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# The Dehumanization of Prisoners in Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*

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**B**rendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* looks not only at how a prison population reacts to an execution, but also how people throughout history respond to inhumanity—whether it be injustice or dehumanization. Behan struggles with whether or not prisons are able to reform prisoners. In a darkly comic way, Behan questions the justice of prisons and executions, and yet the characters in the play do not seem to know how to fix the judicial system of 1940s Ireland. In this play, Behan is concerned with showing how the prison system is built and how it will never help anyone: prisons supposedly are meant to change humans, but the system has failed, and it seems that the way it currently is can never be changed. Even though Behan was imprisoned for six years under the British system for being involved with the Irish Republican Army's terrorist activities, he gives no clear answers to the audience. Instead, he emphasizes dark humor, the humanity and understanding of prisoners, and the inhumanity of some characters, such as the Hangman, creating a play that is remarkable in showing a system that has failed.

In *The Quare Fellow*, it is clear that the way in which a killer kills can determine whether he or she is better than another murderer. Prisoner A and Dunlavin speak about the Other Fellow's and Silver-top's crimes. Silver-top is seen as a superior person since he uses a "silver-topped cane" to murder his wife (Behan 258). The Other Fellow is worse because he uses a "butcher's knife" and cuts up his victim afterwards (258). It seems that Behan is pointing out that the Other Fellow's act is more "violent," thereby showing that the Other Fellow is inferior. Behan is exemplifying the idea that a rich man can kill, but it is not acceptable for a poor man to do so, and that the poor buy into this hypocrisy: a man with a silver-topped cane killing someone is better because he is obviously richer than a man who uses a butcher's knife. As Dunlavin says, "But a man with a silver-topped cane, that's a man that's a cut above meat-choppers whichever way you look at it" (258). Comically, Behan uses the phrase "cut above" when speaking of this "meat-chopper," as if the audience needs just a little dark humor to ease the mood—both of this situation specifically and the piece in general. Prisoner A and Dunlavin talk about the situation in such a carefree manner as to let the audience get into the story and understand the character's points of view while also seeing the inherent problems in the system.

In this case, it is plainly a problem to think that because a man is richer than another, it is more acceptable for him to kill than a poor man. Behan is showing without a doubt the failure of the justice system in a way that might not have been completely obvious at first glance. Silver-top, for example, has not been put to death while so many other convicts have. In fact, Silver-top is getting life imprisonment rather than execution, and Dunlavin says, "Killing your wife is a natural class of a thing that could happen to the best of us" (258). So, Behan goes to an extreme in this case—an extreme view that may very well have been the standard in Irish prisons: that killing one's wife is acceptable and the rich can murder indiscriminately, but poor men killing anyone other than their wives is not acceptable. The Other Fellow, the man who killed his brother with the butcher's knife, says that he "cannot imagine any worse crime than taking a life" (264), and Dunlavin cannot believe that "the likes of that [are put] beside [him]" (258), even though they are both murderers. How is it possible for everyone to go along with and not speak against these inconsistencies? Behan suggests later on that the system is too far gone to be fixed.

Behan occasionally brings humor into the play in very dark ways. Just like when Dunlavin and the other prisoner were talking about the Other Fellow's and Silver-top's victims, Behan makes the end of the play comical when some prisoners are fighting over the Quare Fellow's letters. After Warder Regan puts the Quare Fellow's letters in the grave, Prisoner A says, "Give us them bloody letters. They're worth money to one of the Sunday papers" (309). Prisoner D responds, "They're not exclusively your property any more than anyone else's," followed by another prisoner suggesting that they "divide" the letters (310). They call themselves businessmen, and Prisoner A says, "For what's a crook, only a businessman without a shop" (310). This is a rather darkly comic scene. The prisoners do not concern themselves with the dead man since, fortunately, they are still alive and could possibly profit off the death. In "The Writings of Brendan Behan," Colin MacInnes writes, "Snobberies, resentment and frustrations of the prisoners are conveyed with comic irony, reminding us that a jail population differs from that outside in no essential respect whatever" (MacInnes 519). Behan consistently reminds the audience that the prisoners are almost the same as everyone else, though they have to deal with all of their issues in different ways.

The inside of the jail is not that much different from the outside. People in the jail are attempting to keep their sanity in a situation where freedom and life are taken away. Just by hearing that a man is going to die, the prisoners and all the staff at the prison are infatuated with finding out all there is to know about the Quare Fellow's upcoming execution. While his sentence will most likely be death, there is the hope that

the Quare Fellow will be found innocent (Behan 279). The prisoners do not concern themselves with finding out the Quare Fellow's life story, his trial, or the details of his crime so much as expecting his execution. The Quare Fellow is a man who killed his brother: "He bled his brother into a crock, didn't he, that had been set aside for the pig-slaughtering and mangled the remains beyond all hope of identification" (279). Once this graphic scene is reported, the hope of life over death is quickly dismissed, and the prisoners all agree that the Quare Fellow will be executed; his situation is hopeless.

It seems strange that the prisoners focus on the Quare Fellow, a character who is never seen in the play nor has any dialogue. MacInnes notes, "As we meet the prisoners and the warders [,] we are made aware that the forthcoming execution of the 'quare fellow' is a shared obsession" (MacInnes 519). He is more of an idea than anything else: the symbol of the prisoners' humanity, a myriad consisting of hope for life, while also seeking the solace of death. For instance, a "lifer" attempts to hang himself using a sheet, but is cut down before he dies (Behan 275). The prisoners want to live their lives free and without worry, and so death becomes a common option to attain peace, as escape from the prison seems impossible.

The obsession with death is most obvious when the Hangman makes his appearance late in the play, right before the execution. The Hangman sings, which recalls the Voice of the Prisoner Below who sings throughout the play perhaps to keep his sanity (304). In a very cold way, the Hangman goes over what it will take to make a "fourteen-stone man[s]" neck break (305-6). At the same time, he is having a drink, as if to exemplify his nonchalance. In his "Review of *The Quare Fellow*," Colbert Kearney argues, "The 'quare fellow' is taboo: all attempts to hide him and to dehumanize him are attempts to disguise the fact that he is a human being who is about to be killed in a careful calculated manner" (Kearney 526). The Quare Fellow is not only a human like everyone else; he is more attuned to what is going on in the play even though the audience never meets him. The Hangman is disconnected: he is drinking and singing to keep his mind off the death he will be responsible for. He seems to disagree with the execution, but he is playing a role: fulfilling a duty with outcomes that must not be questioned.

Behan is suggesting that executions have become a faceless institutional practice. Yet, how humane is an execution where the hanged may "[live] seventeen minutes at the end of a rope" and executioners have a total disconnection from their killing, while the convicted killed with some purpose? (Behan 260) D. E. S. Maxwell writes in his "Review of *The Quare Fellow*":

For the prisoners the Quare Fellow is not a cause. He is a victim, a sacrifice, the ceremonies of his death detailed in their minds. Only through them has the audience access to the condemned cell and to the knowledge of its occupant, whom we never see, and who is deprived of individuality. He is all the Quare Fellows who have met this death. (Maxwell 528)

Without seeing him, the audience may imagine any man as the Quare Fellow, waiting in a cell for the forthcoming day of death. While his crime is briefly described, that is all the audience knows. Is it enough to convict him to die? No one knows the circumstances of the murder, and the very story of the Quare Fellow's crime may be quite different when compared to what actually happened. Behan creates a confused state in the play by leaving out many of the details. Yet, this allows for Behan's message to come out: the justice system is a failure, and lives are ruined as a result.

The apparent unfairness of the execution and the tension that builds is finally released when the Quare Fellow is dead. The prisoners and warders do not want the execution to happen, but since it is part of the system, they are excited when it does happen because they are no longer awaiting the inevitable. Before the execution, the tension grows more intense by the second, especially as Mickser narrates what is going on:

He's making a big effort for the last two furlong's. He's got the white pudding bag over his head, just a short distance to go. He's in. [*A clock begins to chime the hour. Each quarter sounds louder.*] His feet to the chalk line. He'll be pinioned, his feet together. The bag will be pulled down over his face. The screws come off the trap to steady him. Himself goes to the lever and... [*The hour strikes. The WARDERS cross themselves and put on their caps. From the PRISONERS comes a ferocious howling.*] (Behan 307)

By reporting the Quare Fellow's execution, Mickser is being very humane. He is letting the other prisoners get some relief by announcing the death that they knew was forthcoming and inevitable. And since the Quare Fellow was executed and they are still alive, they probably feel more alive than at any other time behind those prison walls. Outside of prisons, funerals bring the living together; inside prisons, executions have the same effect.

Everything relating to the prisoners and executions seems set in stone, and nothing can be changed. A literal instance of this idea comes when the Quare Fellow has been hanged and his body is to be interred. A chief warden speaks to a few prisoners who must chisel a code into the wall nearest the Quare Fellow's

fresh grave. The code is going to represent the Quare Fellow's remains for records and in case he is ever to be exhumed. The Chief Warden says, "That's it. It should be E.779 according to the book, but a '7' is easier for you to do than a '9'. Right, the stone in the wall that's nearest the spot. Go ahead now. [*Raising his voice.*] There's the usual two bottles of stout a man, but only if you work fast" (309). Even in records, the individuality of the Quare Fellow does not matter; his name is never stated. What is important is making life easier for the living—whether criminals or not. The Chief is making work easier for the prisoner who is going to chisel the code into the stone nearest the grave, which is humane. He does not concern himself with the accuracy of the Quare Fellow's code because the Quare Fellow is dead: the idea of the Quare Fellow is what will live on, not his name.

The Quare Fellow dies and it is final, but the most important thing about his death is to make people raise questions about executions and imprisonment. Kearney writes, "He is to be hanged and the theme of the play is the effect which his fate has on the people within the prison and [...] on the audience. [...] He does not appear on the stage but this does not prevent him from dominating it in the minds of others" (Kearney 525). Behan plainly brings to light the apparent barbarity of these institutions and shows that no one is getting better by being exposed to prison or execution. Kearney goes on to argue: "That they feel that there is something shameful, something obscene, in the idea of legal execution? And is this why the prisoners and staff refuse to mention the victim by any personal name?" (526). The Quare Fellow is faceless, much as the system has become: the prisoners are not supposed to be seen as people, but prisoners.

The outside world does not want to consider that murderers are people with emotions and issues that need to be addressed. Behan obviously does not see the institutions as helping in any way. Rather, they are perpetuating the problems that are evident across the prison culture. These male characters have probably been in and out of prison most of their lives for petty and even violent crimes, and it is plain that there has been no attempt at rehabilitation or employment. The only thing prison sentences do is to make prisoners want to stay out of prison, but they will continue to commit crimes because resources are being spent on prisons rather than reforming the convicted. Although these questions are raised, Behan cannot give any definitive answers, as the system seems so far gone as to be without hope. Maxwell takes note, "Even Warder Regan, who comes closest to explicit condemnation of the whole process, never fully interrogates its motives" (Maxwell 530). The institutions in place are like machines that keep going along their own paths and are unable to be stopped, and no one knows how to stop or repair them, so

they are accepted. The motives are unknown and are followed blindly like old traditions.

Brendan Behan's play *The Quare Fellow* is an interesting and riveting look at the prison system of Ireland during the last century. According to MacInnes, "Behan has made a drama that is funny, humane, and a profound affirmation of the life that everything in the prison is trying to destroy" (MacInnes 518). It portrays the problems and questions that arise from prisons and executions, but gives the audience no clear answers, which suggests that Behan might not have known how to change the direction that the institutional machine was moving in either. Behan most importantly makes it clear that the people in prisons are very much like the people outside of the prisons, and that even murderers are human.

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