as well as by the rioters at the Abbey Theatre, to the uncontrolled mystification of reality created by gossip and small talk, language becomes degraded. Both literary genre and the treatment of the idea of narration are employed to debunk the idealised and mythologized legacy of the past: the passing of tradition from

⁵Language can be seen as the prerogative of the father as it constitutes the means of communication with the outer world, outreaching the exclusive mother-son relation. While language can also be read as a feminine construct—after all, we use the expression ‘mother-tongue’—it is an expression that is used when we want to make a comparison with other languages, thus, with encounters with the ‘other’.

one generation to another is compromised in the struggle between fathers and sons, and it does not lead to any positive emancipation.

A brief biographical chapter on the relationship between the most famous playwrights⁶ of the Abbey Theatre and their respective fathers provides a further contextualization of the authors mentioned here. A large section of the chapter is devoted to the specific case of Yeats: an eminent artist himself, Yeats's father was not representative of the traditional Victorian authoritarian figure. Synge and O'Casey are considered together given the biographical similarity that they both lost their fathers at an early age. Of necessity, less space is devoted to the other playwrights.

One remark of a general nature is necessary. This book is meant as a study of texts, and is intentionally text-based. Whenever the plots of the plays in question exemplify a specific concept, the choice has been made to quote directly from the respective dialogue or monologue; at times, even single sentences or apparently casual or seemingly unimportant adjectives and adverbs convey unexpectedly relevant meanings. Though the book focuses on theatrical works, it examines them as scripts, or texts, and not specifically on the basis of their theatricality or performativity. Indeed, this analysis should be seen as a cultural investigation regarding a theme perceived by the collective unconscious as being of crucial social and political importance.

One final word: in this study I occasionally prefer to rely on one of the main functions of literary criticism (and of art in general, if we admit that art has a function beyond the aesthetic), and that is, to raise questions, rather than to provide answers to them.

⁶It was not possible to provide biographical details for all the playwrights mentioned in the book: I have deliberately selected those who provide various telling examples of the father-son relationship.

CHAPTER ONE

ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXTS

Says the Eastern Proverb—“A man is more like his own time than his own father.” The dramatist is the child of his time and his locality (Padraic Colum quoted in Levitas 2002: 194).

Father figures and family matters have always been archetypal in literature, from ancient times to our contemporary age. However, perhaps this was articulated to an even greater degree in the first decades of the twentieth century, contemporary with Freud's essay on dreams which identified the Oedipus complex and the role of the family in the development of personality. Many modernist writers dealt with problematic familial relationships, from Kafka's much quoted *Letter to His Father* to Italo Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience* (the second chapter of which is titled 'My Father's Death').¹ In these years the revolt of a gifted son against a father

¹Important precursors questioning the father figure, were two Swedish playwrights: Ibsen and Strindberg. In *The Father* (1887), Strindberg questions the state's marriage law, seen as unjust—because with marriage a woman sells her rights to her future husband in exchange for his financial support—but also debunks the traditional role of father figures. In this play husband and wife—Laura and The Captain—argue over the future life of their daughter; when the Captain says he must have the last word, Laura resolves to drive him mad insinuating he is not the father of their child, in order to obtain the exclusive possibility to raise her fourteen years old daughter (without the Captain's interference). A few years later Ibsen responded with his *Hedda Gabler*. Gabler is the protagonist's maiden name, a deliberate authorial choice: he wrote to his French translator, Count Prozor, that his intention in giving it this name was to indicate that Hedda was to be regarded rather as her father's daughter than her husband's wife. Significantly both The Captain and Hedda's father are, or have been, in the military force. In different plays Ibsen tackles the issue of fatherhood: “Throughout Henrik Ibsen's dramatic works, fatherhood and issues related to fatherhood occupy a central position. In his historical and romantic dramas, as well as in his contemporary dramas, Ibsen writes about fathers, the role of fathers in relation to their children, and

2 Fathers and Sons at the Abbey Theatre (1904–1938)

who, belonging to a different generation does not understand his child's needs, is a recurrent theme in European literature from D.H. Lawrence to Thomas Mann: "The breakneck speed of change in society gave added force to the concept of 'generation', and the gap which had always separated fathers from sons grew so wide as to suggest that the young and old inhabited totally different countries" (Kiberd 1996a: 383).

In the British Isles, the representation of intergenerational conflict was a common theme, also being a natural reaction to the legacy of Victorian moralistic, and supposedly respectable, society. As Richard Ellmann (1979, 22–23) notes, tension between father and son was a recurrent theme in literature, but during the second half of the nineteenth century it became particularly noticeable, and even the more so in Great Britain, where "filial revolt runs like a Wagnerian *leitmotiv* through the literature of the period [...]." But in Ireland this revolt was even more prominent: in *Confessions of a Young Man*, George Moore openly proclaims his sense of liberation and relief when his father dies; Synge based his *Playboy of the Western World* on an attempted parricide; James Joyce's *Ulysses* is the quest for a putative father, while the earlier *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* culminates in an emancipation from oppressive authorities, one of which is the family. After attending a performance of Hermann Sudermann's play *Heimat* in Dublin in 1895, Joyce told his parents that the play was about revolution against the world of his elders: "the subject of the play is genius breaking out in the home and against the home. You needn't have gone to see it. It is going to happen in your own house."² Incidentally, one of Joyce's poems ends with the cry 'Father forsaken, forgive your son', an overt recognition of the different path the child has taken. Yeats, after handling the subject in an unpublished play written in 1884, returns to it in 1892 in his poem, 'The Death of Cuchulain'. He then turns the same story into a play in 1903, translates both *Oedipus Plays*, and at the end of his life writes *Purgatory*, which describes a character killing both his son and his father (cf. Ellmann 1979: 22–23). Yeats and Synge belonged to a generation, the Irish *Risorgimento*, that can be interpreted, among other things, as a revolt by angry sons against discredited fathers. It is curious that both Synge and Joyce depict motherless sons in their masterpieces, and stigmatize Irish males as being inadequate fathers. However, their criticism

how adult men are impacted by their relationship to their fathers. I can hardly think of a more pervasive motif in Ibsen's works than fatherhood" (Lorenzen 2006: 817).

²Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper*, London 1958, p. 87, quoted in Foster 2014: 104.

of male inadequacy fails to produce a convincing analysis of the causes of parental failure (cf. Kiberd 1996a: 382).³

If the analysis of this conflict was often misfocused, the symptoms were constantly represented. The generations of the new century widely acknowledged the growing fracture between past and present, a growing divide between generations. Many shared a sense of an imminent need for change. Roy Foster's words regarding the generation that took an active part in the Easter Rising, can also be used to describe Irish young men and women in general:

The men and women who made the Irish revolution knew that they were different from their parents. The way that the constitutional-nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party lost its grip on Irish opinion reflected a generational shift; the fracture between old and new broke along lines of age as well as of ideology (Foster 2014: 1).

The self-awareness Foster mentions led many Irish artists to produce a series of works centred upon, or referring obliquely to, the clash between two generations. As Raymond Williams says, the word "*generation* seems to follow [a] broad movement, allowing the emergence of a sense in which the distinctiveness of a particular time or set of people is emphasized, though within (as in *period*) a sense of general continuity" (Williams 1983: 97). It is exactly this change within such a continuity that is problematic in this moment of Irish history. "Both words, (generation, period) in these senses, seem to be necessary parts of the vocabulary of a culture in which historical and social change is both evident and conscious" (ibid). However, it is not just societal changes, but the centripetal forces that operate in transforming society that are consciously depicted in Irish literary output. As Robert Welch points out, the Abbey could be seen "as an arena in which the latent forces, and energies, and pressures of modern Irish consciousness manifest themselves" and in the Abbey plays "these pressures are given imaginative form" (Welch 1999: vii). In Ireland political, economic and social change produced a "conflict between what we might call the forces of growth and the forces of bondage. This conflict is seen in terms of the pressure exerted on individual characters by their

³Regarding the Irish dramatists of these decades, Pilkington (2001: 73–75) suggests that the difficulty in producing this convincing analysis, particularly for the years between 1910 and 1922, is due to the fact that the social problems of Ireland were portrayed as internecine: they were not the product of political choices but of the ontological constitution of individuals. In this respect, the Abbey Theatre often fell short in its aim to be a means for the cultural modernization of the country.

4 Fathers and Sons at the Abbey Theatre (1904–1938)

immediate family, by economic need, by the larger community and by their own aspirations” (Fitzgibbon 1975: 61).

The theatre proved to be the most appropriate medium to dramatize a common concern for an audience that recognized its topicality. After all, the theatre is “the [privileged] place where a shift from private to public discourse can take place” (Murray 2000: 5). This privileged status of dramatic performances, given by direct contact with an audience, is an incisive “collective response [that] can negotiate terms of belief, identity and freedom” (Murray 2000: 6). The archetypical clash between generations—so intense in the decades in question—was undoubtedly widely perceived culturally and indeed was part of the collective unconscious of the period. Dublin’s Abbey Theatre not only reflected this but also presented itself as an instrument for change. Therefore plays staged there were meant not only as a mirror of Irish society,⁴ but also as a possible spur for social and political action. In Christopher Murray’s words “[...] in the Irish historical experience, drama (the creation of texts for performance) and theatre (the formation of the means of production and conditions of reception of drama) were both instrumental in defining and sustaining national consciousness” (Murray 2000: 3). To this I would add social and political consciousness.⁵ Playwrights were aware of this specific function of drama. On several occasions Yeats himself stressed the need for a theatre. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he said that the great mass of Irish people, were accustomed to interminable political speeches, and read little. Thus, it was clear from the beginning of the Irish Literary Theatre that Irish writers needed a theatre of their own. Similarly, Synge also upheld the importance of a dramatic voice. In a notebook of circa 1895–1898 he wrote:

Lyrics can be written by people who are immature, drama cannot. There is little great lyrical poetry. Dramatic literature is relatively more mature. Hence the intellectual maturity of most races is marked by a definite moment of dramatic creation. This is now felt in Ireland. Lyrical art is the art of national adolescence. Dramatic art is first of all a childish art... without form or philosophy; then, after a lyrical interval

⁴Christopher Murray (2000: 9) points out that this mirror does reflect the real, but gives back images of perceived reality.

⁵Christopher Murray partly answers the question that Eagleton poses on the relationship between art and politics: “is art political weapon; utopian symbol; image of reconciliation? Is it to be mirror or hammer? Should it reflect an oppressive present, give voice to some spirit stirring within it, prefigure that spirit’s future realization, or take an active part in its unfolding?” (Eagleton 1995: 237). The answer is that these plays were meant both as ‘mirrors’ and as ‘hammers’.

we have it as mature drama dealing with the deeper truth of general life in a perfect form and with mature philosophy (Synge 1962–8: 350).

This passage is particularly relevant as, while recognizing the importance of Irish drama, Synge directly connects this literary medium to the authoritative, and above all, mature voice of the nation, first seen as childish, then adolescent and finally mature. With this short passage Synge implicitly proposes his own generation as the new artistic force that represents the country in contrast with a lyric tradition of the past. The sons are ready to take on the role of their fathers: the theatre will give them voice.

1.1 Paternal figures: paradoxes, antinomies, dichotomies, and contradictions

The first structured relationship that introduces the concept of otherness to the exclusive mother-son dyad is that between father and child. For the son, this relationship represents his first introduction to the social sphere. The father becomes a symbol of authority, the law which informs the son of the outside world. But in a colony where authority has been dispossessed and dislocated, the concept of father figure shifts from the norm and becomes problematic. In a complex situation such as that of Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century—eventful years that saw drastic political and social upheaval—the symbolic position of the father figure acquired a fragmentary and sometimes even contradictory importance. Without considering the fact that various authors, according to their personal, familial, religious, social, geographical, and political backgrounds might represent father figures in different ways, it must also be taken into account that in a little less than forty years Ireland saw the end of the Land War with the final Land Acts of 1903 and 1907,⁶ the Easter Rising (1916), the First World War (1914–18), the Anglo-Irish War (1919–1921), the birth of the Irish Free State (1922), the Irish Civil War (1922–23) and the constitution of the Republic of Ireland (1937). Passing from the ghost of Parnell to the figures of John Redmond, Arthur Griffith, Patrick Pearse, Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera, from British Rule to the Irish Free State and the Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil governments, any discussion of Irish theatre in these years must

⁶Namely, the Wyndham Land Purchase Act and the Augustine Birrell Act.

necessarily take into account such complexities and cannot be reduced to simple generalizations.⁷

In such a context, the image of the father, far from being univocal, proceeds through a series of antinomies, mirroring the complexity of a variegated and rapidly and continuously evolving society. With this in mind, this first section illustrates the metaphorical and symbolic readings of the father archetype through a series of possible dichotomies, contradictions and paradoxes that inform the paternal figure.

As mentioned, an initial duality derives from Ireland's colony status. Father figures can stand metonymically as representative of an entire Irish generation, seen and interpreted in three ways. In the first place positively, as a dispossessed authority, when compared to its British equivalent. In this case the biological father represents the national legacy to be bequeathed and preserved, and indeed, from this perspective the Irish National Theatre, and then the Abbey Theatre, were unique and glorious institutions, the first subsidized national theatre in the western world. As Wood argues, there is a big difference between the adjectives "national" and "nationalistic" and the Abbey negotiated its position and identity with regard to these two terms holding "a middle ground. Its nationalism was perhaps a by-product of its national aims as well as a reaction to the political turmoil sometimes literally going on down the street. However, the founders' mission was to promote Irishness rather than politically advocate for Home Rule or Free State" (Wood 2015: 52). The national role of the new theatre was to preserve and portray Irishness,⁸ a legacy of past generations of fathers. A second interpretation also sees the father as a dispossessed authority, but focuses on the fact that he has failed historically; he shares responsibility for the national *impasse* and is seen as weak and inadequate. A whole chapter will be devoted to such figures. Finally, fathers can be seen as representative of a generation whose values are no longer credible: this generation has not failed, but has remained anchored to the past. In this reading, fathers are stubborn, hindering presences.

If sons first had to oppose their own biological fathers—seen as negative, absent or marginalized—they soon realized that a much harsher battle

⁷Yet in *Theatre and the State in Twentieth Century Ireland*, Lionel Pilkington convincingly argues that in such a complex situation "the Irish Literary Theatre (1899–1902), the Irish National Dramatic Society (1902–4), the Irish National Theatre Society (1904–6), and the National Theatre Society, Limited (1906–) owe as much, if not more, to the imaginative energies associated with 'constructive' unionism as they do to those energies associated with the struggle for Irish political independence" (Pilkington 2001: 2).

⁸Whatever meaning this term might assume according to different playwrights.

emerged from this first conflict, and against a foreign and more malignant father: British authority. The latter can be seen as the substitute for a father figure, as a usurper, as an enemy, as a strong, patronizing and paternalistic—that is to say, imperialistic—entity. It was an emasculating foreign dominance. In such a context, even rebellion against the Irish father would prove ineffectual due to the presence of this double fatherhood, the biological and the political:

In a colony, the revolt by a son against a father is a meaningless gesture, because it can have no social effect. [...] When the sons of each generation rebelled, they soon saw the meaningless of their gesture and lapsed back into family life, as into a “haven in a heartless world”: yet it was a haven that, in every respect, reflected the disorder of the outside colonial dispensation (Kiberd 1996a: 381).

Fathers can thus represent both foreign and domestic institutions. As such, sons naturally tend to discredit authorities, and parricide metaphorically can be read—and accepted—as a social and political act, losing the sense of taboo that it genetically entails. This single act of rebellion against hated and/or oppressive authorities becomes acceptable as “antistatist, antimonarchical, antielitist, anticolonial, anti-Church, and so forth” (Valente 2010: 182).⁹ From a political and historical perspective, the representation of a father-son relationship becomes a metaphor of a country oppressed by the empire, in which the son responds with violence to an intolerable yoke.

It must be understood that in the plots of the plays staged at the Abbey Theatre, this metaphorical reading is often implicit rather than explicit. In one of Lennox Robinson’s non-political plays, *The Whiteheaded Boy* (1916), a substitute father is openly described as symbolic of British rule. In this play, the young man Denis Geoghegan—who has always been overprotected as the youngest and frailest child of the family—asks to live his life his own way. His elder brother, who has taken on the father role—their father died years earlier, leaving his eldest son with the responsibility to run family matters—accuses Denis of having—and wasting—all the opportunities his brothers and sisters never had. Denis eventually understands that he needs to be self-sufficient and without someone showing him how to live his life. He says: “I want to be

⁹These readings did not suffice to save Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* from the attacks of nationalists: nor did the justification Synge provided in *The Aran Islands* fare better: “The impulse to protect criminals is universal in the west. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feeling of these people” (Synge 2008: 350).