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"Defensive Flippancy": Play, Disorientation, and Moral Action

in Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City*

Hannah Brooke Azar

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“Defensive Flippancy”: Play, Disorientation, and Moral Action
in Brian Friel’s *The Freedom of the City*

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Master of Arts

When Brian Friel’s play *The Freedom of the City* premiered in 1973, just a year after the events of Bloody Sunday, it was met with harsh criticism and called a work of propaganda. In the play, three peaceful protestors flee a civil rights demonstration turned violent and end up trapped inside the Guildhall in Derry, Northern Ireland. By the end of the play, they are shot dead. These three protestors, disoriented by violence as well as the aftereffects of life-long poverty, on the surface are not emblems of morality. However, this thesis employs Ami Harbin’s theorization of disorientation and moral action to challenge traditional virtue ethics and showcase that even in the midst of all-encompassing disorientation, moral action can easily emerge, even from the most unexpected person. Specifically, I look at the character Skinner, a flippant hooligan who leads the other trapped protestors through a series of games ultimately meant to encourage them to embrace their disorientation like he has. Within Friel’s drama, accepting and embracing disorientation as opposed to fighting it, I conclude, is what frees one from the bounds of disorientation, and in this case, allows a person to more fully perpetuate moral action.

Keywords: Brin Friel, Northern Ireland, The Troubles, Ami Harbin, moral action, virtue ethics, disorientation, play, games, Bloody Sunday

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"Defensive Flippancy": Play, Disorientation, and Moral Action in Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City*

In the moments after three Northern Irish civilians take refuge from the violence erupting from a civil rights protest in Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City*, one of them—a young man nicknamed "Skinner"—seems to be overcome by mania. He cackles, "races right round the room," and even "does a somersault across the table" (115). This reaction scares the other two with him and leads to one of them labeling him a "lunatic" (115). However, Skinner has not lost his mind; instead, he has just understood something that his fellow protestors, Lily and Michael, do not yet know: they have "escaped" into the Mayor's parlor within the town's Guildhall, been surrounded by British soldiers, and will eventually pay for their error with their lives. Skinner's reaction signals the beginning of a doomsday playfulness that will surround the trio's interactions for the remainder of the drama.

Skinner's outburst emerges from a series of disorientating experiences—experiences in which an individual "lose[s] one's bearings in relation to others, environments, and life projects" (Harbin xi)—that have led to this moment. The disorientation caused by the chaotic protest is compounded by the trio's poverty, their lack of education, and the more general injustices of "The Troubles"[1] (specifically, Bloody Sunday), which constitute the historical context for the play. Bloody Sunday, or the Bogside Massacre, occurred in Derry/Londonderry[2], Northern Ireland, on 30 January 1972 when British soldiers opened fire on unarmed civilians protesting the internment of 342 individuals suspected of being involved with the Irish Republican Army.

[1] In this paper I am using "The Troubles" to refer to the most common conflict associated with the term. This conflict occurred in Northern Ireland from the 1960s through the 1990s, primarily over the issue of Northern Ireland's political autonomy. The Troubles formally ended with the Good Friday Agreement reached on 10 April 1998.
[2] The conflict over whether to refer to this city as Derry or Londonderry, which is primarily a nationalist versus Unionist issue, is emotional and far from resolved today. In this paper, I follow Friel and his characters in referring to the city as Derry.

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F. C. McGrath claims that *The Freedom of the City* “quite deliberately evokes” the events surrounding Bloody Sunday, but he points out that Friel’s play “makes no attempt to reproduce the[m]” (100). An example of Friel’s divergence from history is his setting of the play in 1970, two years before the real-life massacre. Additionally, the play’s protesters are removed from the political factions of The Troubles, and instead of protesting the internment of IRA members, the citizens in the play are marching for civil rights and for government action to fight poverty, which was severe in Derry at the time. By making these moves, Friel “broaden[s] the perceived concerns of the play,” which allows the drama to act as more than a simple reconstruction of history (Smith 100).

The character of Skinner works to this larger end as well. More than simply an individual character, Skinner represents the “disaffected younger generation in the Bogside” (Parker 56), and he plays a subversive role throughout the text. He shows his intelligence by engaging in destructive behavior in an attempt to destabilize (or even reverse) the hierarchy of power operating in Derry; indeed, William Jent hypothesizes that Skinner is “an unemployed intellectual” (570) who is aware enough to “articulate his experience” with injustice (581). However, many of the other characters in the play only see the chaos Skinner both embraces and creates and fail to recognize the elements of parody at work in his actions. Skinner is, as Christopher Murray calls him, “the [play’s] central consciousness,” because he “both knows what is at stake once he finds himself in the precincts of the enemy and reacts in such a way as to enlighten the audience as to the ‘true’ reality of what happened” (334). The type of enlightenment that Skinner offers is certainly ambiguous. Stephen Watt points out that Skinner’s birth name—Adrian Casimir Fitzgerald—etymologically breaks down to mean destroyer of peace (37-39), and Scott Boltwood goes so far as to imply that Skinner likely was a proponent of

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"paramilitary Republicanism" (110). The complexity of his character defies expectation and allows for a multiplicity of interpretations.

Like Murray, I believe that Skinner is an important "conscience" within *Freedom of the City.* By embracing the disorientation that swarms around him, Skinner becomes a playful, carnivalesque leader who subsequently guides Lily and Michael through a series of game-like experiences while they are in the Guildhall. Skinner's games encourage them to understand and accept their own disorientation—something that Lily manages to do before her death but that Michael resists. This playful behavior, I argue, constitutes a kind of moral action in that by deliberately deciding to guide his companions through their own disorientation, Skinner achieves a greater good. He becomes, in fact, a moral center for Friel's sometimes demoralizing play.

Critical Framework

To see Skinner's transformation of disorientation into play as a form of moral action, we first need to understand the relationship between disorientation and moral action. According to moral philosophers, there are moral ramifications to every action and choice. Robert Sokolowski explains this by saying, "each human act is a mixture of what we are doing morally and what happens by the inertial necessities in the material performance in which our action happens" (51). He writes, "When I do act, I have not just rearranged what was there, I have also moved morally. I have betrayed, I have protected, I have helped and that act will be there from then on, along with the material changes I have made" (Sokolowski 52). The things we do are more than just physical actions; there is an underlying component that affects ourselves and other beings who are touched by the effects of our actions. It thus makes ethical sense that people should aim for their actions to influence others positively rather than negatively. They should aim for moral action.

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Moral action includes, "actions that are good to do and bad not to do, actions that are neither good to do nor bad not to do, and actions that are bad to do and good not to do" (Chisholm 98). Or even more simply, moral actions are "actions and behaviors that foster virtuous outcomes and avoid harm to others" (Harbin 4). In other words, moral action is behavior that works towards an end where the actor and those affected by the action are not harmed and are ideally made better from the action. One of the long-held beliefs about moral action is that it requires intentionality; a person must choose to act or not act before his or her actions can be classified as moral. An action taken with no deliberation, by instinct or accident, would not constitute moral action even if a positive end was achieved. Much of this understanding has grown out of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning, in which the most advanced stage of reasoning privileges decisiveness. Building on Kohlberg, traditional virtue ethics elevates clear thinking and following through on those thoughts with intention as the ideal set up for moral action.[3]

This thesis takes as its suppositional foundation Ami Harbin's *Disorientation and Moral Life*, which challenges the "dominant assumption that the best evidence of successful moral motivation in an agent's life is *moral resolve*—a combination of knowing what to do, feeling able to do it, and successfully carrying out the required action" (37, emphasis original). According to Harbin, moral resolve—on which intentionality is premised—privileges orientedness because it requires an individual to be fully aware of their circumstances and to follow through with action based on that awareness. This privileging is problematic because it doesn't account for the common and widespread experience of being disoriented, a state of mind in which, Harbin argues, moral action can take place despite lacking full awareness and

[3] *Disorientation and Moral Life* surveys the philosophical history and genealogy of intentionality, or "resolvism," in the debate of moral action (Harbin 42-53).

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deliberation.

Disorientations are at the core of the human experience (Harbin 154). Disorientations can be individualistic (like being diagnosed with a terminal illness), communal (like the emotions experienced in a community after a local school shooting), or systemic (like when laws are put into place to ensure the continued oppression of specific groups). These traumatic experiences result in disorientations that are "sustained," "difficult," and make it "hard to go on" with one's life (Harbin 18-19). The key here is that disorientating experiences are "not just passing, momentary flashes of unease quickly followed by a return to feeling fine"—they are lasting and result in an enduring impact on a person's thoughts and behaviors (18). Cumulatively, disorientations detract from an individual's ability to be at ease in the world in the way that a person who is not *dis*oriented but *oriented* (or grounded) would be.

By acknowledging disorientations, Harbin's philosophical approach "challeng[es] tendencies in traditional ethics to overlook the injustices of oppression" (32). Ethical universalism insists that the same systems and standards apply to all people, regardless of their personal circumstances. But personal circumstances are integral to one's ability to act in the world. Oppression affects one's moral landscape, making moral resolve more difficult to obtain because, by its very nature, oppression is disorienting. Oppressions, which are varying and multitudinous, may not disorient equally, but they *all* disorient. For this reason, the privileging of orientedness (inherent in the assumption of intentionality) in moral action means that those who are oppressed are less likely to be seen as morally motivated, a perception that maintains an unjust status quo.

In *The Freedom of the City*, the three main characters experience oppression on multiple fronts, a fact that compounds the disorientation they experience during their protest. While some

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scholars, like Sokolowski, claim that orientedness is necessary for moral action and that "extreme circumstances can extinguish the possibility of moral action" (52), Harbin's argument suggests otherwise, allowing us to see characters like Skinner as both disoriented and capable of moral action. As Harbin points out, many individuals live though disorientations that render them unable to reach an advanced level of mental clarity but continue to produce moral action. In fact, the disorientations these individuals experience can, in some cases, lead to increased empathy and a greater sense of communality, both of which promote moral action. All of this becomes important as one considers the disoriented state of Lily, Michael, and Skinner in *Freedom* and the ways that Skinner is nevertheless able to take moral action in the play.

Disorientation in *The Freedom of the City*

Disorientation in *Freedom* exists on both a micro (personal) and a macro (systemic) level. We first see disorientation at the micro level when the peaceful (albeit "banned" [114]) civil rights protest in which the characters are participating turns violent. Friel indicates in the stage directions that a "fiery" speech "punctuated by clapping and cheering" is taking place when "suddenly all sounds are drowned by the roar of approaching tanks. Their noise is deafening and fills the whole auditorium. They stop and we hear the sounds of a crowd screaming in panic and confusion" (110; 111). This sudden, disorienting explosion of sound, experienced by the protestors and viewers of the play simultaneously, compounds the confusion already felt by viewers. Unlike the characters in the play, who would be experiencing the events chronologically, viewers have been pitched into a heightened state of confusion by having been shown the three central characters—as yet unknown—dead on the apron of the stage. By beginning *Freedom* with this shocking and unexplained scene, which prefaces the protest, Friel forces viewers to rewind, to move in discontinuous time backward/forward into the "immediate

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pandemonium" of the interrupted march (111). As "the stage goes dark for an instant. Then there is an explosion off left and the lights come up" (111), our disorientation mirrors that of the protesters whose screams are drowned out by "rubber bullets and the quick plop of exploding gas-canisters" (111). The stage is nothing but chaos and confusion, and escape is made impossible "as tanks and water-cannon pursue fleeing groups" (111). Importantly, however, none of the weapons deployed by the paramilitary forces at this point are lethal; tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets are meant to disorient, not to kill.

Not surprisingly, all of the characters are wildly disoriented by the attack—all, that is, except Skinner. Michael and Lily, whom viewers now see alive, both stumble around "as if [they] were blind," unable to breathe because of the CS gas that has been expelled into the crowd (Friel 112). Stage directions note that Michael "staggers on stage left. He has been blinded by the gas, can scarcely breathe, and is retching. Lily "is affected by gas," too, and stumbles around with her hand "extended in front of her" as she "holds a handkerchief to her streaming eyes" (112). The pair are confused and vulnerable, but Skinner remains clear-eyed. Having been drenched by a water cannon instead of being gassed, Skinner can still see and "races on . . . looking about frantically for somewhere to hide" (112). When he comes across an open door that provides shelter from the gas and violence, Skinner quickly pulls Lily inside. Michael, on the other hand, has collapsed on the ground and resists Skinner's encouragement to move inside to safety. Skinner initially attempts to reason with him, saying, "Come on! Get up! They're going wild out there!" (113). Michael makes no attempt to remove himself from the dangerous situation, and Skinner tries harder, yet Michael only responds with, "Leave me" (113). Finally, after a round of rubber bullets forces Skinner "flat on his face," Skinner "grabs Michael by the back of his jacket and drags him" into the Guildhall (113). Through this brief sequence, we see

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that despite his disorientation, Skinner is the most aware and grounded of the group, a pattern that will continue through the rest of the play.

From the beginning, then, Skinner is "marked out from the others" and carries the privileged position of understanding the sociopolitical systems at work and the price that will eventually be exacted on the trio for taking refuge in the Guildhall (Parker 56). Such knowledge imbues him with power but also with responsibility. Since Skinner is the first to comprehend what is going on, he is the one who must determine how to act. Michael Parker writes, "From his very first entry, Skinner quickly distinguishes himself from his prostrated, disorientated companions, through the speed of his thinking and action" (Parker 56). In the tear gas sequence, Friel characterizes Skinner as reckless, but also resourceful and caring. Instead of focusing solely on himself, he makes sure to bring some of his fellow protestors to safety. Even while experiencing disorientation himself, Skinner remains functional and alert. By recognizing the reality of what is happening in this moment and accepting it, he is able to work through some of the confusion. By embracing and accepting disorientation, Skinner paradoxically claims a type of orientedness.

While the violence of the protest is one of the micro-disorientations the characters experience in the play, it happens within a larger and more encompassing disorientation: poverty. The foundational disorientation that unites and informs Lily, Michael, and Skinner is their experience of living in poverty. Urban poverty, which bears witness to "multiple institutions failing members of oppressed groups concurrently" (Harbin 145), is everywhere marked with injustice. The poverty that the characters have to endure is a sustained state of being and not quickly or easily remedied. And while the three characters have never known a life outside of their crippling impoverishment, it is reasonable to assume that sustained deprivation heightens

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every other difficulty they face, especially when there is no end in sight. Acknowledging that poverty is a disorientation is important here because it attests to the fact that these characters have never had the opportunity to be truly, fully oriented.

The "the subculture of poverty" (133) in which Lily, Michael, and Skinner are trapped is expounded upon by the play's problematic sociologist character, Dr. Dodds.[4] The economic characteristics of this subculture—"wretched housing, a constant struggle for survival, a chronic shortage of cash, persistent unemployment and very often real hunger or at least malnutrition"—are clinically and monotonously recited by Dr. Dodds, whose remarks are juxtaposed with the Guildhall refugees' own descriptions of their painful lives (133). Only a few minutes after entering the Guildhall and clearing her eyes of the gas, Lily begins speaking openly about the economic burdens she endures, sometimes with a shocking level of nonchalance. After entering and observing the grandeur of the Mayor's parlor, she exclaims:

> LILY. This room's bigger than my whole place.
>
> SKINNER. Have you no gold taps and tiled walls?
>
> LILY. There's one tap and one toilet below in the yard—and they're for eight families. (120)

While Skinner's reply to Lily is tongue-in-cheek, she replies with utmost sincerity about the her living conditions. Everything she says is made even more horrific when, shortly after, we come to learn that Lily has eleven children who live with her and her husband in a two-bedroom apartment inside a condemned warehouse. We then learn that Michael and Skinner, who are both in their early twenties, have not been able to live independently because of their economic circumstances. Michael, who is engaged to be married, explains that he and his fiancée will "live

[4] While Dodds has some correct and useful insights into the play133]) act ironically to show just how much the middle and upper classes don't understand about the realities of poverty. While one might suggest that the characters in the Guildhall are "having fun," there is always the looming knowledge that that fun has a fatal cost.

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with [his] people" because they are unable to afford a place of their own (128). While this is hardly ideal, he at least has a place to call home. Skinner, who grew up as an orphan and does not have a familial safety net, lives "Anywhere—everywhere. As they say—no fixed address" (152). And because Skinner is homeless and lacks a fixed address, he "can't claim no dole" (152).

Beyond their "wretched housing," as Dodds puts it, these three struggle in all aspects of their lives. Lily's husband is unable to work on "account of his health" because the fumes from the foundry he worked in when they were first married have "destroyed all the tissues of his lungs," meaning that she must act as the sole provider for a large household with a disabled spouse (132). She has a job cleaning houses but continues to rely on her elderly mother (who also still has to work) in order for her children to have a place to bathe, since they cannot do so at their own residence. While Lily "can never manage [to clean] more nor fifteen" houses a week, she is at least able to work (130). Michael, despite extensive efforts to make himself employable, has not been able to maintain a job in an economic landscape in which every business and industry seems to be closing down (122). Skinner, when asked if he has a job replies, "Three years ago I did some potato picking . . . And last August I was a conductor on the bus" (131). This response emphasizes just how dire the job market was in Derry in the 1970s.

Of the three, Skinner's poverty is the most physically apparent. His clothes are soaked through from the water cannon when he enters the Guildhall. Once inside, Lily insists that he take them off to dry. Even though it is winter and cold, Skinner is painfully underdressed. He has no undershirt to keep him warm, and "he is not wearing socks" (124). After he has mostly disrobed, Lily remarks that Skinner must be like one of her sons and "[eat] like a bishop and [have] nothing to show for it" when in reality, it is apparent that Skinner's malnutrition and low

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weight are almost certainly from a lack of access to regular food (124). Each of these challenges is, like Dodds claims, both economic and psychological and has an impact on the way Skinner (as well as Lily and Michael) reacts to the injustices he experiences (133).

Beyond just impacting their reactions, however, extreme poverty can lead to real disorientation. Lily, Michael, and Skinner all behave in a way that emphasizes their disorientation even before the protest and that implies a continuous state of disorientation in their regular lives. Lily, for example, mixes up the names of her children and contradicts herself repeatedly. In the Guildhall, after Michael has introduced himself and Lily has responded that she has a son named Michael, she asks just a few minutes later:

LILY. What do they call you again, young fella?

MICHAEL. Michael.

LILY. Michael's a nice name. I have a Michael. (132)

Lily's inability to keep track of names is just one manifestation of the type of disorientation that characterizes her everyday life. In a similar way, her husband, whom Lily touts as a smart man, "[sits] at the fire all day, reading the wanes' comics" because of the "fumes" that have made him unable to work (132). These fumes act just as the tear gas did, but on a permanent basis. They stymie Lily's husband's ability to see clearly and find his way forward, a physical symbol of the way that poverty can disorient to the point of leaving a grown man at home every day reading comics meant for children.

Michael's overall disorientation manifests itself most readily as a kind of intellectual blindness. Though the most performatively vocal about civil rights, Michael shows an overall lack of awareness and naivete towards the power structures that govern his life. He claims he is "lucky" to be in his position, even though that position is at the bottom of the class hierarchy

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(122). Even more naïve is his staunch belief that it is the responsibility of the poor to "show [the higher classes] – that [they]'re responsible and respectable" (128). He asserts that if the poor prove themselves, others will "come to respect" them and resultantly allow them their human rights (128). His poverty has clearly disoriented him as much as it has Lily.

While the disorientation experienced by the characters is clearly unsettling and sometimes even disabling, Skinner reacts to disorientations both personal and systematic in a unique way. Disorientation produces in him a sense of euphoria that he transforms into play, but a serious kind of play quite different from the "having fun" that Dodds imagines for the poor. While Lily, Michael, and Skinner sit inside the Guildhall waiting for the violence of the protest to stop so they can return home, they engage in moments of play brought about through a variety of games and interactions instigated by Skinner. These games share certain aspects of *play* described by Richard Schechner. Schechner uses playful language to describe the multitudinous traits of *play* by asking:

> [If] play is characterized both by flow—losing oneself in play—and reflexivity—the awareness that one is playing; if ethological and semiotic studies show that play's functions include learning, regulating hierarchy, exploration, creativity, and communication; if psychoanalysis links playing with fantasy, dreaming, and the expression of desires; if the "in between" and "as if " timespace of playing is the source of cultural activities including arts, sciences, and religions . . . can we ever really understand something so complex? (91)

Put simply, *play* is intentional behavior that may or may not be structured, and this behavior is an outlet for creativity and varying emotions that might manifest through enjoyable action. However, other participants may not necessarily find enjoyable release if they are being played

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with. *Play* has the potential to be "full of creative world-making as well as lying, illusion, and deceit" (Schechner 92).

The concept of *play* is tightly intertwined and difficult to distinguish from the act of gaming, but "generally games are more overtly structured than playing" (Schechner 92). This structure might take the form of obvious rules, but the existence of obvious rules is not requisite. In *Freedom*, the three main characters participate in intentional behaviors that can be classified as *play* as well as in game-like activities. While the three characters are trapped in the Guildhall, Skinner acts as the instigator of play. Despite his own and their disorientation, he takes on the persona of a jester or Lord of Misrule to guide Lily and Michael through a series of game-like interactions. Skinner's behavior is usefully informed by the humor and chaos of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, which works to subvert (while sustaining) power structures and incorporates elements of dress-up and role play. It is important to note that while they may seem chaotic, *play* and gaming are orienting, intentional, self-conscious, and create a form of disorder that has its own kind of order. Through play, Skinner encourages Lily and Michael to recognize and accept their disorientation, which has the potential to make them more aware and better agents in their own lives.

Disorientation and Play

The first game that Skinner plays might be called the Guessing Game, and it serves the purpose of orienting Lily and Michael to the disorienting circumstances of their being first gassed and then trapped in the Mayor's parlor. Skinner's turning his companions' fear and confusion into a game allows them to find humor and even enjoyment in their predicament. The Guessing Game begins soon after the trio finds themselves in the Guildhall:

SKINNER. Do you know where you are, Missus?

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LILY. Just you lay one finger on me!

SKINNER. Do you know where you're sitting?

LILY. I'm warning you!

SKINNER. (*To* Michael) Look around—look around—look around. Where are you? Where do you find yourself this Saturday afternoon? (*To both)* Guess—come on—guess—guess—guess. Ten-to-one you'll never hit it. Fifty-to-one. A hundred-to-one. (116)

With a manic glee, Skinner forces the Guessing Game on his fellow Guildhall refugees, spewing words and betting on the odds that the others can't possibly imagine where they have found themselves. Skinner's questions—"do you know where you are?," "do you know where you are sitting?"—reveal the fundamentally orienting nature of this game. Even though Lily and Michael seem unwilling to take part, Skinner continues to draw them toward self-awareness before finally telling them the answer that will end the Guessing Game and cause them to also experience the disorientation that comes from their new setting:

SKINNER. I'll tell you where you are.

MICHAEL. Where?

SKINNER. You. Are. Inside. The Guildhall.

LILY. We are not!

SKINNER. In fact you're in the Mayor's parlour.

LILY. You're a liar!

SKINNER. The holy of holies itself! (116)

Skinner signifies his disdain for the political power structure by irreverently and ironically conflating the location they are currently in with the biblical sacred place where God's

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presence appeared and the Ark of the Covenant was kept. By making the connection between the Derry Mayor's office and the inner sanctum of a temple, Skinner is also highlighting the absurdity of deifying corrupt politicians. It is the final line of this exchange—"The holy of holies itself!"—that precipitates a transformation in Skinner and leads him to treat the room as a carnivalesque space in which to play. The Guessing Game reveals Skinner's desire to share his knowledge. He does not want to leave the other two in ignorance. He is encouraging them to understand and embrace the fullness of their disorienting situation.

After breaking into the Mayor's liquor cabinet in order to supply the group with "municipal booze" and allow them the privilege of drinking what was generally reserved for distinguished visitors and guests, Skinner begins a new game: the Masquerade Game (129). This game is when "the play's carnivalization reaches its climax," both in the sense that this is the work's most playful sequence and its most subversive, in line with the attitudes of Carnival (Parker 62). In this sequence, Skinner bursts from a back dressing room "dressed in splendid mayoral robe and chain and wear[ing] an enormous ceremonial hat jauntily on his head" (Friel 135). Here, he is invoking not just the carnivalesque but also the Shakespearean precedent of using "metadramatic devices [and] deploying changes of costume and speech to [a] comic [. . . and] subversive end" (Parker 62). Skinner initiates the Masquerade Game by quoting *King Lear* to Lily and Michael, "You're much deceived; in nothing am I changed / But in my garments!" (Friel 135). By using metadrama to assure the others that he is playing a part, Skinner signals that what he says during the Masquerade Game is a subversive commentary on the character he is dressing up as and mocking—in this case, the Lord Mayor of Derry.

Skinner invites Lily and Michael to play the Masquerade Game with him by distributing robes and headgear so that they can join in. Lily is immediately enthralled by this game and

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wants to know more:

> LILY. Mother of God, would you look at him! And the hat! What's the rig, Skinner?
>
> (Skinner *distributes the gowns*.)
>
> SKINNER. Mayor's robes, alderman's robes, councilor's robes. Put them on and I'll give you both the freedom of the city.[5] (135)

When Michael doesn't want to participate in the game, Lily intervenes and encourages him to "put it on for the laugh," a command he "reluctantly" obeys (136). Michael is not much affected by the game, but Lily, by donning these ceremonial robes, is emotionally emancipated and gives in to the Masquerade Game entirely. After putting on her robe, Lily dances around the room singing exuberantly (136). Skinner continues this pretense of liberation and honor by conferring the "freedom of the city" to Lily and Michael:

> SKINNER. Lily, this day I confer on you the freedom of the City of Derry. God bless you, my child. And now, Mr. Hegarty, I think we'll make you a life peer. Arise Lord Michael—of Gas . . . Make way—make way for the Lord and Lady Mayor of Derry Colmcille! (136)

In this mock ceremony, Skinner bestows a great honor and symbol of respect on his compatriots, and "Lily joins Skinner in a ceremonial parade before imaginary people" (136). The idea of being free and welcome within Derry contrasts starkly with the fact that the group is presently trapped and unable to escape freely into the city. But during the game, this hardly seems to matter. By facilitating the Masquerade Game, Skinner acts as an "anarchic, Dionysiac spirit who leads Lily beyond social constraint" and encourages her to have fun and forget about the violent realities waiting outside of the Guildhall (Andrew qtd. in Russell 53).

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[5]An honor bestowed in dignitaries, celebrities, or heroes by a governing body. In the United States, instead of being given the "freedom of the city," one might be given a "key to the city."

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The Masquerade Game is successful in terms of its effect on Lily. Through play, she gives in to the absurd disorientation of their current situation and allows herself to enjoy the crazy, disordered moment. This small liberation brings joy and a kind of freedom of spirit not often afforded by Lily's regular life, shown through her excited dancing and her statement that she and Skinner are "really enjoying [them]selves" (136-37). In this moment, Skinner's role as a Lord of Misrule has led to a type of moral action in spite of a lack of moral resolve. There is no evidence that Skinner recognized a need to cheer and comfort Lily, or that he thought out and intentionally followed through on an action with this specific end result in mind. Their situation in the Guildhall does not allow for that level of clarity and foresight. Nevertheless, Skinner's action results in a moral end and thus might be regarded as a positive moral action despite the disorientation that surrounds them all.

This disorientation, however, cannot so easily be dispelled, nor can the threat facing the trio. The more time the three spend trapped in the Guildhall, the more aware Skinner becomes that the "price" that will "be exacted" from them will be their lives (150). Relatively early in the drama, Friel has Skinner go to the window and observe what is going on outside of the Guildhall (128). He sees the growing number of British troops surrounding the building, and this causes him to mutter a curse and "[refill] his own glass" of brandy (129). Skinner's awareness of the growing threat does not dampen his desire to play, but it does explain the change in tone evident as Skinner begins his last game. In the midst of the Masquerade Game, he pivots and starts to talk to the large portrait of some "forgotten civic dignitary" (105) on the wall of the parlor:

(*Skinner pauses below [the portrait]. He is now the stern practical man of affairs. The accent is dropped.*)

SKINNER. This is the case I was telling you about, Sir Joshua. Eleven children in a two-

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roomed flat. No toilet, no running water.

LILY. Except what's running down the walls. Haaaa!

SKINNER. She believes she has a reasonable case for a corporation house.[6] (137)

While Lily, it seems, is still fully immersed in the Masquerade Game, making entertainment out of her abysmal living conditions (and helped along in this by the fact that she is now quite drunk), Skinner drops his mocking accent and speaks as himself. This distinction emphasizes the sincere concern he has not just for Lily but for people at the bottom of the class system as a whole. Here Skinner's mockery fades into truth; his behavior is not just about enjoyment.

At this point, Skinner—who again remains clearheaded while the others are starting to be disoriented by alcohol—begins to press knowledge upon Lily and Michael through yet another game, the Recitation Game. The Recitation Game first begins when Skinner quotes *King Lear* in connection with the robes they are wearing. He recites, "through tattered clothes small vices do appear; Robes and furred gowns hide all" (135). This quotation comments on the unjust way that riches shape how the world perceives a person's actions. When writing about Skinner's use of *Lear,* Parker claims that this line "could almost serve as an epigraph for the entire play, which, like *Lear* deals with injustice, corruption, murdered innocence, blindness, a vicious abuse of authority by people with 'glass eyes' who 'seem / To see the things thou dost not'" (62). Beyond summing up the class conflict at the center of this drama, Skinner's decision to recite this particular line hints at his knowledge that the three of them are going to be scrutinized without mercy, that those in power will see their "tattered clothes" and attribute all manner of "vices" to them as justification for the punishment that was always already waiting.

The end goal of the Recitation Game—understanding—is at its most apparent when

[6] A form of public housing in reference to the Dublin Corporation housing scheme. More commonly known as council housing.

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Skinner tries to make Michael play along. Michael has proven more recalcitrant than Lily to Skinner's invitations to play the Guessing Game and the Masquerade Game, so Skinner attempts to compel his cooperation by saying, "and now Lord Michael will oblige with a recitation—*If*—by the inimitable Rudyard Kipling" (138). However, Michael refuses to do so, so Skinner alone recites, "'If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . . ' Ladies and gentlemen, a poem to fit the place and the occasion" (138). Skinner uses these two brief lines of Victorian poetry to allude to what is happening outside the window where the British army is gathering, preparing for their attack. The lines ironically highlight the way that the group inside the Guildhall is not anxiously panicking—they're keeping their heads, as it were—whereas, the military forces outside the Guildhall are acting disproportionately and will inevitably blame their reaction on the three inside.

By insisting on this recitation, Skinner seems intent on imposing an awareness of their situation on Michael. He seems to want Michael to recognize the futility of their situation and to understand that the people he looks up to will blame him for his own death. Despite Skinner's valiant attempt at enlightening Michael to this disorienting truth, Michael refuses to play along. Instead of reciting the Kipling poem, Michael retorts, "I don't know what sort of a game you think this is. But I happen to be serious about this campaign" (138). He proceeds to question Skinner's motive in attending the march, asserting that he "marched three miles today . . . because every man's entitled to justice and fair play" while Skinner is merely "fooling around," more interested in game playing than protesting (138). Indeed, while Skinner is leading the trio through a series of game-like activities, that does not mean that he is "fooling around." Despite his glib nature, the off-the-cuff recitation of great literary works shows just how self-aware and purposeful Skinner is as he attempts to draw Michael toward a realization of the darkly ironic

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nature of their position. While Michael utters stale platitudes about civil rights, peaceful protests, and Gandhi, Skinner uses British literature to highlight the hollowness of such platitudes, the superficiality of promises made and quickly broken. In doing so, Skinner gives a type of structure and organization to the chaos surrounding them. Michael, however, refuses to play, refuses to move toward orientation by embracing the disorientation.

At this point, Skinner's playing takes on a seriousness and intensity not present in the Guessing Game or the Masquerade Game but visible, to some extent, in the Recitation Game. As Skinner comes to understand that the price the trio will pay for taking refuge in the Mayor's parlor will be their lives, he begins the game that all the other games have been moving the characters toward: the Truth Game. The Truth Game opens with a shocking salvo meted out by Skinner himself. During the majority of the time in the Guildhall, Skinner has encouraged a level of playful anarchy by letting the group imbibe the Mayor's liquor and wear the Mayor's robes, but he has not been intentionally destructive. But as he looks out the parlor window, sees the British soldiers closing in on the Guildhall, and reflects that they will "leave nothing to chance" and that "the poor are always overcharged" (150), Skinner "pours himself a drink and sings quietly. Then very deliberately he stubs out his cigar on the leather-top desk" (138). He then "pulls out a pile of papers" and "scatters them around" (159). While Skinner whirls about ransacking the room, Michael and Lily look on, stunned and horrified by what seems to be meaningless destruction. But Skinner's culminating act of vandalism reveals his motive: "Skinner lifts the ceremonial sword, looks for a second at Michael, goes to the portrait and sticks the sword into it" (161).

By figuratively slaying this representation of the political institution that has kept them all disadvantaged, by turning out the drawers and destroying the veneer meant to protect the

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surface of the desk, Skinner has wiped the slate clean. Nothing remains hidden or covered, and every pretense of order in the parlor has been stripped away. When Michael attempts to remove the sword from the wall, Skinner stops him:

SKINNER. Don't touch that!

(*Michael looks at him, surprised at his intensity; then shrugs and turns away. Skinner smiles.*)

SKINNER. Allow me my gesture. (163)

While merely a gesture, it's an important one. Skinner knows that as soon as the three leave the Guildhall and surrender themselves to the waiting guns, their voices are going to be taken from them, and they will be stripped of their right to speak. So, here, he uses the remnants of this game—a ransacked room, a burned desk, a torn painting—to speak the truth as a last symbol of defiance. He knows, he sees, and he will no longer allow the pretense of a government that cloaks its injustices in ceremony and decoration. Even after he is gone, his gesture will speak.

The Truth Game doesn't end with Skinner's gesture, however. Skinner seems determined to draw Lily and Michael out of their own pretenses as well. He needs them to recognize the truth—to recognize, as Russell observes, "that they are doomed" (53)—but also to recognize the lies that have led them to what viewers know will be their tragic end. Skinner begins with Lily, prodding her to acknowledge the way her socioeconomic status has shaped her life and, resultantly, her inevitable death. Because their time is proverbially running out, Skinner is no longer patient with Lily's explanation as to why she came to the protest:

SKINNER. Why were you out?

LILY. For the same reason as everybody else.

SKINNER. Tell me your reasons.

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LILY. My reasons is no different to anybody else.

SKINNER. Tell me yours.

LILY. Wan man—wan vote—that's what I want. You know—wan man—wan vote.

SKINNER. You got that six months ago. (154)

Skinner is not being cruel in his refusal to accept her words; rather, he knows that there is no more time for lies—even if they are acting as consoling fictions.[7] When Lily tries again to find an answer to Skinner's probe, she claims that she marches for the abolition of gerrymandering and for civil rights. Skinner bluntly retorts, "I don't believe a word of it, Lily . . . And neither do you" (154). Although he happily sweeps all pretense away in his rampage through the room, Lily isn't keen to play, so Skinner finally sets the truth right in front of her where she cannot turn from it:

> SKINNER. I'll tell you why you march. . . . Because you live with eleven kids and a sick husband in two rooms that aren't fit for animals. . . . Because for the first time in your life you grumbled and someone else grumbled and someone else, and you heard each other, and became aware that there were hundreds, thousands, millions of us all over the world, and in a vague groping way you were outraged. (154)

Skinner's monologue here shows, for the first time, that he is not the glib vandal that Michael believes him to be. Instead, he is "gently and sardonically urging the others to acquire a fuller understanding about their current position" (Russell 53). He is intensely aware of the injustices that circle around them, and he wants Lily to admit that she doesn't march for something

[7] In his introduction to a collection of Friel's plays, Deane writes about Friel's interest in "consoling fictions"—narratives that are not true but are meant to make the pain of reality easier to bear. Deane explains that Friel "adheres to his fascination with the human capacity for producing consoling fictions to make life more tolerable. Although he destroys these fictions he does not, with that, destroy the motives that produced them—motives which are rooted in the human being's wish for dignity as was as in his tendency to avoid reality" (17-18).

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intangible; she marches because her life has been crippled by economic and social oppression, and this is a small way for her to take action and feel genuine power. He wants her to come to terms with the disorientations of the injustice she has experienced and subsequently see things more clearly because of it.

Because of Skinner's insistence, "Lily finally has the scales removed from her eyes" (Russell 51). After being faced with the underlying truth of her place in the world, Lily begins to play the Truth Game with Skinner. She starts by admitting that she lied to Skinner when she told him earlier that her son, Declan, was shy. In actuality, he is "a mongol[8]" (155). After this admission, her barriers break down and she reflects on her situation:

> LILY. And it's for him I go on all the civil rights marches. Isn't that stupid? You and him and everybody else marching and protesting about sensible things like politics and stuff and me in the middle of you all, marching for Declan. Isn't that the stupidest thing you ever heard? Sure I could march and protest from here to Dublin and sure what good would it do Declan? Stupid and all as I am I know that much. But I still march—every Saturday. I still march. Isn't that the stupidest thing you ever heard?
>
> SKINNER. No. (155)

Skinner's response here is sincere. There's certainly an element of absurdity or pointlessness in Lily's notion that joining a civil rights protest will somehow help her disabled son. But Skinner doesn't believe that Lily's reason for marching is stupid— arguably, it is what his games have been aiming to accomplish, as she has finally accepted the overwhelming disorientation that is her life. Bringing Lily to acknowledge and even embrace this constitutes a kind of moral action on Skinner's part. His games have helped her toward a moral realization, painful as it is.

[8] An outdated and racist term to describe someone with Down syndrome.

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For his part, Michael is not as amenable to the Truth Game as Lily, but this does not stop Skinner from attempting to draw Michael toward a realization of his own. Throughout the play, Michael has maintained his naïve faith in the rule of law and the ideal of unbiased justice. To admit that neither exists for people like him in 1970s Derry would constitute a collapse of everything that orients his world. So even as the soldiers close in, Michael says (surely to convince himself as much as the other characters), "they're not interested in people like us. It's the troublemakers they're after" (158). Still immersed in the Truth Game, Skinner hits Michael with an undeniable truth: "They think we're armed" (158). What follows is a brusque exchange:

MICHAEL. They know damned well we're not armed.

SKINNER. Why is this place surrounded by tanks and armored cars?

MICHAEL. Are you ready, Missus?

SKINNER. And why are the walls lined with soldiers and police?

MICHAEL. We'll do exactly as they ask. We've nothing to hide. I'll go first. (158)

Although he believes he has "nothing to hide," Michael is unwilling to recognize the truth that he cloaks with his platitudes: that the people outside, those politicians and military leaders in whom he has placed his trust, are not interested in justice and only serve to protect their own interests and the power structures that maintain them. Michael will not allow for or concede to this disorienting truth because it will destabilize his entire belief system, so instead, he refuses to play with Skinner and chooses willful ignorance. When Skinner points out, quite honestly, that the soldiers outside are not the models that Michael believes them to be and "could do terrible things to you—break your arms, burn you with cigarettes, give you injections," Michael's response reveals his inability to come to the realization that Skinner is urging him toward: "Gandhi showed that violence done against peaceful protest helps your cause" (140). Skinner's reply—

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"Or shoot you" (140)—follows his previous statement grammatically but floats oddly unattached into spoken space, a fragment of what viewers recalling the play's opening scene know is a truth already realized.

Michael does, at last, join Skinner in the Truth Game, but it is not until the moment of his death. As the three begin to leave the Guildhall, finally surrendering after their mistaken ordeal, Skinner says of the soldiers ordering them to come outside, "I don't trust them" (165). Michael claims he is "prepared to be arrested" (140), but upon Skinner's remark, he begins to play with Skinner just as Skinner had played with him, needling him with questions that echo their previous exchange:

> MICHAEL. Do you think they'll beat you up, Skinner?
>
> SKINNER. Maybe.
>
> MICHAEL. Or shoot you?
>
> SKINNER. Maybe.
>
> MICHAEL. You really think they'd shoot you! You really do!
>
> SKINNER. Yes. They're stupid enough. But as long as they've only got people like you to handle, they can afford to be. (165-66)

Michael's turning questioner here, his sudden willingness to play along, allows Skinner to speak to Michael the truth Michael will not admit to himself. This partial acquiescence comes too late for Michael, however, who is shot dead when he steps out the door. His death occurs before he can make the realization that Lily already has, and his inability to accept the truth leads to his dying "in disbelief, in astonishment, in shock" (150). This description is one that Michael attributes to himself, as his character speaks to the audience after his death. He tells viewers that he died still believing in those who killed him, agitated "not because I was dying, but that this

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"terrible mistake must be recognized and acknowledged" (150). But even as his mouth "kept trying to form the word mistake," Michael realizes he has been betrayed; "and that is how I died—in disbelief, in astonishment, in shock. It was a foolish way for a man to die" (150). Thus only in death does Michael admit the truth that Skinner's game attempted to draw from him in his final moments in the Guildhall.

Lily, on the other hand, is able recognize and finally accept the disorientation of her life. Because of this, she comes to the awareness that she is (and has always been) an intentional agent, however powerless in the face of institutional injustice. Speaking after she, too, is shot, Lily reveals that before she died, she came to the very realization that Skinner had tried to bring her to: "In the silence before my body disintegrated in a purple convulsion, I thought I glimpsed a tiny truth: that life had eluded me because never in my forty-three years had an experience, an event, even a small unimportant happening been isolated, and assessed, and articulated" (150). Lily laments that she didn't get the chance to experience life after having finally grasped an awareness of it; because of this, she says, "In a way, I died of grief" (150). The fact that she feels grief, that she has gained the "perception" that allows her to see her life in fully-sentient terms for the first time, attests to the wisdom Skinner's games imparted to her before she died.

Skinner faces the firing squad with the same clarity and humor he has shown in every moment of disorientation throughout the text. He begins his post-death speech by announcing this clarity: "A short time after I realized we were in the Mayor's parlour I knew that a price would be exacted" (150). His ability to remain oriented in the midst of disorientation is what allowed him enact his games. Skinner's final thoughts capture the simultaneous orientation and disorientation he manages to navigate. He notes the gravity of the situation and the danger he risked from the very outset of the protest: "how seriously they took us and how unpardonably

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casual we were about them," and then Skinner faces the firing squad with a parting joke ("if you're going to take them on . . . you've got to mend your ways") and dies, "as [he] lived, in defensive flippancy" (150).

Conclusion

The Freedom of the City is ambitious in the way that it weaves the realities of Derry's economic crisis, The Troubles, and the legal fallout of Bloody Sunday into three vibrant and remarkably human characters. Lily, Michael, and Skinner, through no choice of their own, have long been burdened by the disorientations associated with poverty and political subjugation, and the British attack on the protest that leaves them barricaded in the Guildhall only compounds their disorientation. Through the lens of traditional virtue ethics, these characters are unlikely figures to look to as emblems of moral action. However, Harbin's beliefs that moral action can take place without clear-headed resolve, and that disorientations can actually promote empathy and communality, makes classifying Skinner's playful behavior in the Guildhall as moral not just feasible but *likely*.

Skinner does not allow the disorientations of his life to blind him; instead, he embraces them and turns them into something productive: play. Skinner makes an unlikely moral center, yet that is what he is in *Freedom.* This trouble-maker who, in most cases, seems allergic to sincerity and overly prone to snark is also the character who provides insight to his fellow protesters. Friel's choice to make a "hooligan," someone who would have come across as very suspicious to contemporary audiences, the central moral agent in the play is significant (138). So, too, is the fact that Skinner, who has embraced disorientation and the way that it can inspire good, exists in a state of clear-mindedness. Lily, who makes strides to accept her own disorientation ends the play more confident and self-assured than she began it. But Michael, who

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refuses to come to terms with the disorientation caused by the collapse of his ideals, remains blinded up until his death. What viewers find in *The Freedom of the City*, then, is that even in the midst of all-encompassing disorientation, moral action can easily emerge, even from the most unexpected character.

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