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The Irish Face: Images of "The Hero" in Modern Irish Drama

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Oral Presentation 2.2

THE IRISH FACE: IMAGES OF "THE HERO" IN MODERN IRISH
DRAMA

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In May 1995, Irish poet/playwright Tom MacIntyre spoke to a group of students in a small village in Ireland called Allihies. The topic of discussion was Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* and MacIntyre's stage adaptation. In the midst of this discussion, MacIntyre described *The Great Hunger*'s main character Paddy Maguire as having "the Irish face": a wandering, roving, near-crazed expression that hit at the core of being a man in Ireland.

In analyzing Paddy Maguire's character in *The Great Hunger*, the reader finds several qualities that I believe comprise the Irish face. First, there is the indication of an empty or meaningless existence. Second, the character is unable, even impotent, to change the direction or circumstances of his life. Third, there is the hint of madness that tempts the reader into passing the character off as simply a "crazy" or "brutish" Irishman. Finally, the character possesses an inner strength that protects him from his miseries and that ultimately redeems him as a character. I believe that the haunting Irish face consists of the combination of all these elements.

I argue in this paper that the Irish face is not unique to Paddy Maguire, but rather extends across Irish literature, specifically Modern Drama. Four famous plays are discussed in depth: J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, Brian Friel's *Translations*, and John P. Keane's *The Field*. An analysis of each of these plays demonstrates that significant male characters from each possess the same or similar "faces" as Paddy Maguire in *The Great Hunger*.

Finally, I discuss the Irish face in terms of a famous and significant quote in Joyce's *Ulysses*: Stephen Dedalus says that history "is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (28). This notion of history as an important influence on the Irish is vital to my argument when it becomes clear that each of the characters being discussed must negotiate his life in terms of the forces, or "histories," that would try to define him. I believe that the impetus for the Irish face is not simply the misery of day-to-day life, but rather the need and desire to lead an existence in terms of or against these histories.