

A Melodramatic Study of Reaney's *Sticks and Stones*: A Note

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Abstract

Melodrama is a sub-genre of drama with an ability to move the audiences with exaggerated and sensationalized events and characters. The melodrama is characterized by a plot that have larger than life characters, exaggerated fears, bloodshed, murders, background music, nightmares, and sometimes, the appearance of the ghosts. It raises the strong emotions of the audience. The melodramatic structure makes the characters to achieve payhos to appeal you through their struggle and hardship.

Reaney's skillful use of melodrama is quite evident in his plays as well as in his poetry. From *The Sun and the Moon* through to *King Whistle!* (1962), Reaney has repeatedly drawn on the narrative conventions and character stereotypes found in nineteenth-century romantic melodramas and gothic novels. The aesthetic and cathartic values of this structure have occupied a central role mainly in his theatre. His *Donnellys Trilogy* is the most obvious representation of the simple structure of popular melodrama.

Sticks and Stones is a drama of the highest order and, along with the two other parts of *The Donnellys Trilogy*, probably the finest dramatic work ever written in English Canada. From its roots in the soil of our own history, Reaney has created a world-class melodrama from the Donnellys myth that will endure even if future historians and lawyers ever answer the many questions that remain about the Donnellys and their times.

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The Donnelly Trilogy is based on a real-life event, the Donnelly Massacre in which five members of an Irish Roman Catholic family, named James and Johannah Donnelly, their sons Tom and John, and a niece, Bridget had been brutally murdered by a vigilant group on February 4, 1880 in the township of Biddulph, Ontario, Canada. In spite of the testimony of an eye witness, Johnny O' Connor who had come to stay with them that night, the murders were given a clean chit by the jury consisting of protestant judges. They were proved to be notorious and threat to the people living in the town.

There have been many books revolving around the story of the Donnellys – Thomas P. Kelle's *The Black Donnellys* Orlo Miller's balanced account of the Donnellys' life titled *The Donnellys Must Die*, Peter Colley's play *The Donnelly: A Drama with Music* and Ted Johns' *The Death of The Donellys*. But Reaney's *The Donnellys* has been considered as the finest achievement of Canadian theatre, with the 'Globe and Mail' calling it "Canada's own Greek Tragedy".

The critical manifestation in *The Donnelly Trilogy* is the talent of Reaney for recapturing the perceptions of melodrama in which wonder and delight are offset by exaggerated fears, bloodshed, murders, background music, and nightmares, including the appearance of ghosts. *Sticks and Stones* is the first in *The Donnelly Trilogy* where violence and horror become means to revision the deaths of the Donnellys as tragic and redemptive, thereby constructing positive images by which a community can see itself.

As Jerry Wasserman puts it:

To be Donnelly in Reaney's portrayal is to be strong, proud, heroic, stubborn, forthright. It is to choose to be true to your own values no matter how much pain that may cause you. It is to stand against the mob, the community, the church; even the law, if they pressure you to be what you are not (James Reaney 275)

In this trilogy, his genius lies in the fact that he endows an apparent regional story with a universal appeal by showing 'all is not well in the state of Denmark' in the words of a Shakespearean hero, Hamlet in *Hamlet*. It is a forceful indictment of social, cultural and religious ostracization of the Donnellys, a Roman Catholic Irish family, by the dominant people in the established power structure. Reaney makes an honest effort to resurrect the Donnellys as tragic heroes by clearing the webs of misunderstanding surrounding them. *The Donnellys* live in a corrupt, unjust world, and for Reaney, these evils are fundamentally mythic, the stuff from which myth and heroes arise rather than sociological. They were presented as black Donnellys in the previous works.

Sticks and Stones is the first in *The Donnelly Trilogy* where violence and horror become means to revision the deaths of the Donnellys as tragic and redemptive, thereby constructing positive images by which a community can see itself. The heroic determination of *Sticks and Stones* gives way to the rowdy violence of *St. Nicholas Hotel* and the enfolding horror of *Handcuffs*. The trilogy uncovers a social past that disturbs any tendency to sentimental nostalgia. Here, we encounter deaths by murder, suicide, accident, and alcohol, and we enter a world where ethnic hatred, violence, and abuse are common, where conspiracy, political corruption, judicial deception, and religious bigotry form a web that encircles the entire community. Comparison with second third

Sticks and Stones begin with the immigration of James and Johanna Donnelly with their seven sons and one daughter from the poverty and sectarian violence of Ireland after refusing to bow to the threats of the 'Whitefeet', a secret society of militant anti-Protestants. They rent the land from absentee landlord John Grace on the understanding that they will be given the first chance to purchase it later with a fair deal. After they've spent years improving the land, however, landlord Grace ignores the previous agreement and sells half of it to another family, it leads to the feud between the two families. In the series of events, Patrick Farrell is killed. Donnelly is convicted of his murder and sentenced to hang, which later changed into Seven years imprisonment. But even when their barn is burned down, the Donnellys denies being driven out, a resolution that leads inevitably to a tragic end.

1. THE very documentary material is the major source of melodrama from which Reaney drew so many of the episodes and characters of his *Sticks and Stones*. As W. D. Butt explains in his study of sources:

The irony about melodrama is that a form so simplistic, so un-life-like, is applied most

eagerly to complex and difficult real-life situations.... This irony is nowhere deeper than it is when melodrama appears in newspapers, whose readers virtually by definition expect to find factual truth. In 1880, the Donnelly story is grim; it is complex, revealing a Canadian society with certain fundamental and disastrous flaws. The papers are ordered and packaged melodramatically: art forms are used as instruments of repression. Audiences in 1880 readily absorbed the Donnelly story as melodrama because - in theatre, in fiction, and in the newspapers - the sentimental confusing of fictional forms with real-life was daily habit. (*The Donnelly: History, Legend and Literature* 415)

From the newspaper accounts - as well as from the trial records - Reaney was able to extract the main features of the black and white world which permeated the setting of the nineteenth-century newspaper world; he was also able to discern clearly these sources, the mode people phrased things. As Butt states, the newspapers provided a relatively fixed, and often superficially consoling, ordering of experience that, of course, worked its way into language and the general perception of things. Such a passion for order (and for melodrama) represented and fostered by the newspapers is seen by Reaney in *Souwesto Theatre: A Beginning*; he writes:

... one has to admit in looking at some individual copies of the earlier newspapers - say the London Gazette in the 1830s - that their appearance is most elegant. The paper is still white, the type is well set, and the letters it printed are still jet black; how a dreary, provincial backwoods filled with stumps, frogs and mud has been transformed by Caslon, lower and upper case! We see the same triumph of order here that would have been visible at that time in the new straight railroads with their parallel rails and the roads that meet at right angles which the surveyors' instruments had produced. (11) conflicts

Reaney's association of the newspaper world with what he calls in *Wacousta!* the 'God of squares and geometric forms,' implicit in the image of land surveying, leads one to another major feature of melodrama, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, which informs the structure and the vision of the Donnelly cycle - as it has nearly all of Reaney's plays - the confrontational pattern. It is possible, on one level, to interpret such antagonistic patterns in terms of what R. B. Parker, in a study of the Reaney's earlier plays, calls Reaney's "evangelical" sensibility (*Reaney and Mask of Childhood*) which, he writes: "...polarization of the action between extremes of good and evil; his simplified, almost allegorical characters; the importance of guilt as: motive in his work; and his temperamental attraction to violence and melodramatic last-minute reversals" (281).

Ingredients of popular melodrama in the *Sticks and Stones* are pretty evident in the characterization, themes, language, use of scenic tableaux, in the variety of briskly-paced external theatrical excitements - mob scenes, coach-races, bar-room brawls, chases, and in his use of songs and background music, and the like. In all instances, Reaney utilizes the physical, verbal, and scenic exaggerations common to melodramatic technique partly to "excite," as he claims *Halloween* excites in its fundamental guise as "direct, sentimental, sensational primitive theatre." (Reaney, a letter from Reaney to *Halloween*, Spring 1976, 2). Reaney authoritatively sketches the politicians, merchants, farmers, constables, and priests of *Biddulph* in the unmistakable, intense melodrama hues.

In this play, Reaney's array of scenic images which, as a sequence, help to tell the Donnellys story, and, as montage, direct us to respond to some complex re-alignments of this story as a

document, “as religious rite, as popular melodrama, and as tragic myth. The sequence begins with the formation of a threatening mob at the scene of the “Raising Bee at Gallagher's on Cedar Swamp Line,” (75) a mob that faces us in the audience as well as Cassleigh's main target Donegan. This confrontational image is sustained when Mrs. Donnelly enters to face, and then to kneel to, Sarah Fral, asking “Have you forgiven me and mine then for what we did to your man? And for what my husband is now in prison for?” (76) Her private engagement of will and passion becomes public again when she agrees to “save” Sarah Farl's brother and faces Cassleigh's mob demanding the release of Donegan:

Give Mr. Donegan back his clothes ... raise him up out of that mud. Dung! There's a field of grain to garner with bread for you all, and you'd rather be thorns to each other. There's a table of food for you to eat and you won't come and sit down at them. Well, you won't sit down at them. Get back to work, you fool. You tribe! (77)

The scene shifts to that of a church: “Slowly everyone kneels but it would be hard to tell when we saw Mrs. Donnelly kneeling” (77). The priest asks the community of Biddulph to confess its complicity in the tormenting of Donegan: ‘silence filled with the buzzing of a fly against a window,’ and Gallagher asks for pardon, both for the harm done to Donegan and for the isolating of Mrs. Donnelly in her effort to assist him. The chorus, holding the candles, chants ‘Si iniquitates observaveris, Domine, Domine quis sustinebit’ then moves to form the audience for the famous “Medicine Show,” placing the lit candles on the floor level to become footlights. In the foreground, on our side of the candle footlights, Tom Donnelly and Jim Feeney enact their ritual scene of becoming blood brothers: “Now - cross your arm with mine. Your blood, my blood, mixed in brotherhood.” () While this scene freezes the “Medicine Show” enacts, on ladders, Jim Feeney's confession to Pat Donnelly that he has betrayed Tom, and then, to the accompaniment of banjo and fiddle, the Showman delivers the concluding lines of the song from the awful – The Black Donnelly's

Oh all young folks take warning
Never live a life of hate,
Of wickedness or violence, lest
You share the Donnellys' fate.
Their murdered bodies lie today,
A mile from Lucan town
But the memories of the awful feud
Time never will live down. (80)

Mrs. Donnelly appears once again to hang out the shirts of her seven sons in the moonlight. It is the twenty-ninth of July, and Mr. Donnelly is coming home from prison. The scene now focuses upon Mrs. Donnelly waiting by the gate with her lamp:

Now I'll wait for him here by the gate with this lamp. Bring sheaves with you when you've finished with the field. Your father will want to see what his farm's been doing right away. I'll stand out here with my lamp. You will come tonight. I know you will. I'll hold this lamp until either its oil runs dry or your home. Moon, you hold your lamp, stars; I hold mine. Night sounds I stand. I'll stand here years after tonight - a seal in the air - long after my house and my gate and my curtilage have become dust. A lamp hanging in the air, held by a ghost lady. (81)

In the creepy half-light, Mrs. Donnelly is joined by her ghost, who, “wandering through, crossing times and places,” (81) relates the future, “You'll die unconfessed, Judith Donnelly. And wander these roads for a certain while. Dead leaf. Float light” (44). Mrs. Donnelly sees herself both acting in the present, waiting, with the lamp by the road, with seven grown sons and a flourishing farm, for her husband's return, and transfixed in a story that cannot be altered, a story of choices already made, things already spoken ‘tongues and their words’ and ‘ladders with certain rungs’, which demands her violent death. The Ghost of Mrs. Donnelly tells her: 'There were ladders with certain rungs, Judith, you could have avoided, you know; and her living self-laments. 'Oh, if we could get out of the pound were locked in-it's like a house with twisty windows. 'The tragic fact that the Donnellys will be no freer in Biddulph than they were in Tipperary is brought out in the survey scene during which all the actors but the surveyor and the boy 'return to their lines stage right and stage left to kake Jacob's ladders, or cats' cradles.' These children games give visual immediacy to this scene's message illustrating how the Donnellys will be trapped in the web of the roads of Biddulph on Concession Six, Lot Eighteen. The image is repeated at the end of the sequence where we see the actors 'using ropes and making cats' cradles (Jacob's ladders) out of them and their bodies; fates with string entangling people's lives. The presence of ghosts also symbolizes the trapped condition of Donnellys that they are not accessible in the town. This scene illustrates how the Donnellys will be trapped in the web of the roads of Biddulph on Concession Six, Lot Eighteen.

The confrontation with the mob; the scene in the church; the “Medicine Show”; the woman by the road with the lamp, both in and out of time, ambiguously poised between the act and the story of the act - all four scenic images recur in varying configurations throughout the play. Each is reinforced, as in Blake's “composite art,” (Blake, *Finding Shakespeare on Film* 118) or as in what Peter Brook calls Shakespeare's “pop collage,” by a variety of verbal and auditory structures (prose dialogue, sermon, chant, music, song, quasi-poetic soliloquy). Each also affords a different perspective on the story, contributing to the complex design of the play. The intermingling of the dramatic and the tragic is of crucial significance. This intermingling is especially evident and especially revelatory of Reaney's vision in the juxtaposition of the “Medicine Show” version of the Black Donnellys with the figure of Mrs. Donnelly with the lamp.

Reaney gathered a lot of characters to enhance the melodramatic effects of the play. There are around thirty characters in the play; the author authoritatively sketches politicians, merchants, farmers, constables, and priests of Biddulph in the unmistakable intense hues of melodrama. The Donnellys, James Carroll, George Stub, Sarah Farl, Andrew Keefe, Jim Feeney, Tom Cassleigh, Ned Brooks, Patrick Finnegan, The Reverend Maguire, Ned Ryan, Hugh, and McCrimmon. This large cast of the play presents a combination of the different shades of life, and we have clever, stupid, saintly, villainous, generous, and silly characters. Merchant George Stub, for instance, has a stock of theatrical identity as one of any number of melodramatic villains whose power derives from economical sources.

Reaney illustrates more fine play writing in his development of the characters Stub and Cassleigh. Indeed, their roles seem to be the creations of Reaney's imagination, for no Donnelly history previous to *Sticks and Stones* made any significant mention of them. Reaney

created them to present larger-than-life characters to meet melodrama. The development of such characters reveals that they are more than just foils for the Donnellys. The characters of George Stub and Cassleigh are the representatives of the evil in the drama. Stub sits as a judge, and he aspires to be a senator. Though, Stub is much more than a representative of legal dominion. In the scene showing Mrs. Donnelly's trip to Goderich, Judith's lines are offset by Stub saying things like, "Rope from W.E. Grace 24g. Four long poles at a dollar each." (34) While she is trying to save her husband's life, Stub determines how much the town will make from the hanging. The Donnellys, who is more humane, does not belong to Stub's world: a very callous and profit-orientated.

Another representative of evil in the play is Thomas Cassleigh. Cassleigh as new Matthew Midnight, leader of the White foot organization, reigns over Catholics in the area by terror. This Whitefoot organization is a demonic church of the night: "complete with vestments (the women's clothing they use as disguises), invocations (the threat to visit the Donnellys at some hour of the day or night), and sacraments (the burning barns and houses of their enemies)" (13).

The power of Cassleigh is so complete he even has his own commandments, "The fifth commandment of God is: Thou, Brimmacombe - should not have beaten me so badly" (14). Part of the initiation ritual for this demonic church involves knowing the catechism of the religion. This catechism seems to include kneeling and swearing to Matthew Midnight, which James Donnelly would not do. Those who failed this catechism had their barn burned. Consequently, the Donnelly barn is set on fire.

The character of Mrs. Donnelly is the best example of Reaney's melodramatic vision. Much of the tragedy lies in the struggle of Mrs. Donnelly she is destined to throughout the play. *Sticks and Stones* begin with the mother's words to her son, Will—her refusal to be intimidated into persecuting others, to participate in communal hysteria, even if her own life is endangered. Reaney calls her variously Johannah, Judith, and Julia—as if evoking the names of a pagan goddess or the matriarchal head of a legendary dynasty. Though Mrs Donnelly is described as "black Irish"—thickset and swarthy, by no standards a beauty then or later." (*The Donnelly Must Die*, 34) Reaney, however, repeatedly refers to her as tall and stately. Like the female personification of Ireland's heroic values. She is like a queen and has a queen's walk and can inspire men to courageous action. Johannah can outface any man with her calm courage, including the bully Cassleigh when, using Whiteboy methods, he intends to torture a neighbour who insists on just play over some property. Moreover, she identifies the essential tragedy of the feud, which has torn apart the Ontario community, just as internecine strife has devastated Ireland: "There's fields of grain to garner with bread for you all and you'd rather be thorns to each other. There are tables of food for you to eat and you won't sit down at them. Well, you won't come and sit down at them. Get back to work, you fool. You tribe!" (77)

This portrayal of the Donnellys as a minority destroyed by a callous majority moves the play out of a simply regional context and gives it universal overtones. Reaney uses Donnellys' social and spiritual isolation to enhance the play's tragic impact and to reinforce their social ostracization; a series of opposites is used. They are caught and crushed between opposing forces. An essential feature of the melodrama that Reaney used to enhance the social and

spiritual isolation of the Donnellys in this play is a series of opposites used to emphasize the fate of the Donnellys, who were caught and crushed between opposing forces. These opposites are typified in the title itself for in the course of the action the *Sticks and Stones* stand for the Donnellys' enemies and friends. Other opposites included are Protestant and Roman Catholic, Grits and Tories, Whitefeet and Blackfeet, Church and State, the Girl with the Sword and the Fat Lady, and the false picture of the Donnellys as opposed to the actual image of them. Reaney evokes these opposites visually when people form lines representing the different factions when some carry sticks and other carry stones. The overall effect is to show the Donnellys becoming more isolated as the action develops and left more and more to their own resources, so that by the end of the play they have emerged alone but determined, and aware of their strength and lonely destiny. 'I am proud to be a Donnelly against all the contempt of the world,' Jennie proclaims, and by this point the Donnellys have taken on a cosmic dimension and are opposed by their entire world.

Uniting as never before his gifts as poet and as dramatist, Reaney has given us a play that, while coming to life fully only on stage, can be studied as literature on the many levels of symbolism, metaphor, and irony that give *Sticks and Stones* a new dimension to the melodramatic pattern of writing.

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