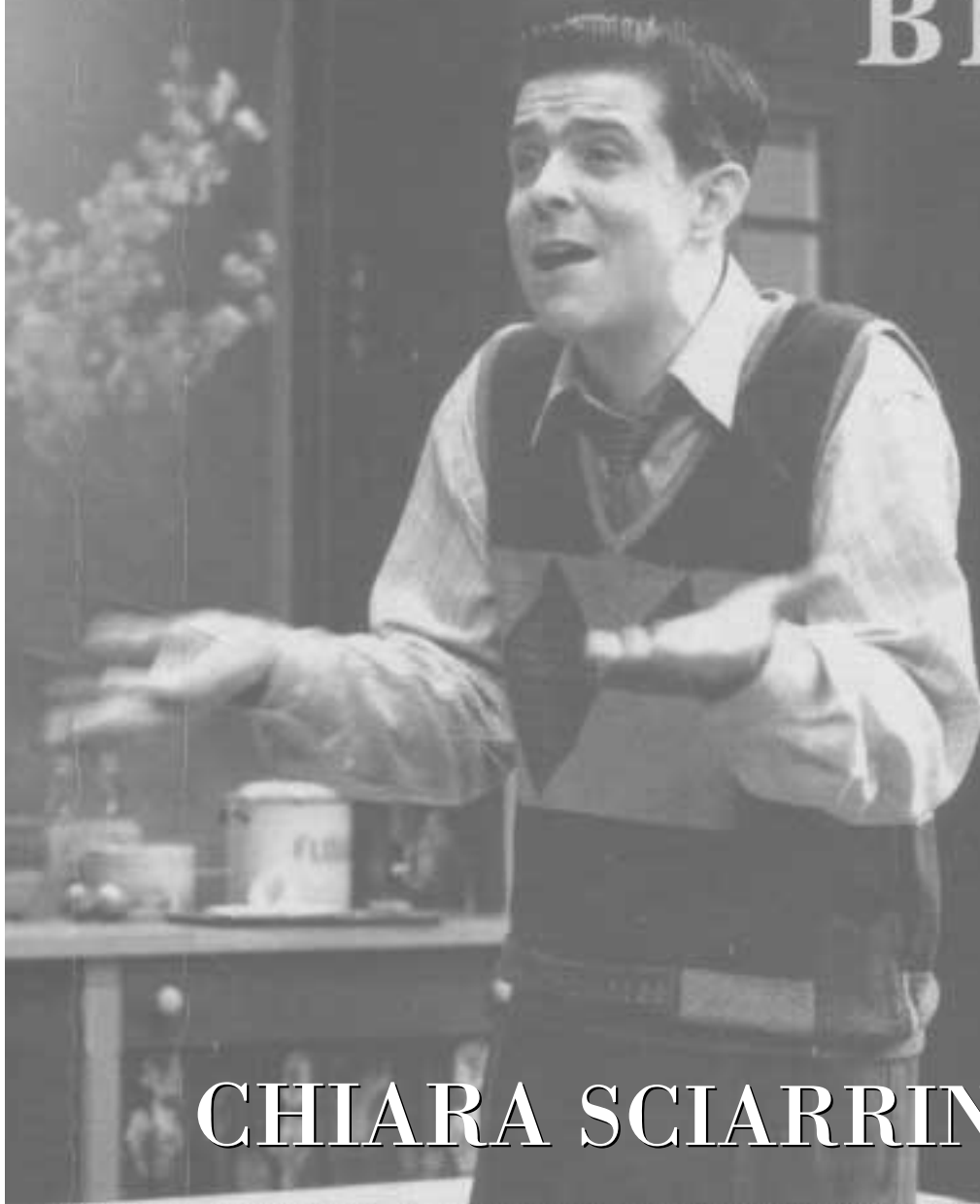


# KEVIN'S BED



CHIARA SCIARRINO

**A Stranger in Kevin's Bed:  
the Construction of a Literary Stereotype**

*She walked in the Via Maria, dragging with her the jungle of her nightmare. Through it tourists drove their cars...guides held coloured umbrellas above their heads, stall-holders sold replicas of the leaning tower. The sun hung like a furnace...she turned into the Piazza Dante. Hullo, hullo, a man said, walking with her. Bellissima...The hand that was not gripping her arm reached out and touched her breast. 'Bellissima' he said...Heavy Italian women, all dressed in black, sat in a line opposite to her discerning her distress.*

William Trevor, *Other People's Worlds*

This is the way the Irish writer William Trevor (1928-) portrays some Italians met by the protagonist of his short story in a nightmarish walking tour of Pisa.

The characterisation of the man with something strange on his eye and of the local women all dressed in black, cold and reluctant to welcome Julia who has all the qualities and features of a foreigner, avails itself of all the elements of the cultural stereotype, combined with an emotional, poetic and literary participation, on the part of the narrator, for the condition of 'outsider' of his character.

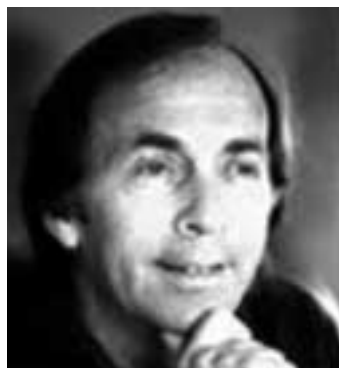
William Trevor's short story is only one of the many examples of characterisation of the image of the Italian in Anglo-Irish literature.

Before becoming a literary theme, the theme of the foreigner has been and is an existential condition, a role that is assumed in particular circumstances by the person who visits a country and a community different from his/her own and who finds himself/herself entering into relations with the members of that community; coming up against social institutions, political and jurisdictional structures, customs and cultural habits different from his/her own. The foreigner is, before becoming a literary character, a projection deeply involved in the processes of construction of the identity of people, an image which is loaded with symbolic and ideological values.

The role of literature, within the context of this activity of creation and diffusion of cultural images and stereotypes, has often been twofold and sometimes even contradictory: while unfolding its own means to dismantle

from within those traits of ideological rigidity, it has also contributed in building up those images in a direct and decided way, in underlying and reinforcing the characteristics which are 'other' and differentiating.

The latter seems to apply to Maria – a woman from Italy – one of the characters that features in Bernard Farrell's sixteenth play *Kevin's Bed*<sup>1</sup>.



Constructed on the world of middle-class Dubliners and with an oversimplified and fragmented view to elsewhere, the play opens up the question not as to whether the description of the Italian is true, but how it has been conceived and how it has become recognisable. What audience is the author addressing to? Why is it important for him to make this point? How does the author attempt to convince the reader of the validity of his claim?

Opened in the Abbey Theatre in April 1998, *Kevin's Bed* is the story – set in the early seventies – of the weak and undecided character Kevin.

Early in the play, he suggests to his parents, the bad-tempered dad Dan and the pretentious mum Doris Gillespie, that having entered the house from the back door may annoy someone living in the house who could 'walk in and catch us' (Farrell 13). He seems almost scared about what this person might think and say, so he asks them to 'go back around and knock on the front door' (Farrell 13).

Little by little, from what Doris and her twenty-four-year old pregnant granddaughter Cecily say, we realise that it is Kevin's Italian wife, Maria, who they and Kevin refer to. While they pointlessly argue about which door to come in by, what to make Maria believe and when they were supposed to arrive, she is having a 'soak' in the bathroom, upstairs. All their talking has the natural consequence of making them feel the presence of the woman, as if her voice echoed all along with a deafening sound which they unwillingly endure. It seems that Cecily's first concern is to make things perfect to ensure that nothing can upset her mother.

Earlier, as Dan closes the kitchen door, leaving Kevin 'remembering', we go back to twenty-five years before, during his parents' silver anniversary celebrations, a time when the optimism, the hopes and expectations of each one of the characters were still fervent. Against the background of a

‘light...more natural within the room’, we find a younger Kevin – of twenty-two years of age – who is ‘unsure/nervous as ever’; John, his brother, more confident and lively, with a post of responsibility in a school and his girlfriend, Betty.

We learn that Kevin has just come back from Rome where he studied at the Irish College. Beyond his decision to come back, there is not only his lack of interest in religious matters, but also something else that he tries to conceal and about which his family, family’s friends and audience will know only later and little by little. The truth will then be avoided, denied or modified according to the circumstances, giving rise to side-splitting scenes, as for example when Kevin’s brother suggests that he goes back to the party room to show that he is a free man ‘back in circulation and raring to go’ (Farrell 20), which in fact makes us laugh when we think about what Kevin will almost immediately after and unwillingly reveal to him: a woman is coming, a woman from Italy: ‘**John:** An Italian? And where’s she coming from? **Kevin** (*Annoyed*) Where do Italians usually come from? Italy! Rome’ (Farrell 21). John seems suspicious and asks what she is coming for, commenting: ‘Don’t tell me this is some young wan you had in Italy when we all thought you were studying for the priesthood?’<sup>2</sup>.

At this point Kevin could have let the cat out of the bag but his weakness and cowardice and the specific allusion to the fact that he could have lied during all the time spent in Italy, makes him say the first thing that comes to his mind which he tries to assume and accept with a firm tone: ‘No, no for God’s sake, she’s a nun’<sup>3</sup> (Farrell 21)

Farrell’s religious motif has not the mere practical justification of showing through a comedy the ‘underlying desperation of characters whose lives have made a wrong turning’. It well fits and is well grounded within the Irish cultural background of the nineteen forties.

As two main studies on Ireland of those days specify, ‘Catholicism was overwhelmingly the majority creed’; ‘the Church became a kind of surrogate State, the only organised and institutionalised expression of nationality.’<sup>4</sup>

Even though for some Irishmen ‘the guardian of the faith’ – as the Catholic Church was defined in article 44 of Éamon de Valera’s 1937 constitution – was ‘their strongest link with the world overseas’, it was still deeply conservative, somehow contributing to render Dublin ‘an odd and, in many respects, unhappy place’, narrow-minded and ‘rigorist on morality.’<sup>5</sup>

In a society where faith and culture were so intimately intertwined, where

Catholicism was seen as ‘a nationality as much as a religion [...] a matter of public identity rather than of private faith’, such places as Assisi and Rome became favourite destinations for real and such improvised pilgrims as the playwright Brendan Behan and his friend Anthony Cronin and residences for would-be priests.

What Irish intellectuals realised once in Rome was that apart from having the headquarters of the Vatican City, it offered a different kind of religiosity, a more liberal one which lived together with a counterpart made of ‘atheists, socialists, communists, and simple agnostics’.

\* \* \*

The first thing that worries Kevin is not to disappoint his parents and indeed, the lie has the merit of turning his mother’s indifference into a kinder, more considered attitude. His father, on the other hand, does not seem to fall for it: being more realistic and reluctant to change his mind about his son<sup>6</sup>, he asks him if what he’s been told corresponds to the truth and what is the reason for her visit. There follows a comic scene where Kevin explains to his father that the nun won’t ‘be saying anything...because she can’t speak English...she only speaks Italian...she is Italian’<sup>7</sup>.

The woman, as we were told, comes from Rome and her name is obviously Maria<sup>8</sup>.

No sooner has Kevin finished speaking to his father that he finds himself involved in the difficult task of avoiding Betty’s advances: referring to his decision to leave the priesthood and maliciously alluding to a day spent together at Kevin’s Bed, a spot in Glendalough, she takes a step forward and kisses him, but she will soon have to draw back after being told by John that Kevin will probably go back to Rome and become a priest.

News about the nun’s arrival creates even more havoc and arouses even more curiosity as Doris starts wandering about, to see what kind of religious objects she can put in the nun’s room whilst it is soon made clear the woman does not really look like a nun as she is not wearing the religious habit. An explanation, which seems quite reasonable to the credulous and religious Doris, will soon be given: ‘since Vatican II things have changed also for nuns’<sup>9</sup>: no matter what the nun wears, how she behaves, how ‘lovely-looking’ and ‘young-looking’ she is (as Doris ironically and absurdly remarks), she remains always and convincingly enough a nun to her. It will be her friend

Pauline's hazardous questions and comments that will give a more real picture of what kind of person the Italian woman really is.

Dan can't make head or tail of Kevin's story: a nun 'singing, gallaring, yapping' is a complete nonsense and to him she will always remain a complete stranger 'roaring and shouting and ordering people around, when she's not frightening the life out of everyone – and that voice of her's would strip paint off the wall.'<sup>10</sup>: all terms that well indicate how rude and vulgar and very outspoken he is<sup>11</sup>.

It is then only towards the end of the first scene that the nun makes her entry: '*Doris has come in from the back door. She carries a suitcase. Behind her is a twenty-one year old Italian woman*'<sup>12</sup> of whom Doris can only grasp the name, Maria. The stage directions do not say anything about the way the girl is dressed, but the audience on the stage gets hold of the idea that it is not a nun they have in front of them as soon as they see her with her shortish skirt and white tight shirt, and observe her putting '*her hands to his [Kevin] face*' and saying '*(Sincerely) Ciao Kevin, che bello rivederti*'<sup>13</sup>.

In the second act we go back to the present. Kevin is 47 again. We can see him standing, looking outside the window and as the stage directions point out 'remembering'; the atmosphere is dull, obscure, of 'abnormal lighting and darkness', a brief prelude to what will happen to the Gillespie. Indeed we return to the silver wedding anniversary day again. If we left the scene with Maria just arrived from the airport, this one opens with an explicit reference to her in the form of a question made by John about her "nature". He exclaims: 'Sister Maria is a great hit, Ma delighted to have A Nun in the house while The Nun is sitting there singing *Arrivederci Roma*'<sup>14</sup> with Betty on the piano' and asks 'what the hell is she, Kevin? ...Sister shagging Maria – and I want this straight and I want it now – is she really a nun, like a real nun, is she?'. Kevin does not know what to answer, the simplest thing that



comes to his mind is to answer with another question: ‘Why, did she say she isn’t?’ he asks him without even thinking that Maria cannot say a word of English<sup>15</sup>. It will soon be explained by Kevin that he has asked the girl, whom he met in Naples during a holiday, to pretend to be a nun so that his parents’ anniversary wouldn’t be spoiled. He also specifies that ‘all [he] did was just to speak to her and since then she’s never left [him] alone, phone calls and letters and she got [his] address from Tadgh – and she insisted on coming but, the thing is, she’ll be gone soon, tomorrow’, which is far from being the complete truth, but which looks convincing enough as to make his brother play along with him<sup>16</sup>: ‘we’ll stick to the nun story for now – she’s a nun and she comes from Rome, not from Naples’<sup>17</sup>.

Insisting on the importance of the provenance of the nun seems to be an important detail not to be missed from the telling of her story as if whoever is listening or watching knew only the city of Rome or would consider Rome the best place for a religious person to come from or to live. The construction, the story line of the play – with almost all the characters not knowing anything about Italy or the Italian language<sup>18</sup> – is such as to permit the playwright to say, to make up whatever he wants resulting in hilarious scenes and untruthful statements about Italy at the same time<sup>19</sup>.

Maria comes in: her brief ‘Scusate il disturbo’<sup>20</sup> is long enough as to make her listeners grasp – or rather claim to – the right intonation/way of pronouncing words and speaking of Italians. Indeed, what Doris does is to try to adjust her way of speaking English to what she thinks it is the Italian way, so that she will render it more comprehensible to Maria. The stage directions indicate: ‘**Doris** (*In a similar accent*) Ah, Sister, come-a-in, come-a-in, there-a is something you-a want, yes?’<sup>21</sup>; and a little further: ‘**Doris**: Kevin, does Sister want the toilet? (*To Maria in an accent*) Toileta? Lav-a-tory?’<sup>22</sup> or ‘Now sister, I’ll leave you here with Kevin. (*In an accent*) With Kev-in. Me go. You stay. And no disturb. Okay’<sup>23</sup>, which sounds more like a mockery instead of an attempt to help the woman.

Can Bernard Farrell’s assertion<sup>24</sup> of Pauline’s stupidity and conformity, intended as a plausible reason for her making a fool of Maria, also be applied to Doris and to the other characters?<sup>25</sup>

As far as Maria is concerned, she does not make any effort to try to understand or to respond: she does not pay too much attention to Doris as she is more interested in being alone with Kevin to ask him to clarify the situation. The two of them have a brief conversation, during which Maria is



asked to keep the secret until the following day and after which she leaves Kevin free to translate, for his parents, what she has just said.

But the truth will soon out as Maria will have to affirm it with all her strength against Betty's claims that Kevin doesn't like women. Interrupted by Maria, Betty assails her, '*furiously*' asking her to shut up, to go back to Italy and calling Kevin a homosexual. Enraged, Maria proudly shouts that she is 'incinta', i.e. pregnant and that they will soon have a family.

After Betty, it will be John, then Dan and finally Doris – with the help of her mother<sup>26</sup> – to know the truth. In a state of disappointment, Doris asks John to promise her that he will stay and live in the house and will not let strangers in. Again the words used to refer to Maria and later on to her relatives, do not have positive connotations, the word 'strangers' epitomizing the fact Maria is a stranger not only because she comes from a different country but also because she is from outside the family.

Neither Doris nor Dan, in fact, will make any attempt to conform their tastes, their habits, be they culinary<sup>27</sup> or related to drinking<sup>28</sup>, to the ones proposed by Maria<sup>29</sup>: 'Would it be too much to ask for some tea and a few ordinary sandwiches...instead of what she has in there'<sup>30</sup>, asks Doris to her son, not realizing, together with the playwright, that it is not "true" Italian food they have been offered, but a list of snacks<sup>31</sup> accommodated to suit Irish tastes.

When talking about Maria's relatives who 'come and not go – with their singing and their shouting and their cooking and their taking over the place...in case her ladyship was lonely over here'<sup>32</sup>, Doris draws a dividing line between herself and them, i.e. the 'strangers'.

With the end of Act One and the beginning of Act Two we go back to the present with Cecily coming into the kitchen and complaining with her dad about not having heard and answered the doorbell. Cecily is similar to her mother in the way she addresses Kevin, explicitly giving instructions to him: 'But Grandma said you're to answer the door...and show them in here and get the party going. Quick. (*goes*) **Kevin**: 'In here? Right (*Looks around*) Better do it so', which confirms once more how little Kevin has changed, how weak he has remained throughout these years. Bernard Farrell says on the subject:

I think that would be the motif of the play...that the mistakes that you make in life...you pay for them there is no going back...I don't think it will [change much for Kevin]...I don't think people actually





change...the offsetting I think is that arrogant people remain arrogant, bullies remain bullies, weak people remain weak people...the future for him is pretty bleak, you know, I think the future for all of them is very bleak.<sup>33</sup>

Doris and Dan's attitude towards Maria will not undergo any change even when they know she's going to leave the house to them for the following four months – that is the months the sick Doris has left - and if there is any change, it is only on the surface: 'only because she's going to leave the house' her accent becomes 'lovely, musical...that's why operas is always sung in Italian'<sup>34</sup> admits Dan, whose insincerity stands out against Maria's kindness, goodness of heart and sense of compassion<sup>35</sup>.

Italy and Italians are referred to again and again during the second part of the play. To take a few examples one could consider Doris's reference to the fact that her grandchildren's rates at school are paid by Maria's relatives<sup>36</sup>; Cecily imagining that 'The poor thing – the baby she is expecting – would be cuddled to death. You know Italians!'<sup>37</sup>; Dan's thought about 'Cecily surrounded by the baby-lovers in Naples'<sup>38</sup>. And Kevin also refers to Italians as if they were people to be avoided when underlining that there will not be Italians in the house for the following four months.

The second act gives the playwright a great opportunity to indulge in the characterisation of Maria, who, as the stage directions specify, is now '45, very well-dressed and attractive. Slightly highly strung. She has an accent, but generally speaks good English'<sup>39</sup>. Of her we are given the stereotypical image of the Italian who cuddles very warmly, kisses, speaks in a loud voice, gives orders<sup>40</sup>, gestures, quickly walks, always on the phone with her relatives in Italy, always angry<sup>41</sup>, outspoken and emotional: all attributes that are not always negative but that appear as such, since she is saddled with them, each time, by the different characters and by the playwright himself. Kevin, for instance, does not hide that: '(Coldly)...she's good at that...all her family are like that – emotional – they all cry at the slightest thing: birthdays, anniversaries, anything'<sup>42</sup>. As far as Doris and Dan are concerned, their view does not diverge from their son's, as when, after having talked on the phone with Maria's parents, they both admit: 'They're all crying their eyes out over there' and, referring more specifically to Maria's father: 'he burst out crying and put the phone down'<sup>43</sup>.

*There is no room for Maria to have tender moments with her children and very rare are the ones when she gives signs of affection towards her husband. Farrell explains:*

in the first act of the play she has to be seen to be lovely and tender towards him whereas in the second act of the play there is not many [occasions]...because the play is not about Maria...she has to be seen as the person who now runs the house...she has to take control of the house...because nobody does it ...the only person who actually stayed and ordered the house is her...she is the strongest person in it, therefore by the very nature of that, she has to be seen...maybe she is always slightly angry because she's dealing with this family...it's a portrayal of how strong she is...I think the Irish people in the family are the ones who say that she is always angry but I mean that's the reed of somebody who is actually very strong.<sup>44</sup>

*It is only towards the very end of the play that Maria will be touched up to mark a change in her and in the others' life: with a 'gentler' mood she orders the kitchen and says goodbye to Kevin, before leaving for Italy with her daughter, and letting Doris and Dan enjoy the house<sup>45</sup>.*

Some questions, though, still remain to be answered: a brief look at the text will underline the fact that the playwright seems to have totally forgotten or avoided checking the spelling of the Italian words, the grammar and even people's names. How can he account for all the grammatical mistakes in English and, absurdly enough, in Italian made by Maria?

Given that Maria has spent twenty-five years in Ireland where she now works as a translator, it is inadmissible that she cannot remember essential rules as adding the 's' to the third person singular of verbs, forming the imperative, using the present instead of the past tense or instead of the future tense<sup>46</sup>. On the contrary, the impression is that she is quite able to swear or to correctly express her anger<sup>47</sup>. When asked for more details about this particular point, Farrell did actually give vague, hesitant answers:

You're right, I agree with you, maybe she kind of sleeps into misusing English when she is angry, but she should speak reasonable English...I think it's a fair enough point. I don't know what she does as a

translator...I think it's a fair point...I think she should speak better I don't think she speaks terribly bad English...she speaks reasonable English...her grammar might be off every now and then merely to take it in a purely theatrical sense she's going from speaking no English to speaking English...but I think this is perfectly understandable just because somebody lives for twenty five years in a place it doesn't mean that somebody has to have fluent language because Maria's first language is still Italian<sup>48</sup>.

As for the mistakes of Italian he is, as he admits, not surprised, blaming in a way – with a certain couldn't-care-less attitude – the actresses that played Maria's role, who each time changed the words. Would that also mean forgetting accents<sup>49</sup> and anglicise Italian terms? He admits: 'I'm sure there are mistakes...my Italian is so bad...so I trusted them'<sup>50</sup>.

Bernard Farrell's justification for having created – whether he liked it or not – a literary stereotype, like Maria, underlines contradictions at the core of his mind: indeed if from one side he claims that it is a specific family and a specific Italian woman he's dealing with<sup>51</sup>, from the other he falls into generalisations about some traits common to the Irish and to Italian people<sup>52</sup> and in simplistic discourses about the Irish audience's reactions to plays with Irish and foreign characters. And if he claims that the only reason for choosing an Italian was that the Irish College was in Rome and that it was more likely for Kevin to meet a woman from the place rather than from any other country, he seems to have indulged too much in the choice of words, attributes that contribute to the creation of a 'negative' character, angry rather than strong, as he tried to put it, till the point of resulting ill-mannered; indifferent rather than affectionate, hysteric rather than simply emotional and not so lonely as the somewhat stereotypical image of Spanish and Germans in his *Canaries*<sup>53</sup> clearly shows.

A microcosmic picture of the conservative thinking that characterised Irish society from the nineteen forties until the nineteen eighties, the play can only be appreciated insofar as it is seen as a mere entertaining and all-subjective representation of one Italian character.

It would be interesting to compare this play to the recently published *Merchant Prince* (2006) by Cork writer Thomas McCarthy<sup>54</sup> and see in what way it can fit into what is becoming a rich corpus of prejudiced, caricatured and stereotyped portraits of Italians made by Irish writers.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Farrell, Bernard. *Kevin's Bed*, Cork: Mercier Press, 1999.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 21. Despite the fact that John seems the most affectionate, caring towards his parents, it will be him to disappoint them the most. Though it is never said in the play what specific crime he committed, given that he committed it – it is only suggested that it was something to do with a student at school -, what he did, obliged him and his parents to leave the town because of all the disgrace brought to his family.
- <sup>3</sup> Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- <sup>4</sup> Fallon, Brian, *An Age of Innocence, Irish Culture 1930-1960*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999, p. 184; O'Toole, Fintan, *Black Hole, the Disappearance of Ireland, Green Card*, Dublin: New Island Books, 1994, p. 123.
- <sup>5</sup> This was also due to neutrality during Second World War. See Cronin, Anthony, *Dead as Doornails*, Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1999, p. 8; Fuller, Louise, *Irish Catholicism since 1950. The Undoing of a Culture*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2002; Hussey, Gemma, *Ireland Today. Anatomy of a Changing State*, London: Penguin Books, 1995; Lee, J. J., *Ireland 1912-1985*, Cambridge: CUP, 1989.
- <sup>6</sup> 'All his life he's had us like headless chickens, not knowing what he was going to do next...he was never sure about anything!' Ibid., p. 32.
- <sup>7</sup> 'I suppose that is a reasonable concept in a way...you know if I find a Portuguese person who can't speak English I find it perfectly natural...I think the order of that dialogue is important...that's actually true because Maria can't speak English...you have to go back twenty-five years ago when this happened and if you take the Irish experience twenty five years ago very few people could speak a foreign language...they would go on holiday but they wouldn't speak the language', claims Farrell, trying to give a plausible justification to one of a number of simplifying statements about Italy, being Italian and speaking Italian and English. One wouldn't certainly expect from an English-speaking person to be able/be willing to speak a foreign language in the same way one would expect from a non-native speaker of English to speak English.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Why not?' Farrell replies 'the only reason was that Maria seemed to me a very Italian name...and also it is not a very complicated name...if her name was Chiara...every Irish person would say...who is coming? And sister Chiara does not sound as immediate as sister Maria...so people would just take it in and accept it', personal Interview, April 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 47. Given that the Second Vatican Council helped to revitalise and modernise the Church, it does not seem convincing enough to claim or permit such liberties to a holy woman. This is not the only example of a clue, which seems to be thrown there just to fill in the blank spaces of the various characters' roles.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> When for instance he finds out that Maria is pregnant he addresses Kevin and says 'all I want, on this day of all days, is to make sure that your mother hears not the slightest whisper about this...because if she does, it won't be a clatter above the head you'll get, it'll be the toe of my boot into a place that'll make double-sure that this unfortunate baby won't be plagued by any brothers and sisters. Am I making myself clear?' *Ibid.* page 66. About the character Farrell says: 'Dan is most like all Dubliners, he is very sarcastic...impolite...rude of his age...but look at the way he loves Doris...he is devastated if anything happens to her and he's always telling Kevin not to upset Doris...so you see the compassion...but he is terribly rude to people...the balance is there...we know that his legs hurt...everybody behaves like that when is under pressure' Personal interview, April 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48. 'Hello, Kevin – how very nice to meet you again'. An appendix of Italian translation is at the back of the text. Despite the fact that there are whole sections of the script written in Italian the audience seems not to have had problems in understanding what was going on, except for the scene where Maria reveals to be 'incinta', that is pregnant.

<sup>14</sup> "Sister" Maria also seems to ignore such songs as *Panis Angelicus*, which should be part of her cultural background and education as a would-be nun.

<sup>15</sup> 'No one knows what the blazes she's saying – she's talking non-stop gobbledegook in there' cries out John. *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Also because it seems the easiest solution and will prevent the party from being spoiled and ensure that Kevin does not cut a poor figure in front of the guests and friends of the family.

<sup>17</sup> Farrell, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-2. It really seems that the playwright delights in playing with words, names of places and things in general, especially when it's Kevin's turn to speak. On the subject he answered: 'In the first instance he says she comes from Rome, where the Irish College also is, he then switches to the truth, which is Naples, but when his father asks him the question, he tries to give him the best spin on it so that he won't be angry and since he knows that he likes the song *Come Back to Sorrento* he switches to Sorrento. This gives an idea of his complex nature: he will tell you what you want to hear, that's what gets him into trouble, that's the

*modus operandi* of a very weak person...“What do they want to hear?” And he is like that with Betty as well, and with John...but he needs to get John on his side and he’s like that with his father...when his father says to him “Is she a nun or is she not a nun?” He says: “Suppose I’d say she’s a postulant”...so that’s why he names different cities...to please’, personal interview, April 2000.

<sup>18</sup> As for example when Doris admits she hasn’t the slightest idea of how ‘lavatory’ is said in Italian and guesses that it could well be the same word.

<sup>19</sup> Another example is given by John in the form of a rectification of Betty’s impression about Maria: ‘(Defending) No, no, Italians always seem annoyed – it’s the way always speak. Right, we all heard what she said – so all back in – Ma, Da, Mrs Boylan, Betty’. Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54. ‘Forgive me for disturbing you’.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Pauline does that too, speaks English very slowly as if Maria doesn’t understand what she is saying that shows how uniformed Pauline is...that’s not saying anything about Maria that’s saying how silly Pauline is.’ Personal interview, April 2000.

<sup>25</sup> If it were so, then all the characters would fall into that category.

<sup>26</sup> Confined to her upstairs room, the grandmother can listen to the family’s kitchen conversations through a dumb waiter.

<sup>27</sup> ‘That’s for the generation...you have no idea of how far pizzas came to Dublin...probably twenty years ago people would never hear of pizza so that would be that generation but everybody else would eat Italian food...you don’t hear Betty saying “I hate Italian food”...it’s a generation thing, because really the play is about three generations...it’s the attitude of Dan and Doris towards Maria being pregnant...it’s Maria’s attitude towards being pregnant is no problem you know but then you get Cecily who is today’s generation and who is actually terribly proud of being pregnant and there is no sign of the father so really it makes statements about the changes in Ireland.’ Personal interview, April 2000.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Don’t drink any of their wine. They send us over the odd bottle at Christmas – three months later your stomach is still reminding you’ complains Dan. Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 75. ‘Pity about their bloody wine. There’s ten more bottles of this stuff to be got rid of’ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> No chance is given to her to express her dislike of Irish food.

- <sup>30</sup> Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
- <sup>31</sup> ‘Tea and sandwiches?! In there, I put all kinds of drinks, with Mozzarella crostini, marinated anchovies, squid salad, garlic bruschetta, ricotta cheese-cake, peperronata, pistachios – and they want tea and sandwiches!’ exclaims Maria. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- <sup>33</sup> Personal interview, April 2000.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115. ‘But,’ adds Farrell, ‘they don’t have to lie to her, I mean they don’t particularly like her, they can do nothing about that...Betty likes her instead’ Personal Interview, April 2000.
- <sup>35</sup> ‘when I told my parents they cry so much and they say that, for four months, your mother will stay here, in this house, her house’ confesses Maria. Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
- <sup>36</sup> ‘Oh, the money pours in from Italy for their little pet’, *ibid.* p. 75. It sounds like a remark on the way Italians spoil their children.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- <sup>40</sup> ‘You come back for just one day and he does this to you? All go to the morning-room, all now for the party’. Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 78; ‘(Angrily) Oh, For God’s Sake – Kevin! Why are you still in here?’ *Ibid.* page 90; ‘So stupid, Kevin – everybody inside being happy and you out there. Dan you come in’ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>41</sup> The stage directions specify this trait several times: ‘(Suddenly angry)’ *Ibid.*, p. 77; ‘(Angrily)’ *Ibid.*, p. 80; ‘(Furiously) (Angrily)’ *Ibid.*, p. 90; ‘(To Doris, suddenly angry)’ *Ibid.*, p. 104; ‘(Angrily)’ *Ibid.*, p. 106; ‘(Maria goes angrily)’ *Ibid.*, p. 108; ‘(Angrily takes them out)’ *Ibid.*, p. 114; ‘(Suddenly angry...)’ *Ibid.*, p. 114; ‘(Maria has gone, angrily slamming the door)’ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-9.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-5.
- <sup>44</sup> Personal interview, April 2000. Farrell also admitted that the actresses who played the role of Maria – who are Italians – had similar problems interpreting the role since they found the character too harsh, too much angry, questioning him about the significance of certain choices, but ‘you would explain the situation with “she couldn’t be but angry because from the very beginning of the second act she is organising the party and everybody is in the kitchen so every time she walks in the door she has to tell people to go to the other room”...they are not doing what she says that’s why she keeps saying it’

- <sup>45</sup> It will soon turn out that this is a lie made up by Dan to prove his son Kevin that he was not the only one 'who could make up stories'.
- <sup>46</sup> If Paulo sounds like a Spanish name, Stephano, the name of Maria's brother, appears like a mixture of Italian and English. 'Maria: You don't know Italian – she *speak* a little English', Ibid., p. 103; 'the way she want it...' Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 107. 'Ok Papa you now speak a Dan...Now Dan you speak to Papa your poem', Ibid., p. 104. 'Dan, you *finish* your poem for Papa?' Ibid., p. 105; 'I only tell my mother and my father', Ibid., p. 106; 'because when I told my parents they *cry* so much and they *say* that, for four months, your mother will stay here, in this house' *ibid.* p. 107; 'Yes, until my brother Enrico *fix* it' Ibid., p. 91. 'And for that time, I *go* to Mama and Papa in Napoli and Cecily too and her baby *is* born in Napoli' Ibid., p. 107; 'It is okay – do not worry, I *explain*' Ibid., p. 105.
- <sup>47</sup> 'For God's sake, Kevin – why are you hiding in here with everybody?' Ibid., p. 103.
- <sup>48</sup> Personal interview, April 2000.
- <sup>49</sup> One of the first things that a student of Italian learns is the distinction between 'e' which is the conjunction 'and' and 'e'' (with the accent) which is the third person singular of the verb 'to be'. Such a mistake appears on the text several times, as for example in '(*Into phone*) Ciao mamma – c'*e* Doris qui, *e* contentissima e si diverte e non *e* preoccupata perche non lo sa...ti prego parlale di qualcosa di bello e poi Dan *recitera* la poesia per Papa' where all the words in bracket lack an accent ['Hello, Mama – I have Doris here – she is very happy and she's enjoying herself and she is not worried because she does not know...please talk to her now about happy things and then Dan will say his poem for Papa.'] Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
- <sup>50</sup> Personal interview, April 2000.
- <sup>51</sup> 'This play is just looking at this particular Irish family in the same way as this play is looking at this particular Italian girl...it is not looking at Italians no more than the family in the play is looking at Irish people it is picking its characters very carefully'. Personal interview, April 2000.
- <sup>52</sup> He adds 'the play is very much critical of the Irish than it is of the Italians by any sense of the imagination the Irish people in the play are incredibly stupid...Irish people would be much more offended by what the play says about the Irish and the only thing that stopped them attacking me is because they know it is true...now the opposite to that I think Irish people by their very nature are much more cunning, they're sly and they tell lies and the reason they're like that is because Ireland is a postcolonial country and they came out of being colonised because they were able to tell lies and if you go back to Irish history you know it's a history of deceits and



lies because were occupied by a foreign country and because we have to survive and that's the way Irish people seem so...I don't think this is giving orders, I must say...I think the Italians and sort of Mediterranean people are inclined to gesture more and they do speak louder and they are more passionate you know in the way they express affection and anger and disgust. And all those things they are much more passionate'. Personal Interview, April 2000.

<sup>53</sup> Farrell, B., *Canaries*, Dublin: Co-op Books, 1980. The play is about an Irish family on holiday in the Canary Islands where they meet Spanish and Germans.

<sup>54</sup> The novel is about a young man from Cork's merchant class who moves to Rome to study for the priesthood in the Irish College. Set in the eighteenth century, it tells the story of the boy's vocation being severely tested as he finds himself caught up in the extravagance of Rome's upper-class society.



142 BIANCA

