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excavating friel through post-christian theory

Ryan Meservey

In Brian Friel's play *The Freedom of the City* (1973), Friel gives voice to such a myriad of social groups in Northern Ireland that critics can hardly decide which viewpoints deserve the most recognition. Because so many character perspectives exist, Friel's work has been mined by critics for its cultural insights into a variety of topics. Early commentators approached the play's subject matter head-on as a critique of the British army and the government tribunal following Bloody Sunday. Other critics prize the play for its insights into the political dynamics of Northern Ireland, with George O'Brien describing the play as "a model for how a culture does not work, represented by the language of stereotype" (82). From a legal perspective, the play offers insights into Western and Northern Irish law, like the role of emergency laws as Peter Leman argues in his analysis of the play's perspectivalism (3). Even the play's Catholic presence, however scanty and inconsequential to the plot it may be, serves as evidence for a broader analysis of Irish priest characters, to which Mária Kurdi correctly concludes that Friel treats priests as a detriment to society in all but one play (69). Despite being one of Friel's less popular stage plays, *The Freedom of the City* clearly has much to offer critics and historians alike in identifying attitudes and trends of the recent past.

To add to this enterprise of understanding Friel and his society through *The Freedom of the City*, in this paper I will analyze *Freedom* using the theories of Australian historian Alan D. Gilbert from his book *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society*. My analysis will cover three theories: the theories of meliorism, scientism, and the secularization of death. In doing this, my goal is not to give the final word on each of these theories; rather, I plan to show the conflicted relationship Brian Friel has with secular philosophy. Applying Gilbert's theories will reveal how the playwright accepts and rejects secular culture and how the playwright ultimately undermines the political establishment in Northern Ireland.

Before proceeding to this analysis, it is worth noting that my endeavor differs significantly from other Post-Christian readings of Friel's work. Out of dozens of close readings on Friel, my research found only three papers that fit the Post-Christian lens. Although only one of these papers describes itself as "Post-Christian" (Block 1), all three begin by acknowledging Friel's abandonment of religious institutions, which constitutes a sort of Post-Christian acknowledgment. From there, the critics examine transcendence in Friel's plays and draw separate conclusions. Ed Block Jr., in his "Post-Christian, Christian" reading of Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1980), determines that the transcendent elements of that play ultimately guide the reader back to the Christian faith which Friel had been accused of mocking (204). On the other hand, Tony Corbett's essay, "Effing the Ineffable", interprets *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993) as accomplishing exactly the opposite, with the "final epiphany . . . [being] that there are no epiphanies" (231). Dan Cawthon's examination of seven plays is neutral on the relationship between transcendence and Christianity, although he does describe Friel as "religious" (152). These papers succeed in their own right, but they differ from my project. While I aim to show the effects of Christianity's decline on interpreting Friel, these papers focus on the nature of the decline itself and what that means for Friel personally. On the whole, these papers focus on explaining the implications of religious mystery in Friel's plays, against the backdrop of the playwright's apparent abandonment of Christianity.

From the vantage point of Alan D. Gilbert's theories, understanding how the text approaches religious mystery only tells part of the story. For Gilbert, a Post-Christian society "is not one from which Christianity has departed, but one in which it has become marginal" (ix). In British society, religion became marginal with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, when an

“areligious culture” grew and eventually displaced religion’s hold over the wider British culture (xiv). In my analysis, I will focus on Gilbert’s study of this areligious culture that critics leave peripheral or absent in the other interpretations of Friel’s work. Although *Freedom* is a Northern Irish play set in Northern Ireland and not Britain, I find that the close geographic and economic relationships between these two countries make Gilbert’s theories relevant to the play, and, in the spots where those theories fail, Friel lets them fail with a political purpose. Thus, *The Freedom of the City*, a play which marginalizes religion and remains unstudied by Post-Christian critics, reveals how Friel subverts the government’s authority by tugging at the secular culture on which it rests. In rejecting and, at times, embracing the worst of secular culture, Friel characterizes the government as callous, cruel, and contemptuous of the Northern Irish people.

Because my analysis will move from one theory to the next with examples in between, understanding the structure of the play will be helpful in contextualizing my examples. *Freedom* follows two main story arcs. In one, three Northern Irish protesters, Michael, Skinner, and Lily, find shelter in a city building after riot police violently break up a protest. The three then discover that they have walked into the Mayor’s parlor (or office). After some time spent frolicking in the parlor, the military orders them out of the building and shoots them. The second story arc follows reactions to the protester’s situation from the media, religion, academia, and cultural icons, as well as a government investigation into the deaths of the protesters. The play opens in the future with the investigation and closes in the past with the protesters staring out at the audience as gunfire sounds, leaving viewers with a morbid ending to Friel’s morbid tale.

The dark, dismal plot of *Freedom* contrasts sharply with the first component of Post-Christian theory, the theory of meliorism or a belief in human ingenuity. This theory maintains that life is not a “vale of tears” on the path to heaven; it is a puzzle waiting for the diligent application of human effort (Gilbert 47). Although melioristic attitudes have certainly existed throughout history, it only became a cultural force in Britain once 19th century industrial advances made comfortable lifestyles possible for more people than merely the extraordinarily wealthy (48). While this optimistic view of the world does not itself contradict religious belief, the rise of meliorism lead society to prioritize human solutions over spiritual ones.

In *Freedom*, Michael represents melioristic philosophy more than any other character in the play. As a student, he expresses confidence in his academic efforts and looks forward to a “big future” in gas works, despite already losing two jobs and becoming unemployed (Friel 122). As a protester, he believes the government must eventually succumb to peaceful protests because civil rights are “something every man’s entitled to and nothing can stop us from getting what we’re entitled to” (161). Michael remains optimistic over his efforts right up to his death, despite the constant negativity of Skinner, a fellow protester.

Because of his negativity, Skinner could be interpreted as opposing melioristic views; however, a closer reading reveals otherwise. Skinner doubts Michael’s tactics (Friel 141), but he does not doubt the existence of a solution to government oppression. Instead, his attempt at persuading Lily in Act Two that poor people everywhere share economic interests suggests a qualified belief of that change can happen (154). Likewise, Skinner’s last words to himself that “if you’re going to decide to take them on, Adrian Casimir, you’ve got to mend your ways” suggests the possibility of a way forward (150). Thus, in Skinner and Michael, *Freedom* exhibits the meliorism present in modern British culture.

If these two characters represent melioristic philosophy, the plot which puts both of them to death certainly raises criticism of meliorism’s functionality. Perhaps, in regards to the vast insecurity and inequality dealt to the Northern Irish poor, the play teaches that human efforts become insignificant in the face of powerful opposition. While people in Britain and elsewhere may be able to work themselves into a better life, Brian Friel’s play highlights the fact that the poor of Northern Ireland face real, external barriers to this ideal. Barriers in the play like the government’s unchecked control over the military and the judicial system suggest the overall failure of meliorism in the Northern Irish context.

Freedom demonstrates a similarly conflicted relationship with another Post-Christian theory, scientism. In his book, Gilbert argues that the technologies of the Post-Industrial age affected popular consciousness so deeply that science took on the preeminent role of shaping how people respond to the world (56). This new role included an epistemology and an ideology: scientism holds that science can access everything knowable and everything inaccessible to the scientific method is likely “irrelevant or even illusory.” Thus, the popular belief in science, with or without an adequate grasp of

the science itself, functions as “the nemesis of any metaphysical philosophy” (56). In *Freedom*, science’s role as the preliminary truth system comes into question twice consecutively: once in conversation about popular science and again in the government’s courtroom discussions.

Popular science enters the story arc of the main characters just before Act II, with Lily’s comment that, in outer space, people “don’t get old... the way we get old down here” (Friel 144). Her reference to Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity becomes clear with her subsequent mention of clocks and how she could end up younger than her children (Leman 6). Curiously, Alan D. Gilbert also references the theory of relativity in his discussion of scientism, musing that what “the less mechanistic, relativistic Einsteinian assumptions... might mean for human religiosity remains conjectural” (57). In Friel’s play, the reference to relativity serves to qualify the scientific investigation into the protester’s deaths presented in the courtroom scene directly preceding Lily’s comment.

The play’s courtroom scene demonstrates how people in power manipulate science to achieve their goals. In that scene, the court turns to less tangible scientific means after encountering photographic evidence that the protesters had no weapons in the aftermath of their deaths (Friel 142). The court calls on a doctor from the Army Forensic Department to explain how the lead deposits on the protesters show that the three had been armed, had fired on security forces, and therefore deserved to be cut down by the military. In a later scene, the court, confronted with the question of how the protesters’ weapons disappeared, decides to call in a “pathologist” (151), without filling in the gaps of how a pathologist could answer the court’s question. By appealing to science for truth, the text plays with the theory of scientism inside and outside of the text. Internally, scientism ensures the court’s final decision to condemn the protesters as terrorists. Externally, the court’s evidence feels more compelling to modern readers in secular society, even causing one student reading Friel to declare, “I was shocked to read that Michael really did shoot at the military!” (Anonymous). This narrative, where the protesters have sole blame for their demise, represents the storyline the government in *Freedom* would have us believe.

The text, however, encourages us to believe otherwise and demands a mediation between the science of the experts and the reality of the events portrayed in the play. Ignoring conflicts of interest and the possibility of evidence tampering, the relationship of the scientific evidence with the main

characters' story arc continues to be problematic. In exiting the parlor, the characters make no mention of weapons and proceed with their hands up. In their final thoughts, the characters speak of remorse and surprise at being shot. Both these details, along with the accidental nature of the protesters' entrance into the Mayor's parlor, discredit the court's argument that the protesters fired weapons when they walked outside. Although Friel's characters—like the media or the religious—frequently spread misinformation, Friel generally presents each scene as rooted in its own reality. Hence, we have the most reason to believe the main characters' story arc over the narrative suggested by the government's science.

These details, coupled with Gilbert's theories, show that science in *Freedom* defies scientism by defying the reality it claims to most accurately reflect. *Freedom* looks at science for what it is: an ideology, another interpretation of the world, or a "pattern imposed on reality," a phrase Tony Corbett used to describe Friel's view of time divisions (223). The repudiation of scientism in the text undermines the legitimacy of Post-Christian culture's ability to explain human experience. In undermining that culture's belief in science, the text undermines the established powers who wield this worldview, like the Northern Irish government.

Having addressed the impact of scientism in the text, I move on to the last hallmark of Post-Christian theory from Gilbert's repertoire: the secularization of death that has taken hold of British culture. Death typically rests at the center of religiosity because its mystery cannot be resolved and its presence serves as a reminder of human powerlessness (Gilbert 61). However, in recent years, death has been pushed out of public and private life by longer life spans, distance from extended family, and greater medical understanding (62). Gilbert laments the effects of death's secularization, writing, "...in the midst of modern life death has become a relative stranger – an intruder whose presence, when it cannot studiously be ignored, causes confusion and embarrassment as well as trauma." The effects of this secularization can be felt in Western culture at large and keenly in Friel's play.

Right in line with the modern avoidance of death, Friel's play hides the deaths of its characters. The play always operates before or after the violence but never in the midst of it. Even the "post-mortem" speeches each character gives at the beginning of Act II limit themselves to the final thoughts of the characters before their demise, thus continuing to hide the moment of death

while also providing little comfort in what death transitions to. The result of hiding death in a play revolving around death reinforces its mystery and gloom.

The main characters' post-mortem speeches also contribute to the mystery and gloom symptomatic of the Post-Christian secularization of death. In their final moments, Michael grapples with the "mistake" of dying in such a "foolish way," Lily felt a "tidal wave of regret" for not having lived, and Skinner dies "in defensive flippancy" (Friel 150). All of the attributes that Gilbert describes—confusion, embarrassment, and trauma—present themselves in these speeches. Any religious motifs or traces of acceptance remain absent, and Michael's earlier rhetoric that "violence done against peaceful protest helps your cause" has vanished (140). To Friel's characters, death approaches in the same manner it does to individuals in modern society—a stranger, areligious, and irredeemable.

My last choice of adjectives, "irredeemable", best explains why Friel does not question the secularization of death like he does the other Post-Christian theories. In the other two theories, Michael's meliorism and the court's scientism prop up the government. To believe the system rewards effort and defines reality is to stand by the status quo. On the other hand, the secularization of death shakes the status quo by making the occurrence of death less, not more, bearable. Without the constancy and religiosity of death which society held before secularization, the deaths of Michael, Skinner, and Lily feel incredibly tragic, even more so because of the character's own Post-Christian reactions. This tragedy results in nothing less than immense condemnation placed on the government for unjustly killing these individuals and then exonerating the military.

From the above analysis, we have witnessed Post-Christian theory's capacity for excavating Friel's political aims and the broader culture of his society. Part of the success of analyzing *The Freedom of the City* through this lens must be attributed to Friel's own awareness of secular trends in his society, as Friel remarked three years before *Freedom*, "I would like to write a play that would capture the peculiar spiritual, and indeed material, flux that this country is in at the moment" (qtd. in Richards 254). Viewing Friel's work in regards to the spiritual and material trends of Post-Christian theory reveals the dance Friel has with modern culture, sometimes leading, sometimes being led, taking an extra step here, and moving backwards there. Friel's dance with secular ideas shows a conflicted view of these theories in

order to create a consistent view of unjust government actions in Northern Ireland.

Beyond Friel, this project shows the dexterity of three of Gilbert's theories in addressing a Western play set in the recent past. The ideology of secular society still, in many ways, dominates our own society, so understanding it will prove instrumental not only for studying modern literature but also for fashioning a response. The three theories discussed here, as well as the dozens of other Post-Christian theories in existence, will continue to open discourses moving forward.

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