

THE QUEERLY DEPARTED: GRIEF, MELANCHOLIA, AND FUTURITY IN MODERNIST SEA DRAMA

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Navigating literary treatments of the sea is no easy task, especially when these treatments are directly tapped into the sea's indefinability and elusiveness. This notion is made clear in Daniel Davy's discussion of tragedy in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, where he touches upon the issue of marine space as a ruthless area of both creation and destruction. Despite the supposed impartiality of the sea, it can be argued that it is a very *human* space. This holds true when it comes to sailors and fishermen (henceforth "sea-dwellers"), whose lives and sustenance depend on this unruly domain. Sea-dwellers must make certain sacrifices—which include a rejection of meaningful relationships outside of the ship, the denunciation of a stable home, and possibly, the denial of progeny. Thus, those who venture through the sea are removed from the promises of a land-dwelling life. A life on *terra firma* is viewed as a normative and productive choice that not only allows for happiness, but also futurity. The sea's lack of futurity, the triangular tension between the earth, the sea, and the sea-dweller, and even the massiveness of the sea itself disrupt most attempts at entirely fixing or understanding its meaning. These factors ultimately make maritime texts and narratives very suitable to queer interpretations.

The queer possibilities enabled by seafaring have been previously explored in historical accounts such as *Hello Sailor! The Hidden History of Gay Life at Sea*, in which Paul Baker and Jo Stanley discuss accounts of gay men in the sailing industry, particularly after the Second World War. The premise of their exploration is guided by the fact that the sea allowed sailors to live a gay lifestyle that was impossible on land, mostly because "vessels were one of the only places where

[gay men] could be open about their sexuality” (ix). As suggested above, a life at sea entails a deviance from the concrete and abstract demands of a life on land, thus allowing sea-dwellers to explore the facets of identity that must be suppressed while dwelling on land. Life on a vessel imposes certain demands and expectations in terms of comradeship and relationships. As Baker and Stanley point out:

Not only did the morals of land no longer apply, but also the physical need for mutual support was there: a ship is a relatively fragile container on dangerous waters, and all workers are dependent on each other for survival. It was a familial situation, and the atmosphere of mutual support, or even fraternal tenderness, cannot be overestimated. (181)

In many instances, these relationships, as argued by Baker and Stanley, transcend the fraternal and venture into the sexual and even romantic. Whereas certain heterosexual sailors were known to search for sexual release with the assistance of gay sailors present within a crew, other sailors were known to take these relationships more seriously—to the point in which the relationship between two sailors was viewed as a marriage more than anything else. Other sailors would identify as gay while out at sea, but classify themselves as straight while visiting a pier or while visiting their respective homes.

Despite the overlap between queerness and seafaring, my discussion will not focus on dramatic characters that explicitly identify as gay or queer. More exactly, my intent with this discussion is not only to explore the presence of queerness in modernist sea drama that excludes or conceals discussions of homosexuality, but also how this very exclusion or concealment enables a queer potentiality that increases the overall pathos infused within these plays. Rather than falling into the practice of reading these plays in a paranoid fashion, I will conduct a reparative reading¹ that recovers these plays from their potentially heteronormative and homophobic narratives. I argue that the queer features in modernist drama of the sea not only push readers to question what losses can or cannot be mourned, but that they also bestow upon the audience the potential to recognize and reflect upon losses in ways that certain characters in the plays could not. I will focus my discussion on J.M. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1904)

¹ Here, I am referring to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notions of reparative reading discussed in *Touching Feeling*. Sedgwick posits that reparative reading is an exploratory method of critiquing texts focused on repairing the damage done by homophobia and heteronormativity rather than engaging in the paranoid practice of identifying the ways in which a text suppresses queer subjects or queer narratives. Sedgwick suggests that through a combination of paranoid and reparative reading, readers and scholars can better assess the ways in which “selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150-151).

and Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* (1914), two modernist plays that focus almost exclusively on the destructive power of the sea and its aftereffects. My hope is that this discussion will lead to a better understanding of how loss is represented and performed within these two plays, while in turn providing readers with an interpretive venue in which the lack of futurity and the lack of definition can be viewed as fruitful areas of exploration.

Before discussing my theoretical framework, I must clarify why I am approaching two seemingly different plays using the same analytical model. After all, there is little that these plays share with the exception that both are considered modernist works and that both plays touch upon issues of loss provoked by interactions with the sea. One work is a 1904 play written by an Irish playwright, set in the rural premises of the Aran Islands, that focuses on an elderly Irishwoman's approach towards the loss of all of the men in her immediate family. The other work is a 1914 play written by an Irish-American playwright, which takes place in a British tramp steamer that is travelling from New York to Cardiff, centered on the final moments of a dying sailor who experiences a final moment of connection with a "friend." These two plays were crafted by different authors, who wrote these plays in different geographical locations with different demands and expectations in terms of audience and form. I believe, however, that through their comparison, we will better comprehend how queerness is channeled through sea drama, and the reparative effects that this channeling invokes.

The aims of this discussion echo Susan Stanford Friedman's assessments in "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies," in which she approaches the act of revision as a critical practice that paves the way for a planetary epistemology. This epistemology—in due course—allows one to explore the limits of the modernism/modernity dichotomy while simultaneously promoting its expansion. Friedman views planetarity as a viable and productive critical venue because it is "not nominalist, fundamentalist: it doesn't name a singular modernism/modernity, thereby privileging one over all others. It must, by its very 'worldness,' encompass multitudes on a global grid of relational networks. And that means encompassing contradictions, tensions, oppositions, and asymmetries" (494). Thus, I expect that by juxtaposing *Riders of the Sea* (henceforth *Riders*) with *Bound East for Cardiff* (henceforth *Cardiff*), I will be able to understand the role that loss plays in terms of unveiling *and* challenging the queer themes present in modern sea drama. This act of unveiling and challenging can be put into practice by revising our understanding of loss through the deconstructive practices of queer theory—focusing mostly on

the notions of futurity and queer affect. Although, as pointed out by Friedman, I do expect to confront tensions, paradoxes, and incongruences, I am sure that the comprehensive benefits produced by this exercise will outweigh its inconsistencies.

Beyond Reproductive Futurity

I want to draw attention to two main strands of thought that will be crucial for my readings. The first is queer futurity and reproductive futurism, drawing from the work of Lee Edelman. The second is queer affect theory, and more specifically, queer grief, pertaining to the works of Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed. Both of these approaches focus on the notion of death and on concepts drawn from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to better understand the issues that queer individuals face as marginal subjects situated within heteronormative contexts. Despite this grounding on the notion of death, both approaches are different in terms of their critical productivity and outlook. Furthermore, while Edelman's framework argues for an embrace of the death drive as a heteronormative resistance, queer grief and affect strive to transcend the queer subject beyond the problematic limitations imposed by death—whether real or metaphorical.

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman describes queerness as a quality assigned to ideas or people who do not perpetuate the concept of futurity. Futurity in this instance refers to the possibility and the continuity of heteronormative designs as ideologically facilitated by the notion of the Child—a figure that must be protected, for it assumedly enables life and the perpetuation of society.² Queerness, therefore, is a label assigned to notions and individuals that contravene the ideals of reproductive futurism, which can be described as concepts that “impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable [...] the possibility of queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (Edelman 2). This is precisely why the queer is viewed as a threat: it defies the principles of reproductive futurity in favor of ostensibly egotistic and masturbatory pursuits. As Edelman argues, subjects who reject (reproductive) futurity become scapegoats for a system that is designed to fail: “the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive

² It is important to bear in mind that Edelman is not referring to actual children when alluding to the Child. He makes a clear distinction between actual children and the collective set of political and conservative idea(l)s that coalesce when invoking the notion of the Child.

of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and inevitably, life itself” (13). According to Edelman, the engagement in practices that are not deemed productive—such as the refusal to have children, and even the refusal to view children as the wielders of futurity (and more specifically, a future that one will *not* be part of)—are labeled queer because they refute ideals that are valorized within heteronormative contexts. Edelman posits that queer subjects should embrace the “death drive” that defines their existence rather than trying to desperately fit within the heteronormative system of futurity that rejects them in the first place.

In contrast, queer grief, a subset of queer affect approaches, attempts to categorize emotions and feelings tethered to queer subjects while simultaneously understanding the multitudinous reactions to these emotions. The particular emotions that I am interested in for matters of this discussion are grief and mourning. The roots of a queer grief approach can be traced back to arguments developed by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning*. Focusing on post-9/11 American policies that perpetuate the existence of war and violence within contemporary society, Butler approaches the transformative power of mourning and violence as forces capable of turning segregation into solidarity. Butler not only puts into question who can or cannot be approached as human, but ultimately, who can or cannot be mourned. In order for someone to be grieved after their death, they ultimately have to be recognized as subjects in the first place; this becomes increasingly problematic when approaching the death of subjects that are deemed Other—or *unreal* as Butler puts it—including but not limited to marginalized communities that deviate from racial, cultural, and even sexual norms. Thus, subjects who are approached as unreal subjects ultimately go through two deaths: an actual physical death, and a death from the mourner’s memory. As Butler elaborates,

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never “were,” and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. (33)

Unreal subjects are barred, or as Butler puts it, negated from living on in the memories of those who continue to inhabit the world of the living. Based on Butler’s work on mourning and grief, Sarah Ahmed, in “Queer Feelings” focuses her discussion on queer grief, which explores how loss, mourning, and melancholia are concepts that are tethered to queer subjects, who must be recognized as real subjects

in order to be grieved. Ahmed provides clarification in terms of the nature of a queer loss: while she admits queer grief does not imply that queer lives are impossible to grieve, she recognizes that these grievances typically cannot be openly admitted or confessed in any way. Ahmed, along the lines of Butler's ideas, argues that one must "recognise oneself as having something before one can recognise oneself as losing something" (431).

In their analysis of grief as pertaining to unreal subjects, both Butler and Ahmed allude to the Freudian differentiation between mourning and melancholia in their theoretical frameworks. According to Freud, mourning entails a healthy process of grieving in which the living subject is able to let go of the memory of the dead subject. Melancholia, on the other hand, entails an "irrational" process in which the subject in mourning and the "object" being mourned become one—in other words, the subject is unable to let go of the memory of the deceased: "It is on one hand, like mourning, a reaction to the real loss of a loved object; but over and above this, it is marked by a determinant which is absent in normal mourning or which, if it is present, transforms the latter into pathological mourning" (Freud 250). Whereas Freud views melancholia as pathological, Ahmed views it as a positive and fruitful trait when applied to unreal lives. This is because melancholia, unlike mourning, forces the subject to integrate the memory, or better said, the *impression* of the deceased into their own consciousness—giving the unreal a valid existence that resides in the consciousness of the melancholic. Furthermore, whereas mourning and the eventual rejection of the memory of the deceased implies a discomfort, melancholia entails absolute comfort³ with the memory of the departed. Ahmed thus proceeds to view grief as productive when it expresses itself through melancholia:

to lose another is not to lose one's impressions, not all of which are even conscious. To preserve an attachment is not to make an external other internal, *but to keep one's impressions alive*, as aspects of one's self that are both oneself and more than oneself, as a sign of one's debt to others. One can let go of another as an outsider, but maintain one's attachments, by keeping alive one's impressions of the lost other. [...] To grieve for others is to keep their impressions alive in the midst of their death. (434)

By keeping these impressions alive, the non-transcendence of queerness is kept alive as well, along with its distinguishing resistance to normativity. In Ahmed's view, the melancholic integration of an unreal person permits a transcendence of queerness "*that allows queer to*

³ By comfort, I am alluding to Ahmed's view of comfort as the complete integration of the self with an external object. Comfort can also be approached as the seamless integration of a body with an exterior space.

do its work” in the first place (437). It is through this integration of queer impressions that queerness is given a shot at futurity, although it should be reiterated that queerness is not always given a chance to be integrated if it is not recognized. Butler and Ahmed’s views towards queer affect and queer grief allow one to escape the pessimism and fatalism imbued within Edelman’s framework, while furthermore allowing one to scrutinize how queer impressions in literature facilitate the transcendence of queer subjects beyond the limits of death.

Queering Modernist Sea Drama

In determining how queer *can* do its work within Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* and O’Neill’s *Bound East for Cardiff*, it is imperative to determine what makes these plays queer in the first place. When it comes to Synge’s *Riders*, performing a queer analysis of this play can be difficult due to the fact that the play deliberately avoids any type of overt sexuality, and due to the fact that Synge’s plays tend to exclude queerness. As pointed out by Susan Cannon Harris in her discussion of Synge and gender, the dramatist’s treatment of gender and sexuality is “heretical” because it controverts the Catholic and Darwinian view of sexuality as legitimate only when it is hypothetically reproductive. However, Harris further elaborates this notion by providing a key exception to this heresy: “Synge conforms to this belief only to the extent that his universe excludes homosexuality; though ‘queer’ is a Syngean keyword, desire in Synge’s universe is always and only heterosexual desire. What *is* queer about sex in Synge’s world is its almost antithetical relationship to reproduction” (114). Harris’s linkage of the queerness of Synge’s play to matters of reproduction provides a fruitful avenue of exploration for the non-normativity of *Riders*. Though my reading will take place at the risk of diminishing a strong association of queerness to sexuality, I portend that it is a useful line of inquiry nonetheless. In particular, Edelman’s notions of queerness as pertaining to a rejection of (reproductive) futurity and an embrace of the death drive can help one to make a queer critique of Synge’s play that still touches upon issues of reproduction and the body.

The idea of the sea as a space of death that lacks futurity is saturated throughout Synge’s play. The play opens up with a noticeable degree of tension invoked by the possibility that Michael, one of Maurya’s two remaining sons, drowned at sea. Nora and Catherine, Maurya’s two daughters, contemplate whether or not to open a package that possibly contains what remains of Michael’s clothes—a revelation that they keep at bay to avoid upsetting their mother.

Maurya leaves her bedroom and laments the possibility that Bartley, her only remaining son, might venture off to the sea and succumb to its clutches. The tension in this play escalates as Bartley enters the house in search of a piece of rope, and reveals his plans to sail away to Connemara in order to sell a horse. Despite Nora's pleas, Bartley ignores her since the family depends on the money earned from the horse in order to survive. This dependence causes further stress within the family, for although they are aware that Bartley must venture out into the sea in order to assure the family's future, there is also the possibility that Bartley may not survive this journey to Connemara—thus cementing Davy's notion of the sea as both a space of creation and destruction. Maurya is thus very firm when trying to stop her son from going out to sea, as can be seen in the following exchange:

MAURYA. It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drownd'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave? [...]

BARTLEY *To Nora*. Is she coming to the pier?

NORA. *Looking out*. She's passing the green head and letting fall her sails.

BARTLEY. *Getting his purse and tobacco*. I'll have half an hour to go down, and you'll see me coming again in two days, or in three days, or maybe in four days if the wind is bad.

MAURYA. *Turning round to the fire, and putting her shawl over her head*. Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from an old woman, and she holding him from the sea? (Synge 25)

The danger of the sea is made clear through Maurya's plea. She asserts that if Bartley goes out to sea, not only will he die, but he will also assure the demise of the women in the household. In this exchange, the reader witnesses a feminine presence, or better said, force, trying to keep a sea-dweller from slipping away into the queer space of the sea. Ignoring this feminine call, Bartley decides to leave for Connemara anyway, thus confronting the death drive face-to-face. The queer tension within this exchange is both prevalent and paradoxical. On one hand, Bartley must leave for Connemara in order to ensure not only his own futurity, but also the well-being of his family. Nonetheless, everyone in the household is aware that Bartley is facing impending doom, especially since the ocean current is particularly strong during his departure.

After Bartley's exodus, two important events occur: Bartley leaves

behind the cake that his sisters prepare for him, and Maurya lets him depart without first giving him a blessing. These two points bear some interesting insights in terms of the play's queerness. The fact that Bartley leaves behind his sustenance not only foreshadows his eventual death, but it can also be interpreted as a denial or departure from an element that will assure his survival. Maurya's refusal to bless her son before leaving has strong ties to queer grief, for she refuses to bless him, as implied by the play, because a power beyond her cognizance prevents her from doing so: "I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say 'God speed you,' but something choked the words in my throat. He went by quickly; and 'the blessing of God on you,' says he, and I could say nothing" (Synge 37). The issue is not Maurya's lack of desire to bless her son. The issue is that she is completely *unable* to give this blessing despite her efforts. Maurya views her son as a body that cannot be blessed—a notion that intensifies once it is made clear that Maurya is incapable of bestowing a blessing during her second attempt to do so. Thus, in *Riders*, queer affect not only brings into question who can or cannot be mourned, but also, who can or cannot be blessed.

Bartley's departure shifts the focus of the play to Michael, Maurya's other son, who is suspected to have died while out at sea. Feeling a twinge of regret after not blessing Bartley before his parting, Maurya runs after him in an effort to undo her wrong and give Bartley the cake he left behind—therefore alluding to the notion of the feminine presence following the queer body by venturing out of the domestic sphere to assure the futurity of a queer body. With their mother gone, Nora and Cathleen unravel a package they hid from their mother—only to determine that it contains an article of clothing with a unique stitching pattern that the daughters recognize, confirming Michael's death. They then question how their mother is going to cope with the loss of her son, especially since all of her other sons, and even her husband, have died out at sea. Their fears are accurate, for with Bartley's departure and with the confirmation of Michael's death, Maurya reflects on all the lives that the sea has taken away from her, which not-so-coincidentally, happen to be men: "I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house—six fine men, though it was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world—and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them" (Synge 38).

The sea is factually consuming and drowning all of the men in Maurya's life, a problem since women were not allowed to venture

out into the sea as a means of providing sustenance to their families. This is problematic, as Maurya is unable to envision a future in which she is alone with her daughters, and she insistently asserts that her female offspring are incapable of bringing bread to the table. Maurya's fears and apprehensions tap into even greater qualms in terms of the futurity of her own family. Without the presence of men within the domestic sphere, this space becomes queer in that the lineage of the family is destroyed. There are no men around to carry on the legacy of the family or even the family name. The queer sea thus becomes an ominous entity that lures the masculine figure away from the security of the heteronormative domestic sphere, rendering their lives and their futures impotent—an impotency that increases in feebleness when realizing that the father, the father's offspring, and even the father's father have been washed away by the queer sea. The elimination of the male figure from the household also eliminates the possibility of creating a child in the domestic sphere, bolstering the failure of reproductive futurity inherent within the play.

Riders embraces a Hamlet-esque sense of calamity when all of the male characters eventually die at sea. As Maurya sees Bartley's dead body in her home, she delivers her eminent speech in which she proclaims that the sea is now powerless and bears no command over her, an interesting notion when approaching the sea as a queer space:

They're all gone now, *and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . .* I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other" (Synge 42, emphasis mine).

Maurya views Bartley's death as a relief to her suffering rather than its cause. Most of her time was spent praying that the remaining men in her life would not succumb to the sea; however, now that these men are no longer present, she no longer has to spend her time praying. She also points out that she used to be concerned with the direction of the sea's surf, and even the direction of the wind—but with the death of Bartley, these worries melt away. It is baffling that Maurya does not seem to lament Bartley's actual death, but rather, she bemoans the effects that said death induces. These effects include not only the destruction of her familial lineage, but also the ability for her family to survive—thus, her daughters' ability to ensure the futurity of the household is rendered just as impotent as that of her dead sons, husband, and father-in-law.

Maurya's lamentation illustrates how keen she is to push away Bartley's memory. By making statements such as "it's a great rest

I'll have now, and it's time surely" (Synge 42-43), Maurya achieves a sinister sense of gratification by realizing that she will finally get a break from her prayers and her worries. One does not encounter the lamentation usually expected when a mother experiences the loss of a child. Harris argues that this is due to the "inversion of the generational process [that] finally perverts Maurya's 'natural' maternal feelings" (110). Rather than paying tribute to Bartley by prolonging the impression of his memory within her being, Maurya deliberately eradicates his memory, along with the memory of Michael. Maurya's proclamation of her ability to finally achieve rest leaves one to believe that her male children, her husband, and even the queer sea no longer possess the ability to linger within her mind. When Maurya explicitly states her desire to have Bartley's coffin buried in a "deep grave" (Synge 45), it only adds to this distancing of herself not only from Bartley's memory, but also from his body. This desire suggests that Maurya—while indeed lamenting the effects caused by the death of her child—actively repudiates the possibility of Bartley's memory from becoming a melancholic impression. Bartley becomes a subject that cannot be blessed, and through his death, he becomes a subject that cannot be grieved, thus enabling his categorization as a queer subject.

In contrast to *Riders*, O'Neill's *Cardiff* contains various allusions to sexuality and sexual tension, thus enabling an unforced queer reading to take place. The play focuses primarily on the very close relationship that exists between Yank and Driscoll, two sailors of the British tramp steamer known as the *Glencairn*. As the *Glencairn* travels from New York to Cardiff, Yank is dying due to a bizarre ship accident that led to the perforation of one of his lungs. One encounters the two sailors in a moment of solitude, where they begin to reflect on the loneliness and misery ingrained within the life of a sailor. They also contemplate how different their lives would be if they had chosen a different path in their lives. Yank exclaims that he is "goin' to die, that's what, and the sooner the better!," (O'Neill 28) to which his companion, Driscoll, wildly replies: "No, and be damned to you, you're not. I'll not let you." (O'Neill 28). Throughout their conversation, the level of intensity in their relationship begins to increase, to the point at which their affiliation can be interpreted as amorous or co-dependent rather than simply sociable or friendly—they not only depend on each other, but it is clear that one does not want to live without the other.

The intensity of their relationship can be attributed to the fact that they spent years sailing together; nonetheless, there is a particular confession that Yank makes that marks the presence of queer desire

between the two sailors. As Yank discusses how the life of a sailor is acceptable for a young man, he laments the fact that this adventurous life prevents him from achieving any degree of normalcy, which in his view includes heteronormative touchstones such as marriage, children, and a stable home. As illustrated below, Yank then shares his clandestine desire to move to a distant country in order to begin a farming endeavor with Driscoll:

YANK. Sea-fain' is all right when you're young and don't care, but we ain't chickens no more, and somehow, I dunno, this last year has seemed rotten, and I've had a hunch I'd quit—*with you of course*—and we'd save our coin, and go to Canada or Argentine or some place and git a farm, just a small one, just enough to live on. I never told yuh this 'cause I thought you'd laugh at me.

DRISCOLL. [*Enthusiastically*] Laugh at you, is ut? When I'm havin' the same thoughts myself, toime aafter toime. It's a grand idea and we'll be doin' ut sure if you'll stop your crazy notions—about—about bein' so sick. (O'Neill 28-29, emphasis mine)⁴

Both Yank and Driscoll contemplate the possibility of delving into entrepreneurial endeavors together in a distant country, but there is also an implicit desire of Brokeback proportions to construct a domestic space in which the two men could live together. This space entails a shared location, a shared economy, and the production of just enough resources to get them by. Throughout this confession, it is apparent that their desire to move to a distant country not only indicates a longing to remove themselves from a known social and cultural location, but also a desire to achieve a life that is not possible for them at the present moment. This longing for domesticity and stability is so “irrational” and foreign, that they only envision it occurring within a displaced or imagined location.

Although it is uncertain whether or not Yank and Driscoll have ever acted on their queer desire, it would be disingenuous to suggest that this desire is not present. As Yank grows nearer to dying, he paradoxically begins to talk of women and heteronormative endeavors while upholding the aura of queerness imbued within their exchange, referring to a particular “barmaid at the Red Stork in Cardiff” that has “been good” to him (O'Neill 30). This, at first, seems to be a trick in which Yank tries to steer attention away from this moment of

⁴ The pause present after the phrase “crazy notions” suggests hesitancy on Driscoll's behalf, especially as he discusses the possibility of moving with Yank to a distant country. The pause possibly indicates how the very thought of living together with another man in either Canada or Argentina can also be perceived as a bizarre idea.

intense bonding and confession, in which he consistently brings up moments that have reinforced his attachment to Driscoll—moments such as drinking together and going to jail together. He even brings up Driscoll’s awareness of Yank’s social digressions, which include murder. In order to pay tribute to this woman’s generosity, Yank asks Driscoll to buy the barmaid “the biggest box of candy [he] c’n find in Cardiff” (O’Neill 30). While at first it seems that this conversation will be fixated on his desire for the barmaid, Yank pivots back into a queer mode, and discusses what belongings he wants to leave to Driscoll. Yank not only endows Driscoll with a part of his salary, but he also gives Driscoll his watch—*his most prized possession*, a gift that makes the sentimental value of the barmaid’s box of chocolate seem pale in comparison.

The emotional link between Yank and Driscoll is stressed when Yank dies; Driscoll expresses a distressing degree of sorrow intertwined with a degree of hesitation:

DRISCOLL. [*Pale with horror.*] Yank! Yank! Say a word to me for the love av hiven! [*He shrinks away from the bunk, making the sign of a cross. Then comes back and puts a trembling hand on Yank’s chest and bends closely over the body.*]

COCKY. [*From the alleyway.*] Oh, Driscoll! Can you leave Yank for arf a mo’ and give me a ‘and’?

DRISCOLL. [*With a great sob.*] Yank! [*He sinks down on his knees beside the bunk, his head on his hands. His lips move in some half-remembered prayer.*] (O’Neill 31)

Driscoll’s despair is saturated with sorrow that is expressed verbally and physically. Driscoll grows pale and yells, and he eventually places his hand on Yank’s chest while bending closely to his body—which indicates a degree of physical and emotional intimacy between the two sailors. When Cocky, another shipmate, calls Driscoll from the alleyway, Driscoll immediately removes his hands and himself away from Yank’s body and focuses his attention on delivering a prayer. Regardless of his intention of doing this, it is suggested that Driscoll did *not* want to be seen by Cocky in such a vulnerable and intimate position with Yank. Although Driscoll wants to grieve over the loss of Yank, he is unable to do so in the manner and in the fashion that expresses the true intensity of their relationship. While O’Neill might have not intentionally envisioned this exchange between Yank and Driscoll as queer, it is inevitable for us to approach this give-and-take as such due to our contemporary sensibilities as readers. It is possible to interpret this play as a comment of Yank’s and Driscoll’s inability to create their own domestic space within their current social

and cultural conditions, simply because that notion would seem bizarre or crazy to other spectators. With this in mind, the tragedy can possibly be approached as a queer tragedy, in which the lamentation is focused on the characters' inability to comply with their sexual, amorous, and domestic desires because they do not comply with the demands of heteronormativity.

Returning to Yank's and Driscoll's conversation in which they discuss the prospect of moving to Canada or Argentina, Driscoll posits that there is a possibility for them to pursue their domestic desires if Yank's condition ameliorates. Unfortunately, Yank's death completely obliterates this possibility—not that their domestic desires were much of a possibility in the first place, since it was presumably uncommon for two men to move in together and start a small farm during the early 1900s. The act of moving to a different country to begin a small self-sustaining farm in which these two men would ostensibly spend the rest of their lives indeed goes against the notions of reproductive futurity. Even though farming is indeed a productive endeavor and a marker of futurity, note that they are only interested in producing “just enough to live on” (O'Neill 28). By delving into this domestic enterprise, the men would hinder their chances of finding a potential female mate, and the relationship would also not produce any children or offspring. Thus, Yank's death not only prevents this queer mode of being from taking place, but it also assures that the values of heteronormativity are privileged and upheld. The reader of the playtext can only begin to imagine what would happen if Yank survived his injuries. Would they move to Canada or Argentina to start their own farm? Would they continue to navigate the life of a wandering sailor, which in and of itself is a lifestyle with no future?

The homoerotic relationship between Yank and Driscoll, although barely subtextual, actively reflects attitudes and behaviors pertaining to the sexual life of sailors at sea. Since *Cardiff* was written and produced prior to the Second World War, its portrayal of gender and sexuality in the lives of seafarers is symptomatic of the attitudes present within actual maritime life during the early 1900s. Baker and Stanley point out that prior to (and to some extent, after) the war, homosexuality was still a widely condemned portent. Regardless of the attitudes present towards homosexuality, sea-dwellers were known to engage in same-sex trysts and relationships, particularly since sexual release was actively sought “on all-male ships where men were away from land for months” (35). While some sailors pursued sexual relationships when vessels were docked in piers, others resorted to varying sexual practices in order to achieve release. Homosexual practices were a popular form to achieve this discharge, especially

when considering that the morals and laws of the land typically did not apply while out on the queer sea.

While it is possible to approach Yank and Driscoll's relationship as a fraternal one, the propensity for sailors to engage in homosexual acts while out at sea intensifies the potentiality of a queer relationship between the two sailors. It is curious, however, that while *Cardiff* makes subtle references to an intense (speculatively sexual) relationship between the two sailors, especially in their physical attachment, this queer potential is never explicitly expressed. On one hand this is most likely due to the fact that O'Neill would have undoubtedly faced serious backlash for portraying an overtly queer relationship; on the other hand, this ambiguity reflects the clandestine, and perhaps customary, nature of homosexuality in the everyday life of the sailor. Baker and Stanley point out that the evidence for homosexuality amongst sailors prior to the Second World War is scarce; however, they argue that this scarcity should not be interpreted as proof towards the rarity of homosexuality prior to this period. Conversely, they suggest that this dearth of evidence implies that homosexuality amid male sailors

was too minor an offence to be punished from on high, just as the presence of women on board was ignored by officials unless it was seen to result in trouble. Similarly, it could indicate that this behavior was so *prevalent* that the large number of prosecutions would have wasted too much time. (36, emphasis mine)

Baker and Stanley's claims, based on accounts of sailors who were at sea during the mid-1900s, are fairly speculative. Nevertheless, they do shed some light on the validity of a queer reading of *Cardiff*. The parallels between Baker and Stanley's account of gay sailors and Driscoll and Yank's relationship in *Cardiff* are eerily compatible, especially when the authors elaborate on the acceptance of gay sailors in foreign countries. They emphasize how the attitudes of other countries towards queerness "were often more equivocal than in the UK[.] [Gay sailors] could be treated like a normal person, albeit a tourist to be relieved of money, or welcomed, or even, in the USA, as just another member of the community" (153). When this notion is juxtaposed with *Cardiff*, one cannot help but recall that the sailors are not only venturing from the United States to the United Kingdom, but they also express an open desire to move to either Argentina or Canada.

In the preface to their book, Baker and Stanley posit how the history of gay sailors has been limited to either the sailors or the passengers that traveled in these vessels, and that their presence represents "an overlooked aspect of gay history and of maritime history" (x).

Based on the expository aims of their project, the authors speculate on how an understanding of the queer history of sailors will change perspectives not only of the past, but even one's understanding of literary texts: "Do novels such as *Treasure Island* have to be read quite differently in respect to relationships?" (x). Undoubtedly, knowledge about the queer life of sailors does highlight new potentialities not only in terms of *Cardiff*, in which queerness is relatively simple to decode, but also in the case of *Riders*, especially with its queer ties to reproductive futurity. One can only begin to imagine the life that Bartley, his brothers, his father, and his grandfather led while out at sea—a space in which rules and obligations of heteronormativity and domesticity do not necessarily hold true.

The juxtaposition of *Riders*, *Cardiff*, and the queer history of sea-dwellers unleashes the queer narratives embedded within the plays. Both plays not only depict the death of bodies that can be approached as queer, but they also depict the rejection of said body by a loved one—emphasizing the living subject's inability to integrate the impression of a queer body within their ego. Both plays also depict a sea as a force capable of destruction, as seen through Bartley's drowning and through Yank's injury as caused through a ship venturing through untamable waters. However, both plays not only differ in terms of characters, but also in terms of space.

As I pointed out previously, *Riders* stresses a deep distinction between the domestic sphere as a heteronormative space and the sea as a queer space. It is through Bartley's removal from the domestic sphere, and his immersion into the realm of the queer sea, that he literally embraces the nuances of the death drive. In *Cardiff*, however, one encounters a distortion of the domestic sphere through the ship's attempt to parody this domestic space. The ship, after all, is an artificial construction that facilitates the movement of bodies through a space that would otherwise be unnavigable. The existence of the ship, from a queer sense, is thus paradoxical in that it allows subjects to inhabit the queer sea while at the same time being sheltered from it. Even though Yank and Driscoll are found within a place segregated from the heteronormative demands of *terra firma*, the sheltered nature of the ship contains the same heteronormative rules and regulations that prevent their queer desire from being truly activated—even when the ship is only inhabited by men. It is no wonder that both Yank and Driscoll, due to these restrictive demands, were only able to envision a life together neither within the ship nor their homeland, but rather, a projected space by the name of Canada or Argentina in which they are not bound by the demands of family, and arguably, language.

I want to turn my attention to the fact that Maurya forgot to purchase

the nails necessary to construct Bartley's coffin. Through the introduction of Bartley's queer body into the domestic sphere, Maurya is reminded of the queer fate of her home. Similar to the ship, which can be considered queer due to the presence of a single sex within the space, Bartley's death "threatens" the domestic sphere by attempting to transform Maurya's home into a queer convent—a space inhabited solely by women in which a reproductive future is deemed impossible. I argue that this threat, however, is provoked by Maurya's direct confrontation with Bartley's marked body, a concrete manifestation of the queer abject that forces her to stand vis-à-vis her own mortality, and arguably, her *own* emerging queerness as a subject. The coffin thus becomes a space that encloses the queer body from the rest of the world, preventing it from upsetting the heterosexual space within the play—the fact that Maurya desires this coffin to be buried deeply further stresses her desire to remove the body away from her. While the characters in the play contend that Maurya forgot the nails because "getting old she is, and broken" (Synge 44), this overlooking suggests Maurya's hesitancy in terms of fully enclosing this body in a constructed space, and in terms of preventing Bartley from becoming a melancholic impression. This differs greatly from the treatment of the queer body in *Cardiff*, in which Yank admits that he will "be buried at sea" (O'Neill 30), which means that the body will be unleashed into a queer space—a reading that unnervingly suggests that the queer body can only fully embrace its queerness through death.

A queer reading of *Riders* and *Cardiff* suggests that perhaps Edelman was right in that queer individuals are subjects that are antithetical to notions of (reproductive) futurity. A queer reading of these plays not only intensifies the sense of misfortune portrayed in both plays, but it also demonstrates how queer characters are not grievable—thus converting futurity into an absolute impossibility since these subjects are even denied a future within the memory of the living. Adding to the impossibility of a queer subject's futurity is the notion that both plays suggest the inability of queer bodies to inhabit a domestic and heteronormative space, as seen not only by Driscoll and Yank's inability to start a farm and home in a distant country, but also by the death of all of the major male characters within *Riders*. Thus, a queer reading of *Riders* and *Cardiff* not only reinforces the power and superiority of a heteronormative life, but it goes so far as to approach queerness as an ephemeral presence. Does this imply that *Riders* and *Cardiff* are heteronormative *and* anti-queer?

A Potential Future for the Queerly Departed

When approaching *Riders* and *Cardiff* through a queer lens, nihilism and fatalism are inevitable, especially when recalling that Maurya and Driscoll were unable fully to acknowledge the deaths of their beloved queer subjects. This, in conjunction with the fact that queerness is represented as impossibility in both plays, stresses Edelman's view of the queer subject as one that denies embracing future-oriented characteristics. The lack of futurity present in both sea plays, and the inability to recognize grief for the queer subjects who are lost to maritime causes, pushes one to question whether it is possible to escape heteronormative determinism. Nevertheless, although the lack of futurity is rampant in both plays, it is through their performance that it is possible to approach grief as a productive avenue that gives queer characters the future that they are denied in the narratives. It is the performative disposition of drama that rescues the lack of futurity that haunts these plays.

José Esteban Muñoz, in his book entitled *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, focuses his attention on the ability that art has to enable futurity where it does not exist. In order to recover queer theory and queer criticism from its narrow focus on the present perpetuated through the lack of futurity, Muñoz proposes the resurrection of political idealism and utopia in order to approach queerness as a future-embracing phenomenon. He traces the historical materiality of past and contemporary queer works of art in order to demonstrate how political collectives can reframe queerness into a longing for a utopian culture and society—in which utopia is viewed as politics of affect.

In the chapter titled “Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative,” Muñoz discusses how minorities, particularly queer and punk youths, approach nightlife as a rehearsal room—a space in which these minorities are able to perform a self that does not follow the pressures and demands of traditional lifestyle norms. Although *Riders* and *Cardiff* do not necessarily portray spaces in which queer utopia is possible, Muñoz's approach towards performance enables a better understanding on how queer grief can be appropriated to achieve a utopian ideal. Drawing from Miranda Joseph's views on performance, Muñoz points out that the practice of performativity, when approached as a potentiality that has the power to transmit ideas to an audience, is capable of generating

a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging. If we consider performance under such a lens, we can see the temporality of what I describe as a utopian performativity, which is

to say a manifestation of a “doing” that is in the horizon, a mode of possibility. (99)

Performance gives underrepresented voices a sense of belonging, but even more so, performance is therapeutic in that it invites an audience to reflect upon actions and ideals that can be practiced to achieve a utopian ideal. Muñoz also approaches performance as a channel that serves to tether people emotionally and create impressions that are lasting and resounding within people’s minds. In other words, utopian potentiality “like performance, never completely disappears but, instead, lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people” (113).

Muñoz’s views of performance and potentiality as entities that loiter in people’s minds strongly resonate with Butler’s and Ahmed’s views towards queer grief and melancholia, in that an impression is perpetuated long after the dramatic performance is over. This impression becomes particularly crucial in terms of the audience creating a connection with the losses that take place in *Riders* and *Cardiff*. Both plays demonstrate a rejection of the conversion of the memory of the deceased queer subject into a melancholic impression. Maurya denies this possibility by trying to distance herself from Bartley physically and emotionally, and by claiming that through Bartley’s death she is able to rest. Driscoll, on the other hand, does not allow himself to demonstrate his grief openly and to its full capacity, going so far as to remove himself away from Yank’s lifeless body right before Cocky enters the room. Even though Maurya and Driscoll do not acknowledge their grief towards these queer subjects, the pain induced by these queer departures is an appeal to pathos. The audience is thus expected to tap into the pain and the suffering that the characters in the play do not allow themselves to feel. Bartley and Driscoll become characters that haunt the audience’s mind after the performance takes place—thus, they become melancholic impressions that allow queer to do its work.

In positing the idea of allowing queer to do its work, I am referring to the notion that Maurya and Driscoll’s refusal to acknowledge their grief not only pushes the audience to question what bodies can or cannot be mourned, but also problematize the forces and mechanisms—such as heteronormativity and homophobia—that drive this denial. Although the content of the plays depict queerness as fatalistic in that it has no futurity, the performance, and the queer potentiality of the plays themselves, allow one to envision futures that go beyond the realities of the plays. The audience is pushed to envision a state of non-being in which these subjects *can* mourn queer bodies—futures in which people are capable of focusing on the significance

behind a queer subject's death rather than on the impending sense of disaster that this death creates. Melancholia thus becomes a way of doing, a mode of possibility that allows one to transform death into a political ideal that strives to enable utopia, or that at least facilitates its visualization. It is through queer grief that the audience is able to give Bartley and Yank the significance that was denied to their deaths. Performance becomes the potentiality that prolongs the memory and influence of the queerly departed.

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