

CRIME AND NO PUNISHMENT

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JAMES REANEY has chosen to construct *The Killdeer* as a social drama in which the values of our age are examined and contrasted with those values which Reaney believes to be of an eternal and universal nature. The compact three-act formula of the play, however, is suggestive of an externally applied technique. Reaney has structured the plot of *The Killdeer*, with its all but hidden hint of melodrama, largely after the fashion of the well-made play and, in terms of a theatrical style, he has chosen to combine elements of both naturalism and symbolism in order to carry the wide-ranging themes contained in *The Killdeer*.

It was the French dramatist Eugène Scribe who, in the first half of the nineteenth century, laid down the formula for the construction of the well-made play — a formula which many later dramatists (Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde, Pinero, Arthur Miller, and others) used to their advantage. Structurally, the form demands that the play be the culminating point of a story that had been going on before the play begins. The preceding events of the story are then brought to the attention of the audience by means of exposition which occupies a considerable part of the first act, whereupon the action of the play proper begins. A pattern of action and suspense is then built up in which the hero's fortunes see-saw up and down until the climactic moment of revelation or recognition, which is immediately followed by the dénouement or logical outcome of the action and which, itself, concludes the play.

The first act of Reaney's play opens with a scene between Mrs. Gardner and

Madam Fay, each of whom has a son — Harry and Eli respectively. The audience is informed of the background and history of each family, and of the relationship that exists between each mother and son as the play opens. More exposition follows concerning Rebecca, a girl in whom Harry is beginning to show an interest. This in turn is followed by a short scene which introduces Clifford, the somewhat sinister and melodramatic villain whose machinations with respect to the marriage of Rebecca and Eli are the cause of the beginning of the action in the play. Harry too, gets married — but not to Rebecca whom he loves.

Although the first act ends with the separation of the two lovers, it is logical to assume that their paths will again cross. At the beginning of the second act, therefore, we learn what has happened to them in the five years following their separation. Now they meet again, although the circumstances of their meeting are somewhat macabre. Rebecca is to be tried for a murder which Harry is convinced she did not commit. As Rebecca's defence lawyer, Harry searches for the evidence which will prevent a verdict of capital punishment for Rebecca.

In the traditional well-made play there is usually a missing document or a misdelivered letter which is the source of complication in the action, and which the audience knows about. In *The Killdeer* there is a missing document which complicates the action, but the audience is left unaware of this until the document — a legal certificate of death — is produced in what becomes the climactic moment of revelation in the play. The climactic moment in *The Killdeer*, however, is contrived and is not the logical outcome of the plot as is usually the case in the well-made play. But Reaney's vision of reality cannot be totally contained within the form of the well-made play and, at the point where it becomes dramatically, aesthetically and ethically most necessary to do so, he breaks with the form.

The form demands that events follow each other logically within a chain of causality, but logic and causality at the naturalistic level are not Reaney's prime concern. What does concern him is the presentation of a reality that stands over and against the pattern wherein logic and causality have meaning simply because events are seen to occur within a linear progression of time. In other words, throughout the play Reaney has presented two levels of reality. One has been presented at the naturalistic level which gives us a "slice of life" as we know it in our present age. At this level, through his characters, Reaney reveals and comments on the values that people live by — the social and legal values, for example. The other level he must present to us symbolically. At this level, linear

time, causality, and logic have no place. This is a level of reality where good and evil, light and darkness, innocence and guilt exist in eternal antithesis.

The climactic moment in *The Killdeer*, although it takes place in a courtroom, rises beyond the level of social and legal values and is not so much concerned with establishing legal proof of innocence or guilt as with establishing their eternal relationship. It is this reality that Reaney wishes to show, the reality of the forces of light and of darkness that stands over against the naturalistic world.

In the naturalistic world, events that take place in time have a way of being replaced by other events in time. It is true that these facts can be recorded, but facts in themselves are meaningless. They become significant only when they are seen as manifestations of a cosmology wherein everything exists because of, and in terms of its eternal opposite. The innocent are therefore guilty and the guilty innocent, and out of destruction and evil there yet arises creation and beauty: "flowers and butterflies, grass/Growing from the dead horse's body in the ditch."

I have suggested above that Reaney has chosen to construct *The Killdeer* as a social drama in which the values of our age are examined and contrasted with those values which Reaney believes to be of an eternal and universal nature. The play opens on the interior of Mrs. Gardner's cottage. The living-room itself is cluttered with objects which, as we learn later, represent the sum total of Mrs. Gardner's life. Outside the cottage a car is parked. This car belongs to Madam Fay who, like a modern-day Mother Courage, travels around the country-side selling her wares.

What emerges in the first act is a picture of our society set in economic terms. The opening situation between Mrs. Gardner and Madam Fay, for instance, takes place entirely as a buying and selling transaction. As the act progresses, tension is developed. On the one hand, we are shown forces at work in our society which tend to reduce everything to a purely monetary value. Marriages are arranged because of economic considerations, and people themselves become dehumanized objects reducible to a cash value. For most people in such a society, the acquisition of money, things, property becomes all important. On the other hand, there are those to whom these values do not apply. There is Rebecca whose impulses are directed towards love and the preservation of human relationships, and who stands in opposition to the others.

Whereas the setting of the first act had been highly detailed and particularized, the set directions for the second act call for the "simplest possible suggestion of a courtroom." In the first act, life has been presented almost as a social document.

In the second act, life is revealed in fuller terms. Once again we are given the facts of the situation, but the facts this time are not those which deal with monetary values. Now, the action has been shifted to a court of law and to an examination of that value system over which our society states the law holds sway: namely, the determining of the innocent and the guilty. The first scene, however, with its setting that barely suggests a courtroom, opens and closes with references to time and the river of time, and to the transitory nature of the world we see around us. What is happening, therefore, is that the naturalistic level is beginning to fade into the background and, as it does so, the question of guilt and of innocence takes on a new dimension, as does also the search for truth. In short, the dramatic action must now be understood at the higher level of metaphysics.

With this in mind it becomes necessary to look more closely at the ending of the play. Although the play has been concerned with violence and with death, with forces of evil as well as with forces of love, there is at the finish no scene of retribution. Clifford, whose villainy had caused so much of the suffering, dies a natural death. Madam Fay, a dark force of mischief and of evil, escapes from the courtroom and whirls off in her car. The inevitable question is then: why, if evil exists, does it go unchecked? The play makes no answer to this question except to say that evil does exist and that to understand this much is all that we can hope for in this life. Speaking of Madam Fay, it is Dr. Ballard who hints at the possibility of further knowledge — but not in this world:

In after life you will realize that she is
And why she had to be part of your lives . . .

The mystery with which the plot has been concerned at the legalistic level has been resolved, but the play ends on a note of metaphysical mystery. The play has attempted to establish the incontrovertible fact that evidence of the forces of good and evil surrounds us in our everyday lives. Through its symbolism it has attempted to convince us of the reality of those forces and of their eternal nature which, although they cannot be apprehended directly at a naturalistic level, must nevertheless be reckoned with, within the limits of our human experiences.