

**BILLY ROCHE'S PANTHEON:  
DISCOVERING THE ADOLESCENT**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The following pages examine the use of character archetypes in the works of contemporary Irish author Billy Roche. Although there are no recurring characters in Roche's writing, familiar character frameworks can be identified throughout his drama and prose. The writer has identified some of these personalities (the joker, the scorner of life, and the white goddess among others) as essential entities within his "pantheon" of characters, but has not acknowledged one of the most important pieces of his ensemble: the adolescent male—a character archetype that provides a sense of hope and an emotional core to Roche's texts, outshining the otherwise commonplace inhabitants of working-class Ireland, as he handles the complications inherent in coming-of-age.

This thesis identifies some of the most vital adolescent figures throughout Roche's work, while simultaneously seeking to define the parameters and function of the character archetype. By looking at a wide range of texts that span both genre and the full length of his career, a clear portrait of the adolescent is presented that sheds light on the importance of the archetype in Billy Roche's writing.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Billy Roche sets his texts against the backdrop of his hometown of Wexford, Ireland. Within this setting, he paints a drab portrait of mediocrity and aborted potential—social circles without glamour or prestige, but rather a collection of average, ordinary people who live day-to-day in idle repetition. More than passively stagnant, Wexford is “a bulwark against the sea of change” (McKee “Tales of Two Cities”)<sup>1</sup>, stubbornly clinging to traditions and customs of old in lieu of modernizing along with Ireland’s bigger cities. Larry Kirwan, Roche’s friend and fellow Wexford native, puts it simply: “Wexford didn’t give a damn about any of us.” It was an indifferent city with “a dizzying selection of rogues and marauders” (Kirwan “A Wexford Musician”). While the setting may not be the most inviting, to Roche, Wexford is meant to be “timeless” (“Poetry of the Street” 371). It represents an every-town, providing a backdrop for his stories that is neither exclusively personal nor distinctly Irish. The action of his texts takes place predominantly in public spaces—a snooker hall, a pub, or a betting shop—where a community of regulars idly passes their days.

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<sup>1</sup> Essays by Alexander McKee and Larry Kirwan to be published in the forthcoming *Wexford as the World: The Achievement of Billy Roche* (Carysfort, 2012).

Roche is “fascinated” by the personalities in his writing, describing his plays predominantly as a “natural grouping of characters” (“Poetry” 374). While there are no specific criteria for this assemblage, he elaborates (“Poetry” 374):

If you introduce one too many or one too few [characters] in that pantheon, you’ll pay a price. Don’t ask me how you determine how it is—but I kind of listen to a play, and the five or six who walk in the door are archetypal.

There are no recurring characters in Roche’s plays, but there are recurring character archetypes that extend across his oeuvre. The author believes it is crucial, as a writer, to “Find your pantheon” (“Poetry” 374). The term pantheon traditionally refers to a collection of gods or deities, but Roche uses it to describe his cast of characters. He writes characters of a mythical quality, which transcend time, culture, and trend by representing a general personality type.

Roche identifies certain character types that surface throughout his writing—The Joker, The Scorned of Life, The White Goddess, and The Shadow—each bringing a necessary element to the story. Names and details about these character prototypes vary depending on the text, but they serve the same purpose within their respective stories. While Roche references the use and function of certain roles within his pantheon, there is another character archetype which he has not acknowledged: the adolescent male.

The adolescent is in his late teens and on the cusp of adulthood. He is motivated by young love—inspired by a romantic muse that Roche refers to as “the

White Goddess.” The adolescent is typically involved in some sort of mentor/apprentice relationship—either under the direct or distanced guidance of an older character. Most importantly and least tangibly, the adolescent is signified by a sense of being too big for Wexford: he brings an emotional charge of hope and opportunity to an otherwise stagnant city while serving as the emotional core of the text.

Roche describes 1967—when he was a seventeen-year-old boy—as the most important and beautiful year of his life, a personal “Garden of Eden.”<sup>2</sup> Kirwan also notes, “Billy became a man early, yet he never lost a certain boyishness” (Kirwan “A Wexford Musician”). This dynamic—living in a man’s world without the experience of age, the search for growth, love, and life—is central to Wexford, the adolescent, and thus to Roche’s writing. In his play *Lay Me Down Softly*, Roche tells of Junior, an adolescent male whose talents and promise are stunted by self-interested and mediocre companions. Over the course of the text, however, Junior’s love interest, Emer, convinces him of his potential and the two run off together in the night, chasing a greater future. Similarly, in *On Such As We*, Leonard is a quiet and reserved teenager who enjoys a quiet romance with Sally. Their tale is simple and without conflict, but reflects the gentle beauty of finding love in a hopeless place. The adolescent

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<sup>2</sup> Quotation from a personal interview conducted with Billy Roche on February 3, 2012



characters—even when not the highlight of Roche’s texts—resonate with an inspiration, joy, and potential that older characters are simply not capable of conjuring.

Looking at a cross section of Roche’s work—one that encompasses multiple genres—clarifies the indications and function of the adolescent archetype. *A Handful of Stars* features Jimmy Brady, a troubled teen who struggles with the notion of change and the future. In stark contrast, Roche’s novel *Tumbling Down* tracks young Davy Wolfe’s journey into manhood as he learns the ways of women and growth. The final short story in Roche’s collection *Tales from Rainwater Pond*, “Some Silent Place,” tells of a young hurler named Kevin Troy who is launched into the spotlight and forced to transform innocence into experience in order to keep up with those around him. All three of these adolescents are seventeen-year- old boys in the process of becoming men. The names, faces, and details change from text to text, but the role of the adolescent in Roche’s writing remains consistent.

## Chapter 2

### A THORN IN THE SIDE

*A Handful of Stars* takes place in a Wexford snooker hall, where flawed protagonist Jimmy Brady is a seventeen-year-old with a penchant for trouble. Jimmy comes from a broken home, where his father is absent and his mother is pessimistic about Jimmy's capability to make good of his life. His friend, Tony, and his love interest, Linda, idolize him, although despite their devotion at the opening of the play, Jimmy treats them with cool dispassion and a facade of apathy. Roche describes Jimmy Brady as "the small town rebel who refuses to have his wings clipped or his tongue tied, who refuses to swallow the bitter pill of convention" (*The Wexford Trilogy* 178).<sup>3</sup> Jimmy is far more concerned with being remembered as a carefree maverick than a contributor to society. Despite leaving others hurt in his wake, Jimmy walks with a debonair nonchalance that Tony and Linda view with admiration. He is the "cool kid"; he's dangerous and reckless in a way that others don't have the courage to be. Roche explains: "It's the James Dean thing. In a way he's carrying something for all of us. He's the one who leaps over orchard walls. He's the one that leads you on the adventure" ("Poetry" 373-374). Jimmy's careless nature is exciting and

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<sup>3</sup> Subsequent citations from *The Wexford Trilogy* (Dramatists Play Service, 2003) will be marked simply with a page number

invigorating—it is everything a mature and more responsible person is incapable of being because reason prevents it, and despite all logic, the audience wants him to succeed. The audience wants to live through him because he is liberated from convention and experiences life on his own terms.

Despite Jimmy's obvious personality flaws, he is a fundamentally good individual at heart. Roche is careful to not define him two-dimensionally as simply the town troublemaker. A framed newspaper clipping in the snooker hall provides the first indication that there is moral substance beneath Jimmy's calculated display:

A dramatic chase took place last Sunday night over rooftops on South Main Street when a young man who was suspected of breaking and entering was pursued by Detective Garda Swan. The Drama occurred when Detective Swan slipped and went tumbling down the slanted roof. Eyewitnesses said that he was dangling from a considerable height, holding on to the gutter by the tips of his fingers...His cries for help were answered when the young man that he was chasing came back to assist him (36).

Jimmy returned to face legal ramifications; he chose to accept his arrest in order to save the life of another human being. It is the spontaneous and impulsive action of a hero—it proves a profoundly moral understanding of life and death, of what is most important. While Jimmy is concerned with how others view him—and indeed outrunning the police in an epic rooftop chase is certainly a tale he would be happy to tell—he sacrifices acclaim in order to do the right thing.

Furthermore, Jimmy is sympathetic towards his father, an abusive drunk who was kicked out of the house by his brother Richard. In a private moment, Jimmy recounts to Linda, “I found my da stayin’ down in that auld hostel. I felt terrible. He was just lyin’ there, readin’...I wanted to burn the place down. I told him to get his things and come on home but he wouldn’t” (38). Regardless of the wrongs done to him, Jimmy believes his father deserves another chance. He sees the good in his father, the ability for him to be a better person. Jimmy sympathizes, acknowledging a link between them: “fellas like meself and me da don’t have a ghost of a chance do we?” (38). By virtue of seeing the potential in his father and inviting him back home, and because Jimmy has perceived a similarity between them, he is recognizing his own capability to be good.

While Jimmy hasn’t given up on his father, the burdens of being a Brady, and more specifically his father’s son, limit the adolescent’s ability to reach his full potential. Even applying for a low level factory job is met with rejection—partially because Jimmy is reckless in his own right, but also because the small town that raised him knows all about the shortcomings of his family. Even Paddy, the snooker hall owner, is able to reflect on specific moments of Jimmy’s parents’ history. Paula Murphy suggests that the influence of heredity in *A Handful of Stars* impacts Jimmy Brady at a psychological level. She argues that, caught between love for his family, the stigma of being a Brady, and the emphasis on stoicism in Wexford’s inhabitants, Jimmy is unable to reconcile the tension between his various emotions, which leads to his eventual downfall. She elaborates, “Jimmy’s unarticulated emotions elicit a

violence that he struggles to suppress, and which is finally unleashed at the end of the play” (“The Hermeneutics of Heredity” 361).

One of the snooker hall regulars, Stapler, sympathizes with the hard hand that Jimmy was dealt – “He sees a crowd of big shots and hobnobbers grabbin’ and takin’ ...but as soon as a young lad knocks a few bob...they’re down on him like a ton of bricks”(50) – but is unable to remove Jimmy from the reality of it all. Stapler, also being marked by a broken family history, has aged and withered into the monotony of Wexford; he’s unable to provide a better example, nor is he able to successfully encourage the goodness within the young man.

The only character able to tap into the better side of Jimmy is his love interest, Linda. His willingness to connect and grow emotionally intimate with her privately surpasses his will to manufacture a public image as the town bad boy. Jimmy reveals to Linda, and thus to the audience, that he is a deep and emotionally complex person. In fact, he is the most developed and complicated character in *A Handful of Stars*. Jimmy is a troubled adolescent without much room to grow—stifled by a broken home and a bad reputation—but his awareness of his situation and the many aspects of his character are incongruous with the relative flatness of the other Wexford inhabitants in the text. Even though he has a profoundly human softness, Jimmy knows that it will not be enough to forge a happy and successful future.

Because of this, he reverts to his baser tendencies. It is his choices that cause his undoing, rather than any inherent negative quality: Jimmy has every capacity to change and accomplish greatness, but chooses not to. Christopher Murray cites a

possible source of Jimmy's imprudent decision making: "Jimmy sees his father's fate as prognostic of his own. It is that future he rebels against" ("Billy Roche's Wexford: Setting, Place, Critique" 211). While Jimmy certainly fears the connection others draw (and he feels) between his father and himself, it is not the only factor at play. Jimmy's aversion to the future—and his consequent rebellion against it—stems from a broader range of motivations, including fears of blending in and losing the luster of living freely without payment. Murray also notes (212) "a romantic element to Jimmy's attitude. He is a self-dramatizer". Jimmy's constant rebellion against better judgment is not so much to prevent becoming like his father, but rather to continue being the Jimmy Brady he already is.

The culmination of poor decision-making comes through Jimmy's refusal to acknowledge the forces of time and change. Jimmy stands on the brink of adulthood, but he fights with every ounce of himself to maintain the freedom of youth, and to delay what he views as the consequences of growing up. It is ingrained in Jimmy's head that his future will fail to match the invincibility he currently feels—he knows that facing his future means accepting and paying for the recklessness of his youth. When talking to Linda, he admits with touching fragility that he doesn't belong in the back room of the snooker hall, a place reserved for where "the older, privileged members go" (7). Jimmy strives to be remembered, but he is aware that growing up means becoming another middle-aged small-town nobody. When Linda eventually leaves him—the final straw for the adolescent, after Tony's marriage forces Jimmy to face the changes that surround him—Jimmy loses complete control. Garda Swan

informs some of the snooker hall regulars that “[Jimmy’s] on the warpath...[he] shattered a squad car window with a blast from a shotgun no less...He then hit a young guard with the butt of the gun...This all happened after he caused ructions down in The Shark and tried to hold up a shop” (52).

Jimmy is a broken protagonist and a wildly misguided adolescent, but he is certainly not, at his core, the villain Garda Swan describes. Even though Jimmy undoubtedly *did* do these things, it is not the action of someone intending to harm others. He tells Tony, “I’m not goin’ to make it handy for you to forget about me—not you, not me ma nor me da, not Swan, nobody” (57). This act was not one of violence, but was intended to be recorded in the local legends of the town. Jimmy acted in a grandiose manner in order to secure his reputation as wild and rebellious, to take an enduring snapshot of himself in his prime with the understanding that the town will always remember him in that vein. Jimmy was destined to “be a heartbreaker” (59), “cause more trouble than he’s worth” (30), or else fade into the uninteresting crowd around him—but he had no intentions of facing that fate. Instead Jimmy guaranteed he would be remembered as he is in his youth, as the adolescent who never gave heed to what others wanted of him. Jimmy lays it out clearly for Tony at the play’s conclusion, “That’s the difference between me and Conway. He tip-toes around. I’m screamin’....So if you want to join the livin’ dead then go ahead and do it by all means Tony but don’t expect me to wink at your gravediggers” (57). Jimmy knows that this is his end—that he effectually brought forth his own demise—but he did it on his own terms and he made a grand show of the whole ordeal. Jimmy takes a baseball bat to

the backroom of Paddy's snooker hall, leaving the glass partition as shattered and helpless as his hope for a more lucrative future. It's clear that Jimmy will never belong in the privileged members section, so he rebels against the system in the only way he figures he can. It's a violent reaction to a predestined handicap, bequeathed to Jimmy by a deadbeat father; it was a misguided attempt to create a legacy; it was the final act of defiance against Wexford and the world set to hold him back from "screamin'" into the future.

The reckless nature of Jimmy prevents him from listening to the advice of others. Stapler, an over-the-hill boxer, is a former Jimmy Brady persona who has grown wiser with time. Although he is not without blame, Stapler views Jimmy's behavior and tries to help guide the young rebel's path. Stapler's quiet demeanor prevents him from directly stepping in—his guidance ends at a meager "look of condemnation" (14)—he has Jimmy's best interest in mind and is there to mitigate the disaster at the play's conclusion.

Jimmy has an exaggerated perspective of his options—either the monotonous drudgery of adulthood or a fiery exit from society—and he acted in a way that determines his fate. In the final scene of the play, Jimmy sits waiting to be arrested. This time, he knows, there will be no leniency nor second chances, but Jimmy is okay with that. He has been abandoned by Linda, who finally saw the traps of dating an uncontrollable boy, and his only companion is getting married in the morning: when the inevitability of the future dawned on Jimmy, he removed himself from the equation entirely.



Ironically, Jimmy's function in *A Handful of Stars*, as the adolescent, is to provide the text and setting with notions of potential, change, and newness. Although Jimmy is squandering his potential, scared of change, and fighting against anything new, the plot is carried by his decisive rejection of these very concepts. The town's older crowd—Conway, Stapler, and Paddy—is trapped in an unending cycle of mundane routines: every day will be the same for them. It is Jimmy who sparks the setting with excitement. While Tony follows in the shadows of Wexford's older generation, lacking aspiration to do more than blend into the colorless Irish city, it is Jimmy who makes the town interesting at all. The audience hopes for the best for Jimmy, even though he's not likeable in a traditional sense. In an interview with Irish playwright Conor McPherson, Roche stated, "The audience shouldn't have sympathy for Jimmy Brady because he is a pain in the neck" ("Billy Roche in Conversation" 411). But what the author fails to acknowledge is that the begrudging tension between what we *should* feel and what we *do* feel draws the audience closer to the character. We admire Jimmy because he makes us care about his fate, even against all notions of common sense—we know better than to put stock in someone like Jimmy Brady, yet we hope he is able to get everything together, and we are disappointed when he fails to change. The adolescent, and in this case the rebel without a cause, provides inspiration in an otherwise dead setting that any other character archetype is simply not able to inject, and the audience loves him for it.

### Chapter 3

#### THE LITTLE SAINT

While Jimmy Brady is rebellious and dangerous, the adolescent in Roche's pantheon is not limited by personality. In Roche's novel, *Tumbling Down*, the adolescent archetype is realized in young Davy Wolfe, an innocent and earnest teenager who works in his father's pub. Of these two protagonists, Roche states:

Those are two sides of me, constantly pulling against each other. One character is growing up beyond his years, the other wants to be wayward. Davy has my soul but if I was strictly Davy Wolfe I'd never get anything done. It's the Jimmy Brady in me that makes things happen. ("Poetry" 373)

Unlike the wild Jimmy Brady, Davy lacks both the courage and the recklessness to shake up the world around him. Rather than taking what he wants, Davy passively admires: where Jimmy is "screamin'" (57), Davy is pragmatic and cautious. Jimmy decides early on that he is going to create his own destiny, the ends justifying his means, but Davy lets the ride of life carry him along.

The genre change between the play *A Handful of Stars* and the novel *Tumbling Down* also filters the reader's perspective on the adolescents. The actions and drama of Jimmy Brady are on stage for the audience to observe—we see the subtleties of his actions and his demeanor, the nuances of performance versus what is in print, but we

are never invited to explore his thought process. The audience can only gauge his personality from this detached perspective. On the other hand, *Tumbling* provides the reader with both first and third person perspectives. The text tracks Davy's narration, which invites the reader to understand the complexities of the protagonist's thought process as it unfolds. Similarly, we see Davy through the eyes of others, providing insight on how the community views the young man.

*Tumbling Down* centers on the coming of age of seventeen-year-old Davy, a well-intentioned adolescent. Kevin Kerrane describes Davy as, "observant and thoughtful—not a goody-goody, but basically a moral young man" ("Poetry" 373). Davy is an earnest character who genuinely cares about those around him. He is a likeable protagonist whose flaws are sympathetically human and decidedly outweighed by his personal strengths. Davy is aware beyond his years and eager to make something big of his life. While watching Joe Crofton, a regular at the pub, Davy says, "I secretly wondered if he ever felt trapped here...One day, when I had saved enough money, I would break away from here too. I'd take my guitar and go away" (*Tumbling Down* 36).<sup>4</sup> Davy sees others settling for a life in Wexford, but has no plans of letting that become his fate. Although the rest of Wexford's inhabitants are marked by either stagnancy or vice, Davy yearns for more than simply joining their

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<sup>4</sup> Subsequent citations from *Tumbling Down* (Wexford: Tassell Publications, 2008) will be marked simply with a page number.

mundane ranks. He fantasizes about leaving the city, making it big, and traveling the world; at seventeen, Davy is already seeing hints of life's bigger potential. Although his plans are little more than a romanticized dream, it is the sort of ambition that identifies Davy as Roche's adolescent archetype: a glint of silver that gleams through Wexford's grey. Davy is too big for his hometown, and is still young enough to escape without being bogged down by complacency or convenience.

Throughout *Tumbling*, Davy is mentored by the curmudgeon Captain Crunch, a poor, gruff man with an affinity for storytelling. The mentor-apprentice relationship is unconventional. In fact, it inverts the traditional dynamic. Crunch is a washed-up failure, far past his prime. Davy notes, "I used to love to sit and listen to his yarns about dogs and ferrets and drinking sprees and harmless pranks that went awry" (16). He enjoys Crunch for his companionship and entertainment value, but more frequently takes care of the old sailor more than receiving meaningful guidance from him. After Crunch suffers from an emotional breakdown, he drunkenly sobs, "listen, Davy, you shouldn't be... You put fellas like me up on some sort of pedestal... Don't latch on to fellas like me" (82). It isn't clear in the text that Davy *does* put Crunch on a pedestal—Crunch being oblivious to how much Davy watches over him—but the delusion of the aged drunkard does reveal one truth: Crunch is no role model. Davy cares for him, but does not follow in his footsteps. The mentor-apprentice reversal comes to light through Davy's awareness that Crunch is what he does not want to become. He wants to move on from his hometown and accomplish greatness, and Davy sees in Crunch a broken man who lies to embellish a squandered existence.

The only thing holding Davy back from breaking away out of Wexford towards a brighter future is his own uncertainty. He is cautious by nature and limited by self-consciousness, rarely acting on impulse and perpetually thinking about future consequences.

Davy is introspective and astutely aware of the world around him. Having spent his life in Wexford, he sees the limitations and flaws of living in the downtrodden city. Although the majority of Wexford seems content, acting by force of routine rather than seeking a deeper understanding of life and happiness, Davy questions the implications and meaning of what surrounds him. And while he cares deeply for those he spends time with, Davy is not blind to their shortcomings. After Mr. Martin, a customer at the pub, is heckled for acting differently than the rest of the regulars, Davy bursts out in rage, “This crowd of begrudging bastards want[s] everyone to be tarred with the one brush. Don’t go getting any fancy ideas of your own whatever you do. Dance like everybody else and don’t go inventing your own steps” (56). Davy, by way of his youth, is open to difference and change in a way that the older Wexford generation has closed themselves off to. In a community where routine and conformity drive the social life, Davy provides a fresh insight to break through the judgmental nature of those around him. Though it is clear that the majority of Wexford will not go far—between Johnny’s constant return to binge drinking or Mr. Martin’s submission to routine—the reader hopes and believes that Davy will. He is deeply empathetic and enthusiastic about life in a way that no other character is. Even his best friend, Danny, seems flat in comparison—always by Davy’s side but

rarely ever reaching the same level of understanding that Davy does. Despite his youth, Wexford seems to be tightening in on Davy, and he will not be trapped in a city that refuses to grow with him.

Furthermore, Davy's need to escape Wexford is fueled by the city's proclivity towards hypocrisy. Although Wexford's religious devotion had become less prevalent in recent years (if not decades), the people of Wexford try desperately to maintain tradition—that is to say the illusion of tradition. During a religious mission in town, all of the citizens' acts of depravity were ostensibly stopped by a pair of priests, who went about lecturing courting couples about celibacy and chastising men who sought a drink for their sin. Davy contemptuously likens the two “sinister black figures” to the Gestapo because of the fear they instill and their tyrannical methods (141). Only a few men actually attend church services—not for a religious rejuvenation but rather so they could *say* that they were there—and they eagerly recap the priest's sermon to a crowd of bystanders. Everyone listens attentively, but did not attend the service, nor do they exhibit any signs of piety. Davy sees through the sham, sarcastically dismissing the words of the priest as “voodoo” (145). The men of Wexford drink, gamble, and idle on a day-to-day basis, but willfully fake piousness for a couple days of the year to clear their conscience. It is a ruse that Davy has no interest in supporting, and others are “disgusted” that he could act so profanely (145).

Early in *Tumbling Down*, Davy sits in a pub for a drink with Captain Crunch. Davy nervously eyes down a pretty waitress, Linda, who he doesn't have the nerve to talk to. Eventually, he manages a clumsy exchange with her, and then departs without

leaving an impression beyond that of a blushing and flustered boy. The scene epitomizes Davy's insecurity: He clearly knows what he wants but lacks the confidence to act on his desires. He fears how his actions will be perceived, and while he wants to seem nonchalant, he is full of introspective doubt. Before heading out to a party, Davy fantasizes a chance encounter with the waitress:

Linda was down on the beach waiting for me. I ran towards her and she caught my hand and led me up into an out-of-the-way place behind the bushes. She lay down of her own accord and smiled up at me invitingly. My little heart was thumping inside my shirt as I approached her...( 55).

Even when daydreaming, even in his wildest imagination, Davy can only manage to muster a nervous success, from a girl who is too forward to let Davy's hesitation be consequential. But even as an adolescent driven by hormones, Davy's desires go beyond sexual physicality. Although Wexford's most notorious juvenile delinquent, Skeleton Delaney, proudly boasts of his sexual conquests, confidently spreading stories of how he managed to sleep with numerous women, Davy remains unimpressed. Davy has no interest in coercing or else tricking girls into bed with him. He hopes to go beyond the boyish dreams of meaningless sex—he is looking for something more substantial. Davy wants to connect with a girl, to experience love in all facets.

The adolescent eventually does find a deep romantic connection with Kathy, a young girl he meets at a party. After she recognizes Davy's name and tells him that

she has heard his reputation of being a comedian, Davy is given the injection of confidence to continue talking to her. He skips stones to impress her, jokes freely, and then eventually settles into a deep conversation about future plans (64-65). Once at ease, Davy is able to open up and connect with a girl. There is no narrative of attempting to make moves sexually—in fact, they share only innocent kisses despite their intimate discussion—yet Davy is thoroughly happy. The pair continues to date for a few weeks and the protagonist starts developing more complex feelings. He states, “I don’t know if I was actually in love with Kathy or not. Maybe I only thought I was, maybe there’s no real difference between the two conditions” (89). Rather than getting caught up in the heat of passion or the bliss of a first romance, Davy is able to look at his relationship with a level head. Even as an adolescent, he is juxtaposing notions of love against the impression of love, weighing each side of the scale and deeming it to be a useless question: “All I know is that I wanted to be with her every chance I got” (89), he explains, putting the matter to rest with the simplicity of a more experienced man. He understands that the word “love” is an abstract construction attributed to an emotion that cannot ever be precisely labeled. In a short period of transition, the text has taken Davy from a flustered, bumbling admirer to one who can understand the intricacies of love and being loved.

Later in the novel, Davy’s masculinity is called into question when he doesn’t make an advance on a girl he walks home. After Davy escorts a frightened girl back to her house, casually talking and connecting with her, Skeleton Delaney heckles him for not trying to have sex with her: “What would you think of a lad not tryin’ a bit of



stuff...What would you say if I was to tell you that that fella didn't even tackle her? (143). The others in the pub unabashedly call Davy "a queer" (143), embarrassing him into silence. Despite his humiliation, Davy's actions reveal the qualities of someone who is highly emotionally developed. He acted like a man, even though he is heckled for it by the boys. Davy's sincerely good nature sought to bond with a human being during a time of distress rather than take unfair advantage of a sexual object. It is a coming-of-age moment that the reader acknowledges and appreciates as a genuine display of maturity, even if it leaves Davy silent and blushing. His subconscious sensitivity—"there [is] a big difference between shifting a girl from a dance...and in walking along with her because she [is] frightened" (143), Davy's inner monologue relays—is apparently incongruous with the immature outlook of Skeleton Delaney and the rest of the guys' mentalities, but speaks clearly of Davy's moral compass and perception of rectitude.

The turning point for Davy—the final conversion from boy into adult—comes with back-to-back tragedies: the death of Davy's friend, Johnny, and the burning of his family's pub, The Shamrock. Johnny was a regular at The Shamrock. He was a local shoemaker who was caught in a battle with alcoholism. On a near daily basis, Davy would pour him drinks, observing his interactions with the other regulars. The Shamrock serves as the psychological hub of Wexford—a wide variety of personalities filter in and out of the doors, providing Davy with an array of characters to observe. While walking through the graveyard after Johnny's funeral, he feels the consequences of life and death:

Some of the graves were majestic with big ornate tombstones and winged angels...other graves looked sad and neglected with no tombstone at all....I was feeling kind of mixed up to say the least – sad, angry, confused, take your pick...Johnny had come into my life a stranger. I was not compelled to love him or feel sorry at his death. He had earned my love...And now the terrible finality of it all was brought home to me (130)

Johnny's death is the first time Davy's consciousness turns away from love, music, drinking, and friendship. It is his initial experience of emotions that even the wisest adults struggle with and cannot sufficiently understand. But Johnny's death is not met with a flat, abstract sorrow. Davy looks beyond his multifaceted emotional state to the cause of his reaction. He considers the choice he made to care for Johnny, the impermanence of life, and how the effects of both cannot be simply dealt with, but rather are painful and impossible to sift through. On the other end of the emotional spectrum is Davy's reaction to The Shamrock burning down: rather than feeling multiple, specific ramifications at once, Davy singles in on one more general sensation, "that awful feeling of being alone for the first time in my life" (153). Davy cannot put any sharper or more insightful words to how he feels, for the first time failing to successfully make clear the various thoughts and sentiments circulating in his mind, but he knows, for certain, that he feels alone as he stands "watching the walls of The Shamrock come tumbling down" (153). The pub's collapse into rubble symbolically represents the end of Davy's childhood. It is a way of life that is lost: "it was all over then...in no time at all the boys vanished from my life like ghost ships in

the night” (153), Davy laments at the conclusion of the novel. But despite the end of Davy’s youth, and regardless of its tragic turning point, Davy’s emotional intelligence and his mature appreciation for life, love, and happiness leave the reader confident that he will bounce back for the better. Unlike the regulars of The Shamrock, who will undoubtedly scatter to surrounding pubs in hopes of continuing their routines, this is the moment where Davy is released from the cycle of Wexford, unbound and without reason to delay his dreams of getting out.

## Chapter 4

### EASING INTO THE ROOM

In contrast to both the deep perception of Davy Wolfe and the sure-handed antics of Jimmy Brady, Kevin Troy, the adolescent protagonist of Roche's short story "Some Silent Place," is very much still in the process of figuring out the new world which he has been thrust into, measuring the dynamics and conduct of his new hurling team. Kevin is introduced as "the newfound fledgling" of the Wexford hurling team (*Tales from Rainwater Pond* 245) an image that captures perfectly the young athlete's mission to grow as a man, flourish as a hurler, and understand as an adult his place in the world: like a newly hatched bird, unsure how to fly or eat on its own, Kevin observes the world with innocent eyes that beg for experience.<sup>5</sup>

The text follows Kevin from a third person perspective, which allows the narrative of a young man's journey to be read objectively. Roche describes the protagonist as yet undeveloped, but with budding potential below the surface: "Young Kevin Troy...had a baby face that belied his inner mettle" (245). The "Young" epithet precedes his name frequently throughout the story, and defines Kevin more accurately

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<sup>5</sup> Subsequent citations from *Tales from Rainwater Pond* (Kilkenny: Pillar Press, 2006) will be marked simply with a page number

in the first half of the text than any sense of courage or notable strength. Early on, the reader is tuned in to Kevin's uncertainty, as he is primarily concerned with fitting in socially. There is a moment where teammate and mentor Mick Hyland is entertaining a crowd with antics that confuse Kevin, and rather than doing anything that might call attention to his ignorance of the situation, he tries to blend in. Smiling along with the group, "Kevin hoped that his laughter had not seemed ignorant or impudent and he gazed from face to face to try and gauge the situation" (248). It is an attempt to fit in: Kevin tries to understand his surroundings and doesn't want to appear lost in the process. This self-consciousness shows vulnerability in the adolescent and appeals to the reader's sympathy—early on we hope to see Young Kevin find his bearings and take flight on his own volition.

Regardless of Kevin's social reservations, he is heralded as a prodigy on the hurling pitch. The text states, in emphasized italics, "*Kevin Troy was on his way*" (246). It continues, foreshadowing, "Kevin would do some beautiful things on the hurling field in the subsequent years...though [he] still had a lot to learn and even more to prove" (246). The story begins at a point where Kevin still has the world laid out in front of him. Even though he is in the nascent stages of his career as a hurler, Kevin already stands out among his older and more practiced teammates and aspires to achieve the promise of greatness. He fights to prove what he is capable of with an earnestness that earns him the nickname "Mr. Enthusiastic" (256). Rather than stopping to celebrate his status on a new, more prestigious club team, Kevin looks forward with unrelenting ambition. When visiting a local hurl maker, Kevin stops to

look at photographs hanging on the wall of fame: “Kevin couldn’t help but harbor the juvenile notion that his face might one day also adorn these hallowed walls” (261). Though this fantasy is nothing more casual musing—a hopeful daydream—it is the sort of youthful romanticism that appeals to the reader’s emotional investment in the protagonist. Kevin’s success would be applauded as a triumph for protagonist and reader alike.

Kevin’s aspirations are equaled by his unrelenting zeal. After a lackluster start to a hurling match, he is disheartened, feeling bereft of “manliness...heroism...[and] downright masculinity” (271). Rather than giving up early, Kevin returns to the second half with focused determination. News reports would later celebrate his redoubled efforts: “Young Kevin Troy was in fine form...as point after point wended homewards from unbelievable angles” (273). Kevin’s determination—his inner mettle—supersedes the “Young” epithet and defines him as he steps confidently up to a challenge. The poetic diction of the newspaper writer “The Scribe” breaks from the conventional, objective journalistic language and creates an almost mythical sense about Kevin’s playing. He gives an exaggeratedly epic perspective of hurling—describing Kevin’s prowess as skill worthy of Homer. By rising to the occasion, Kevin vindicates the text’s earlier promise that he is on his way, if not only to the local hurl maker’s wall of fame, then also “out into the world with him” (262) when he travels out of Wexford for the next, bigger and better step of his career. In these moments, where Kevin’s abilities dazzle onlookers, it is clear that perhaps Kevin’s wall of fame fantasies carry a grain of possibility if he maintains his focus.

Kevin is mentored by two vastly different adult figures: Father Corish and Mick Hyland. Together, the three of them form an unlikely alliance—Mick Hyland is older than the other players, a great hurling talent without any notion of responsibility; Young Kevin Troy is the new hope and exciting fresh talent on the pitch; and Father Corish is the glue that holds everything together. Collectively, they are described as “a sort of blessed trinity” (253), where father (Mick), son (Kevin), and Holy Spirit (Father Corish) are not revered for their piety per se, but rather their unparalleled contribution to the Wexford hurling team. They rely on each other to be their best, and together can accomplish greatness on the field.

Father Corish is described as “the prodigal priest” (286), a religious man by definition, but one who “smoked and drank too much and was given to whipping off the collar when cornered and milling into a fight” (255). Father Corish fails as a cleric, but is a trusted and well-liked man in the community and is called upon for everything from keeping Mick in check to settling domestic issues. He is a responsible influence on Kevin—perpetually expressing his commitment to the team, even between practices and games.

Mick Hyland, on the other hand, is a “rebel without applause” (249). Feared by others and unapologetically self-centered, Mick doesn’t care if those around him are hurt, so long as he gets what he wants. Even though Mick is marked by a failed sense of morality, he is an unmatched talent as a hurler. He is aggressive and carries the team on his shoulders. Shortly after Young Kevin joins the team, Mick takes him under his wing. He “partner[s with] Kevin in the puck around” and “sit[s] beside

Kevin in the dressing room” (259). Although these could be viewed as meaningless gestures, because of Mick’s daunting status, Kevin questions sincerely why he is given the honor of being Mick’s de facto apprentice.

Kevin and Mick were the two highlights of the Wexford team—even when the team suffers a crushing loss, *The Scribe*, again using an epic tone, “waxed lyrical about Mick and Kevin” (267) as they outperformed the rest. Although early on, Kevin looks up to Mick with starry eyes, as the story progresses, he slowly begins to see the dark shadow that hangs around Mick, who misses practices, treats hurling with increasing indifference, and, worst of all in Kevin’s eyes, makes a move on Anne.

Although Anne is roughly twice his age and married to the coach, Kevin admires her with a deep, if confused, love. His quiet affections have built her up on a pedestal of perfection such that she can do no wrong in his eyes. Kevin confesses early in the text, “Jersey girls haunted his fantasies, but...it was Anne who invaded his dreams” (245). Something about her demeanor sets her apart from other girls—while most women fall for Mick’s knavish hijinks, Kevin determines, “Anne would hardly fall for his usual bullshit and banter” (251). She is somehow regarded as a goddess who can be seen from a distance but never touched. Her appeal, however, is not simply the result of her beauty—she has a sort of power and certainty that is able to silence and embarrass the entire Wexford hurling team when they fail to perform (271). She serves as sort of a quiet, mostly unseen inspiration for Kevin over the course of the story, until she is seduced by Mick and Kevin’s world is shaken.



What began with rumors of infidelity—whispers around Wexford that Mick and Anne were seeing each other in secret—grew into a full-fledged affair. Kevin’s heart sank with the pain of that reality. His initial reaction was a mess of confusion and jealousy (276) but Kevin’s unhappiness soon grew more tangible. The broken-hearted adolescent noticed a change in his love: “Gone was the Anne of old, the sweet and lovely, and in her place sat [a] surly impersonator...who bit her nails nervously and glanced...defiantly” (282). Kevin began to see the imperfections come together as the lustrous, angelic glow he had placed around Anne began to diminish and reality came into the picture. Finally, after picking up Father Corish and a hysterical Anne from DeBarry’s Lodge across town, Kevin’s idol came tumbling to earth. Noticing her blotchy face and matted hair, Kevin saw past the childish, ideal Anne he had created and discovered, as an adult, the reality that was clouded by emotion and love:

She had the exhausted, demented look of a sleepwalker about her.

Kevin, God forgive him, was plagued with the awful image of her statue crashing from a lofty pedestal; he could almost hear the plaster crack and the sturdy plinth on which she stood crumble beneath her.

(286)

In this moment, Kevin inadvertently takes the first step towards coming of age. He begins to see how things are—rather than idly smiling and pretending—and allows reality to guide him rather than a childish imagination. The adolescent’s journey leads him to the brink of adulthood, touching on the failures, pains, and mistakes that accompany, if not define, coming of age.

As Kevin tries to comfort Anne, he stops and wonders to himself: “Is this what people do?...Let on to understand when they don’t and pretend to feel when they can’t?” (287). Ironically, this echoes precisely Kevin’s behavior in the beginning of the text, as he laughed without purpose in hopes of fitting in with his new teammates. Kevin’s emotional climax comes after suffering emotional pains and bitter truths of love and trust, but allows him to come of age—seeing the world, for the first time, with the clear, full eyes of experience. He understands that things are not all that they seem, people are not all that they seem, and when life is disingenuous, nothing is truly gained.

Although this new understanding is a turning point for the protagonist, he has not entirely grown past making the mistakes of youth. Emboldened by experience, the adolescent’s arrogance gets him into trouble when he hits the town to go “clubbing and dancing...and sampling the Jersey girls” (288). No longer “Young” Kevin, the more practiced adolescent’s overconfidence betrays him to speak *too* honestly. After spending time in the backseat of a car with a local girl, Kevin openly tells her, “You’re not my type” then is consequently forced to dodge the punches and stave off the slaps of his enraged partner (288). This sort of foolhardy dismissal isn’t a typical display of the protagonist’s character. Rather, it is the result of Mick Hyland’s poor influence in conjunction with Kevin’s attempts at being more transparent in lieu of pretending. It illuminates the dangers of false mentors and irresponsible guidance—a growing pain and unfortunate mistake for the typically more levelheaded adolescent. Although it shows Kevin stumbling, it leads up to the final culmination of his gained wisdom,

which reaches its resolution in the final pages of the text. Kevin endures a hospitalizing hit in the crotch during a hurling match—a symbolically emasculating shot that leaves the adolescent both humbled and bedridden—Kevin pieces together the events of recent weeks:

[He] couldn't help but embrace the notion that all that had happened in the recent past had been some sort of a mysterious ritual that had been enacted solely for his benefit; and now, job done, the performers had packed up their props and costumes and all gone back home to their day jobs again. He tried to decipher what it was he was supposed to have learnt from all of this. Humility? Patience? Independence? Some lesson for life? (294)

Despite witnessing collapsed marriages, the aborted potential of Mick Hyland, and the loss of his team in the Leinster Final, part of Kevin still believes that it was all done for his benefit. Although this view puts Kevin central to everything—a realistic portrayal of a youthful mindset—the protagonist's growth is also evident: He sees the connectedness and the significance of everything. Although his reflections begin with the search for a moral to the story, with the belief that he was central to it all, he corrects himself before completing the thought:

But no, it was true that on the face of it life seemed to be as it always had been, the comings and goings and the tiny standing stills; underneath though there could be no denying, in Kevin's eyes anyway,

that everything and everybody had been imperceptibly and irretrievably  
and, for want of a better word, spiritually altered somehow (294)

After exploring his thoughts to their end, Kevin follows them to a profound conclusion: that everything can change, while everything remains the same. He realizes that it was not an act for his own benefit, but the way things work. No longer observing from the outskirts and pretending to blend in, Kevin Troy figures out that all of the growth, strength, and knowledge he has coming out of the whole experience will make him better—“altered somehow”—but the world will continue to dance to the same beat. In coming of age, Kevin has realized that Father Corish will always be a wayward priest, Mick will continue to indulge in his selfish desires, Anne will never be the white goddess of perfection, and Wexford will continue to be the place it always has been—the changes will alter how he sees things, even if those things remain, on the outside, as they always have.

## **Chapter 5**

### **GROWING PAINS**

Although Billy Roche's adolescent has various faces and nuances, the superficial differences are negligible in categorizing the character archetype. The adolescent is not defined as simply a trouble maker, an introspective bartender, or a promising athlete—in fact it is possible that he is all of these things or none of these things—but rather it is the substance below the surface that provides the crux of establishing the archetype.

Jimmy is the adolescent because of his capacity to do good, in spite of his streak of local mayhem. His sense of morality is compromised by an immature notion of reputation and legacy but there is no doubt that he is something special regardless of his debauchery. He is untamed but possesses the tools necessary to break out of Wexford's otherwise bleak atmosphere—with unparalleled charisma and (albeit misguided) determination to finish what he starts.

Similarly, Davy is certainly not the only person in his hometown that is capable of deep understanding and compassion but his ability to observe, comprehend, and sympathize separates him from the rest of Wexford. He dreams with a great sense of fantasy and optimism that reads as inspiring rather than naïve. Although traveling the world as a famous musician seems implausible, it is hard to imagine Davy stuck in

Wexford after the Shamrock burns down because the reader has been inside the young adolescent's mind and understands the motivations and capacities of the protagonist.

If Jimmy and Davy represent two ends of a personality spectrum, Kevin falls somewhere in the middle—he is seen as good, earnest, and enthusiastic in a way reminiscent of Davy, but also, near the end of “Some Silent Place”, as reckless and without caution. He is an adolescent still very much coming into his own, but after watching the woman he loves transform from an impossible embodiment of perfection into a real world woman, broken in her own right, Kevin is hit hard with the sting of reality. He sits in reflection on the suffering and change that go hand in hand with age.

These three each come to see the consequences of their action and inaction, understand the ways the world continues with and without their input, and after running the gauntlet, emerge with a newfound sense of experience. Under the guidance of mentors, they struggle through the hardships of love, life, and reality. Each of them loves and loses; each of them must face the truth that their potential is only part of the recipe necessary for success; each of them must earn their little piece of Wexford and the world. In an interview, Roche explained, “When you grow up in [Wexford] your wings are clipped and you have to be very, very strong to rise above them really...But if you let them, the town will keep you down. It will stop you from flying away.” As these adolescents work to break free and away from the pack, they discover this; their innocence is stripped from them and replaced with the hardships and wisdom of experience. Time and circumstance leave behind life lessons and

dreams, broken, fulfilled, or somewhere between, and in the wake of it all, the adolescent is defined.

Billy Roche's adolescent is a multifaceted archetype that is rooted in not only literature, but pop-culture and philosophy as well. I had an opportunity to interview the author on February 3, 2012 about his creative process and the inspirations he pulls from when sitting down to write. Many of the sources that influenced Roche depict raw and visceral tales of growth—stories that vividly portray when maturing isn't easy or comfortable—works such as Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*. Roche finds inspiration in those narratives that depict when the growing process occurs simultaneously with harsh and unforgiving realities.

He incorporates adolescent characters because they “add a youthful energy and a naiveté”. The adolescent's lack of experience, and the journey to shed the unchallenged perspective of one's youth is another key factor for Roche. “A flaw is everything...a hero without a flaw is not worth writing about...[and] a man who sees his flaw is the real human being” he continued, elucidating why the journey through youth highlights the most satisfying aspects of his story telling. By examining the difficulties and discomforts of growth, coupled with the inexperience of youth, a tension arises that allows characters to grow satisfyingly from boy to man.

In our interview, Roche also discussed how American philosopher Philip A. Johnson's notion of the three types of man (simple, complex, and enlightened) factors into his writing. He described the Complex or “in between man” as someone who is “stuck in this complex world, deciding to stay or go.” For Roche, this is the most

interesting type of character, and the ones that often directs his writing. Roche affirmed, “I try to move my characters on, just ever so slightly, towards enlightenment”. The adolescent’s journey is not always a matter of life-altering epiphanies, but rather, often depicts just enough growth to replace naiveté with knowing, to inch away even marginally from their flaws.

Stories of struggle, however, are not the writer’s sole influence. Nor is the adolescent defined solely by his flaws. Roche also explained how pop music effects writing, stating, “The whole notion of jukeboxes...and pop music had a huge influence on me.” Warm notions of young love and the luring appeal of “jukebox joints” reveal Roche’s soft spot for those adolescent years—the happy notes of youth that inspire the writer and invite the reader to kindle feelings of compassion and tenderness. Furthermore, the author cited The Beach Boys’ Brian Wilson as a figure who factors into his writing. Wilson inspires Roche and is manifested in the author’s characters because he represents a seemingly perennial youth, singing songs of finding and holding onto young love. While the adolescent is portrayed as working towards some concept of adulthood, he is still largely defined by the youthful nature of his emotions, romantic motivations, and limitless aspirations.

As Billy Roche discussed his inspirations, it was clear that concept of “the adolescent” isn’t about creating a character archetype that is strictly his own, but instead is part of a greater tradition of story telling. The tumultuous years of youth and growth—the emotional struggles, the mistakes that are made, and the endless promise



of the future—are the years where characters strive closer towards becoming the enlightened man.

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