

Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer*: A Mythic Journey of Wretched Souls

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Abstract

The devil claiming a human soul is no more an unusual theme in today's literary world. And yet, when Conor McPherson made his national theater debut in 2006 with *The Seafarer*, he caused a stir, and the next year he took the Broadways in a similar fashion. During the same time, Clare Wallace noticed that McPherson's on-stage feat made him popular with the audience and the "scholarly response has been a good deal more sluggish," even when he employs the quintessentially Irish storytelling tradition, infusing it with modern theater's "disruption of illusionism" (1). Now a more critically acclaimed playwright, McPherson calls his work "a fable about a struggle for redemption." What makes Conor McPherson's *Seafarer* an impressive feat is the epic or folkloric touch it provides to an otherwise ordinary modern day tale of crazy drunkenness and bawdy activities of some coastal town Irishmen. This paper attempts to read McPherson's play in the light of the Old English poem *The Seafarer* translated by Richard Hamer (used by McPherson). It is an exploration of the playwright's use of the Faustian and Christian elements and fusing them with the age-old Irish spirit of adventure to emphasize and extend a simple story of two brothers, Irish drunkenness, and Christmas magic into a complex tale of philosophical and psychological drama in the modern world.

Keywords: *sin, redemption, epic journey, darkness and light, dysfunctional relationships*

He knows not,
Who lives most easily on land, how I
Have spent my winter on the ice-cold sea,
Wretched and anxious, in the paths of exile
Lacking dear friends, hung round by icicles
While hail flew past in showers ...

Anonymous. *The Seafarer*, (10-15) c. 755 AD,
translated from Anglo-Saxon by Richard Hamer

Named after the Anglo-Saxon poem, the events in Conor McPherson's 2006 play *The Seafarer* occur in the house of Richard and Sharky Harkin at Baldoyle, a coastal settlement north of Dublin. Not a single character of the play is involved in seafaring and yet the acclaimed Irish playwright not only names his play *The Seafarer* but uses a section from the old poem for the epigraph as well. On the surface, the play is a twenty-first century version of the Faustian tale of the Devil and his attempt to claim a human soul. Aside from incorporating Faustian elements, McPherson refers to an old Irish story in which the Devil came to play poker at a tavern. The playwright also called his play "a fable about a struggle for redemption" (qtd. in media release, Broadway theater), and concurrently, he ties it to a very old poem over which scholars have their own debates. All of these elements tend to suggest that *The Seafarer* is not

a simple story of sin and redemption, or the Devil at Christmas, but much more. This paper attempts to read McPherson's play in the light of the Old English poem *The Seafarer* translated by Richard Hamer (used by McPherson), and explore how the playwright uses the Faustian and Christian elements, fusing them with the age-old Irish spirit of adventure to emphasize and extend a simple story of two brothers, Irish drunkenness, and Christmas magic into a complex tale of philosophical and psychological drama in the modern world.

The play begins on the day before Christmas in the household of two brothers, Richard and James Harkin (more known as Sharky). Richard is drunk most of the time, and an absurd accident (falling into a dumpster) has caused him temporary blindness. Sharky has come back home to take care of him though Richard always tries to imply that it is the other way round – and that Sharky has returned because he has messed up his life. Then there is Ivan who prefers to linger around the brothers than to stay home with his wife and children. On Christmas Eve, an old acquaintance, Nicky Giblin (currently living with Sharky's ex-girlfriend), turns up with an affluent-looking stranger named Mr. Lockhart who in reality is the Devil, having come to win Sharky's soul. Some twenty-five years earlier, this stranger had helped Sharky to escape hanging for manslaughter, and extracted a promise of poker to possess his soul. They drink together and start playing cards. The Devil in the shape of Mr. Lockhart seems to win the last round of poker, but later it turns out that Richard and Ivan, one blind and the other half-blind man (Ivan, having lost his glasses) actually have won the game, Ivan seeing four 4s instead of four Aces. As a result, an astounded Devil leaves empty-handed.

Starting with an absurd display of drunken buddies whose only occupation seems to be drinking and slouching around, *The Seafarer* proceeds to weave a very intricate story. Even though Richard harasses Sharky all through the play, his partiality for his younger brother becomes evident when at the end he gets a Christmas present for him, or even in his willingness to buy Sharky out from Mr. Lockhart's grips. The apparently drunken, dazed, but often witty exchanges, prominent at the beginning, slowly give way to issues that are too intense to discuss. Furthermore, a realistic, almost mundane ambience becomes fused with the supernatural presence of the Devil, and this very element that McPherson employs in his play is quintessentially Irish, as Cassandra Csencsitz points out:

His fantastical stories, inspired in part by a tradition of Irish myth and the richly idiomatic storytelling of his grandfather, suggest his openness to the unknown. ... The recurring themes in McPherson's plays – the ghosts, the dissection of the masculine psyche, the hilarity of human folly and bawdiness, fraternity, violence, law-breaking and death – form his own branch of epistemology. (Csencsitz 38)

What might appear as fantastic and strange in another setting seems quite plausible in McPherson's *Seafarer*; for example, rather than questioning the presence of the Devil on Christmas Eve, the audience as well as Sharky (the only character who learns the truth about his identity), ponder on the immediate danger posed by his presence. At the same time, Lockhart is not only intriguing, he is also the most interesting character in the play. He is given the best lines even though Sharky is the modern Faustus. Whereas Sharky seems merely distressed, afraid, and sometimes desperate, Lockhart appears grand and almost tragic.

In an interview with Maddy Costa, Conor McPherson had claimed that in his *Seafarer*, he is all his characters in the play, but perhaps “most especially the disappointed demon, Lockhart, who envies the men among whom he moves.” Now, why would the playwright identify more with the Devil than human beings? A close examination of Lockhart’s character would reveal some basic characteristics of modern humans too – the existential loner, the bad son (Cain), jealous of and vengeful toward the good one favored by the father, and the defiant and morbidly proud anti-hero who refuses to back down even in the face of absolute defeat. His sense of loneliness is something mostly brought about by his own doing. Yet when he speaks about it, he displays a tremendous loss and despair as he cannot understand why God chose human beings over him. His longing for a human soul is an act of retaliation for his own loss of heaven and the love of God. Understandably, he wants the very humans, the cause of his eternal damnation to reside with him. His vengeance is more against mankind than God – like a bad son always trying his luck against the good one loved by the father. For McPherson’s audience, the character of Lockhart is actually a key to understanding his human characters too – their frustration with life, living in a continuous void, the wretched drunkenness, which Ben Brantley, the *New York Times* reviewer, recognizes as a “blind drunkenness” that blurs the line between the real and unreal.

However, even though McPherson incorporates the age-old Christian myth of the Devil craving a human soul in the character of Lockhart, the latter is not the typical scheming superhuman creature that traditional scriptures and common knowledge depict him to be. First of all, though he takes a human form, he does not have any telltale sign, like a cleft-foot or horns, to be identified as a devil. The old Irish story, which provided the playwright with his inspiration for writing the play, had a cleft-footed devil which gave him away at the tavern where he had been lingering. Moreover, Lockhart does not seem to possess the supernatural power that the Devil is supposed to have. For example, he cannot win a simple game of cards against Sharky, even though he is supposed to be the king of tricksters. The twenty-first century version of the Devil created by McPherson is a very complex being with just as much awareness as a modern man. He does not even have any foreknowledge as to how to find a specific person in the human world. He sneers at the human body – the two balloon-like things (lungs), and a whistle (voice), that all men have, while he, being an immortal being, is far more powerful and great. However, when he abuses Sharky in rage because he cannot understand God’s design, the tragic condition of the Devil is revealed – that in spite of all his greatness God has discarded him in favor of a puny, insect-like creature that is neither beautiful nor as powerful as he is. He is also frustrated because even though he has power over man, the fact that God has abandoned him gnaws continuously at his heart.

The question at this point is, why does McPherson name his play after an old Anglo-Saxon poem, and not something Faustian? The playwright here actually draws attention to a significant but often overlooked aspect of the Devil who, apart from being the bad son and the rebel, is also an exile. The fact that God has banished him from heaven connects Lockhart directly with the idea of exile – a central theme in Anglo-Saxon poetry, more so because of the epigraph that McPherson uses for his play. The Old English poem *The Seafarer* deals with a speaker at the center who relates his past voyages on the sea, the tremendous sufferings he went through as

an exile, and how he found peace later on through his faith in God. The theme and style of the poem has evoked a number of problems among critics. For years, scholars believed that there are two different speakers in the poem; the first being the one who relates his journey and perils on the sea, and the second, a speaker who abruptly starts talking about the importance of finding godly ways in life. Naturally, the scholars also assumed that the latter portion was added by the Christian monks who wrote down the oral poems for preservation. During the last sixty years, however, that attitude has become the subject of much speculation, and critics and scholars today conclude that it is one whole piece focusing on the problematic aspects of transient, earthly life, displaying how devotion towards God alters one's way of looking at life. The sudden change in the tone is, as I. L. Gordon observes in his article, "a characteristic of early Old English poetry, and especially of Christian elegy, where it seems to have been part of the poetic method to present themes familiar in secular poetry and then to expand them into a Christian significance" (9). Accordingly, the description of intense suffering on the sea becomes a metaphoric one – the agony of a sinner without the compassion and guidance of God. The poem thus can be connected to the McPherson play that is set in a very modern and secular world where religious values have lost much of their significance.

The poem begins in epic style: claiming his story as true, the speaker talks about his journey during which he went through extreme physical hardship and agonizing mental suffering. On many nights on the rolling sea he had to keep watch, "oppressed by cold" and his feet "bound by frost." Lockhart's description of hell to Sharky bears a stark similarity to this portrayal:

You're locked in a space that's smaller than a coffin. And it's lying a thousand miles down, under the bed of a vast, icy, pitch-black sea. You're buried alive in there. And it's so cold that you can feel your angry tears freezing in your eye lashes and your very bones ache with deep perpetual agony (McPherson 77)

Reversing the traditional portrayal of hell as a fiery pit, McPherson makes his hell an ice-cold sphere devoid of God's compassion. He seems to have reverted back to Dante's portrayal of the Devil in the frozen ninth circle of hell. Biting cold, stark loneliness, "blistering shame," and "self-loathing" are the constant companions of the residents of this hell (McPherson 77). Both the speaker of the poem and Lockhart seem to smile grimly at the contentment of those who have never experienced such adversity. The section that McPherson borrows from the poem displays a touch of wistfulness and envy against those who have lived their entire lives on land in comfortable homes, never knowing "the paths of exile," never experiencing the pains of loneliness. The only sound in this isolated and lonely world comes from the gales and waves and the sea birds. It almost appears that during or after his journey the solitary adventurer from the *Seafarer* never had anybody to share his sorrows with. One possible reason could be that he was so distressed and cut off from his fellow sailors that he preferred loneliness. Or perhaps he is one of the last survivors of a vanquished tribe that lost its lord.

One other significant similarity between the speaker of the Anglo-Saxon *Seafarer* and McPherson's Lockhart is that apart from the physical torments they go through, both are tortured by the vivid, happy memories of the past when they too were part of an actual community. The Old English protagonist remembers the feasts held in the mead hall of his lord among his peers when he says,

Sometimes I made the song of the wild swans
My pleasure, or the gannet's call, the cries
Of curlews for the missing mirth of men,
The singing gull instead of mead in hall.

(*The Seafarer* 18-21)

The "missing mirth of men" definitely holds a suggestion of the life at some mead hall of a Lord or King. Now compare this to Lockhart's description of paradise from where he too was exiled:

At a certain point each day, music plays. It seems to emanate from the very sun itself. ... It's so moving that you wonder how you could ever have doubted anything as you think back on this painful life which is just a sad distant memory. Time just slips away in heaven, Sharky. But not for you, no. (McPherson 78)

Reminiscent of the speaker in the poem, Lockhart remembers the beauty of heaven where pain is kind of nonexistent. Moreover, it is so beautiful and peaceful that the pains of another life only seem like the memories of a dream. All of these are again reminiscent of the Devil in Dante's *Inferno* where he is chained and buried to the hip in solid ice at the very bottom of Hell in the tenth circle – the ultimate exile. The sufferings may also refer to Mephistopheles, in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, who claimed,

Why, this is Hell, and nor am I out of it.
Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God,
And tasted the eternal joys of Heaven,
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,
In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss? (I. iii. 78-82)

The basic idea is that hell or heaven does not depend on physical condition, but mental disposition. As a result, anyone can go through the afflictions of hell, and any place can transform into the pit of hell. When one is thrown out of the Grace of God, one suffers the harrows of hell. Through their experience as exiles, and suffering the existential loneliness the speaker of the poem, Mephistopheles and Lockhart become identical entities.

The theme of loneliness and exile would also lead to a central theme of *immrama* or "voyage genre" in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture. Colin Ireland, the acclaimed scholar of Irish and Gaelic folktales, elucidates the *peregrinus* or pilgrimage and punishment that often came in the shape of exile. A person guilty of murder or incest was supposed to cast himself adrift on a boat, his "feet fettered with an iron chain" and the key thrown away (Ireland 144). The basic idea is that the guilty person throws himself to the mercy of God, and his fate lies with the forces of nature. He would accept whatever God decided to do with him. The self-imposed form of exile later in the seventh century A.D. came to be known as "white martyrdom," and a number of holy men during the sixth and seventh century imposed this punishment on themselves (Ireland 145). There are instances in the *Seafarer* poem that suggest that the sufferings faced by the speaker might be self-imposed. For example, at one point he exclaims,

“And yet the heart’s desires/ Incite me now that I myself should go/ On towering seas, among the salt waves’ play” (*The Seafarer*, 32-34). The lines seem to imply that in spite of all his misery part of him looks forward to the journey. It almost appears that without the journey some aspects of his life would remain incomplete. The ancient saints and prophets felt this same urge to go beyond their worlds into the unknown lands to spread the word of God. However, in McPherson’s secular world, the Devil certainly cannot have that urge even though he roams around the world in restlessness, and human beings flounder, not knowing what to do.

Another point of important similarity between the old poem and McPherson’s play is that neither the protagonist of the poem, nor Lockhart ever mentions any other comrade who might have suffered with them. When Lockhart speaks of his sufferings in hell, he hardly refers to any of his fellow suffering fallen angels. Of course, he lets Sharky have a vision of what he has in store for him, but there is a sense of extreme loneliness, intense pain, and misery that suggests that lack of companionship is simply another aspect of that affliction. The traditional story of the Devil and his fall from heaven includes a band of other rebel angels who fell along with him as they decided to disobey God, not being able to accept the superiority of humankind over angels. But when Lockhart describes hell, he makes it sound like a lonely, cold place, where there is no warmth of love or companionship. The suffering is so great in hell that one cannot think of anything but his own wretched and condemned soul. He presents a vision of a hopeless kind of isolation because God has removed Himself from the hearts of these damned souls. McPherson’s Devil echoes this seclusion, and makes it clear that his exile was something he chose for himself, as he tells Sharky, “Because of what you did. And what you didn’t do” (McPherson 78).

Conor McPherson has only too often claimed that one central theme of all his plays is the feeling of extreme loneliness that mankind is burdened with:

All I can say is my work is a battle against loneliness. It’s an acknowledgement that we all have a fundamental loneliness even though you may not be alone. But all that loneliness can be eased by admitting and sharing that fact. Having said that, it does not necessarily mean that my work is bleak. I don’t think it is. I think it is quite optimistic because its intention is to make contact, to make connection.” (qtd. in Wood 147)

At the initial stage of the play, McPherson’s characters appear skittish, ill-tempered, and in discord with one another. However, as the action develops, a kind of bonding develops among them. Richard and Sharky show their brotherly disposition, and even Lockhart, with all his anger and menacing attitude toward humanity, leaves the stage in sorrowful acceptance of his defeat, longing for what he has lost because of his choice, and a grudging admiration for his opponent. Unlike his contemporary Irish playwrights such as Martin Macdonagh and Marina Carr who focus mostly on depraved human nature and dysfunctional relationships, McPherson truly believes that compassion for each other can bridge the gap, the tremendous loneliness human beings have faced through time. In his interview with Cassandra Csencsitz, he elucidates the necessity of Lockhart, “The devil, Lockhart, was a force of nature coming into the play,” says McPherson. “He’s scary, but he’s also an agent of change for the characters.

He is the darkness we need in our lives to recognize” (Csencsitz 39). Sharky’s quality of life may not change immensely as an aftermath of all these experiences. He will still get drunk, quarrel with his brother, and fight Nicky Giblin; yet he has been given a glimpse of how much worse things could be. He has been saved from the clutches of eternal damnation. When Richard tells him at the end of the play that he is at least alive, probably Sharky knows it better than anyone else on stage how much better that is. He also probably realizes that Richard appreciates and cares for him, along with the woman who sent him Christmas gifts, and that is indeed more than many people have had in life. Indeed it is more than what he had at the beginning of his journey in the play.

The lonely journey that Lockhart speaks of, therefore, is not his legacy alone; it is also a part of the human world. However, whereas the Devil is condemned to roam about alone until the end of eternity, the humans have a good possibility to claim each other in distress. McPherson’s play begins in abject misery for his characters. Sharky appears as a complete loser in his fifties, has lost his last job, and has been beaten up in the streets. His older brother Richard, recently blinded in a stupid accident, is always drunk and has a fiery temper. His friend Ivan never seems to have a clear mind, and is always on the lookout for “poteen,” the infamous Irish whiskey. Nicky might pride himself on his car and girlfriend (both of which used to belong to Sharky), and his sense of responsibility, but he is in no better condition than the rest. He constantly has to pretend about how well-off he is and what expensive clothes he dons, which of course, is not obvious to anyone. Each of them have been through the rugged journey of life, and at least at the beginning of the play, seem to be in the same boat with Lockhart. Actually, with his affluent looks, Lockhart appears to be better off than they are. But appearances can indeed be deceiving, as at the end of the play, Lockhart tells Richard and the rest, “I want what you fellas have. ... Peace of mind” (101). Richard and Ivan burst out laughing as they cannot understand what he is talking about. But when Lockhart leaves the room, he is out again on his journey, whereas for at least Richard and Sharky, a part of their voyage has been accomplished. They may not have reached heaven, but without knowing what he has done, Richard has helped his brother from the clutches of the Devil. They have found companionship in each other. Both Sharky and Richard acknowledge their feelings for each other and that realization itself is like a homecoming and a new beginning.

The theme of the journey is further explored by McPherson in his use of the setting which is very much like a ship, the entrance to the house being above. The way the characters are always drinking, cursing, and swaying while moving also suggests a journey on board a ship. The use of the sacred heart as a lighting device plays a central role as in the beginning and throughout the play it continuously flickers. But as soon as Lockhart goes out of the house it blinks on. Moreover, the first light of dawn also streams into the room. Using light as a symbolic device, McPherson creates an atmosphere where it comes to signify the enlightenment of dark souls. In one of his interviews McPherson explicates the intricate device:

The journey of *The Seafarer* was a long one for me. There’s this monument in Ireland, not very big, a 5,000-year-old tomb called Newgrange. It’s got a long tunnel with a little hole in the middle in it, and on the [winter solstice] each year, the sun shines

directly down that chamber and lights it up – on the darkest day of the year. That image was mind-blowing to me – so simple, spiritual, amazing. I wanted to write a play that had that moment. ... that darkest moment, darkest day of the year, where at the end the light comes in. (Csencsitz 39)

Using the Devil or Lockhart as the dark force of nature, the playwright attempts to connect to the long lost family and country roots of the Irish tradition. In an age of “demythologizing” Ireland he tends to retain the traditions. Whereas the contemporary playwrights like Marina Carr and Martin MacDonagh focus on the dysfunctional relationships among family members as a statement on the estranged, disoriented state of Ireland and the modern world, McPherson uses similar materials to evoke a romantic and soul-searching vision where anything is possible. In that regard, he indeed is the kindred spirit of the Anglo-Saxon poet of *The Seafarer*.

Colin Ireland would like to believe that the Old English text “derives much of its power and appeal from its apparent realism and emotional intensity” (156). He also thinks that the poet of *The Seafarer* was very much aware of the metaphor that equates life with a *sæfor*, or sea journey, and therefore, full of “tumult of waves” (156). In his understanding of life and the Irish tradition, Conor McPherson employs these techniques. Set in a modern time, his play presents the very realistic atmosphere of a modern Irish household of two brothers, and until the appearance of Mr. Lockhart, everything seems ordinary and orderly. Even with Mr. Lockhart there is no supernatural or unreal incident involved. Though he claims to be the Devil, throughout the play Mr. Lockhart does nothing strange or supernatural, and yet both Sharky and the audience come to believe his claim of being the Devil. Putting together the very old and modern elements McPherson thus produces a magnificent piece which captures the Anglo-Saxon and Irish spirit together in a modern secular world.

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