

Arden

T H E A T R E C O .

SUPPLEMENTARY STUDY GUIDE

For

The Seafarer

By CONOR McPHERSON
Directed by DAVID O'CONNOR
On the F. Otto Haas Stage
May 14th - June 14th, 2009

Additional copies of this study guide are available online at www.ardentheatre.org.

The Seafarer

By Conor McPherson

Directed by David O'Connor

Cast:

James "Sharky" Harkin Bill Zielinski
Richard Harkin Brian Russell
Ivan Curry Tony Lawton
Nicky Giblin Joe Hickey
Mr. Lockhart Greg Wood

Direction:

Director David O'Connor
Stage Manager Katharine M. Hanley
Asst. Director Sally Ollove
Asst. to the Stage Manager Bobby Bangert
Casting Amy Dugas Brown and
Stephanie Klapper CSA

Designers:

Scenic Designer David Gordon
Lighting Designer John Hoey
Costume Designer Alison Roberts
Sound Designer Jeff Lorenz



Plot Synopsis

The action takes place on Christmas Eve Morning in a house in Baldoyle, a coastal settlement of North Dublin, Ireland. The setting is described as a “grim living area,” with the dark room obscuring a threadbare, well-worn living room cluttered with empty bottles, overflowing ashtrays, and a generally pervasive atmosphere of bars and bachelorhood. Sharky, a wiry man with small plasters at the bridge of his nose and at the knuckles of his right hand comes downstairs. He opens the curtains to allow the morning light into the room, revealing the squalor of the space. As he does so, his older brother Richard, who has recently gone blind, stirs awake from his slumber on the floor. Both men, unshaven and wearing mismatched pajamas, bicker as they begin the day. It is a struggle, as Richard’s inability to see is compounded by his crippling hangover. As Richard, aided by a walking stick, maneuvers to the toilet and Sharky, after hiding a bottle of whiskey, begins to lay breakfast on the table, Ivan, an old drinking buddy, emerges from the top of the stairs. He shakily feels his way down to the kitchen as he apologizes for staying the night and explains that he has lost his glasses.

As Sharky prepares tea, he discusses with Ivan the events of the previous night. It is revealed that Sharky has recently left his job as a chauffeur out in the country to return to help Richard adjust to life after blindness, particularly with the complications of the home’s steep steps. Ivan, bleary and hungover, insists that while he was only “calling to see if Richard was all right,” alludes to some marital problems at home. They attempt to discuss the events of the previous evening, although Ivan is sketchy on many of the details. Sharky inquires about the noise heard on the back porch after he had gone to bed; Ivan explains it was another of Richard’s frequent rails against “the winos out in the lane,” which culminated in both men tripping on the newspapers at the back door and falling out into the garden. Sharky continues to prepare breakfast as Ivan helps Richard from the bathroom. Richard makes a point of congratulating Sharky on being “off the drink” for two days; Sharky ignores him and the men sit to consider their breakfast options. Ivan, oblivious, inquires about the plaster on Sharky’s nose; Sharky, gesturing wildly to stop this line of questioning, is obliged to own up to the truth, and admits to getting into a bar fight several days earlier on his first night back in town, retreating to the kitchen to prepare toast.

Ivan makes a point, as Sharky is away, to ask Richard if Sharky knows that “Eileen is with Nicky Giblin now.” Nicky, referenced by both men as an old drinking buddy, is the one who told Ivan about the bar fight in the first place; Ivan confesses that he’s been avoiding Nicky lately, and is about to say more when Sharky returns. The three bicker over the logistics of getting food and drink for Christmas when Richard suddenly cries in despair, “I have so little left to live for!” The other two, with uncomfortable pauses, comfort him, and he sheepishly accepts a cup of tea. Ivan asks if Sharky has received any compensation from the bus company after his accident; Sharky, frustrated, tells Ivan that his lawyer had misdated his statement and he is unlikely to receive anything, particularly after seven and a half years. The conversation turns to a former mutual acquaintance of theirs. Ivan tells an incredulous Richard and Sharky that the man had survived electrocution only to die in a fire at his home the same evening; and that two different people were rumored to have seen the man after his burial, an apparition around the car park.

They are interrupted by three loud bangs at the front door. As Sharky goes up the stairs to retrieve whatever has been left by the postman, Richard and Ivan search frantically for the hidden bottle of whiskey, and when it is retrieved, pour large helpings into their tea mugs, concealing the bottle when Sharky returns. Sharky carries a tastefully wrapped package, a present from his former employers, and hands Richard an envelope from the Department of Social Welfare, which Richard throws away. Sharky reads his card to himself, momentarily dazed until the other men tease him, and he unwraps the gift that accompanies it: several CDs. The men search for Ivan’s glasses and begin to prepare their shopping list for Christmas (which consists of several varieties of beer and whiskey, and possibly either a chicken or a turkey). As the men lock up and prepare to hail a taxi, Sharky retrieves the card from the table, looks at it for a moment, and then briskly places it in his pocket and leaves.

In the next scene, it is later that same afternoon. Sharky descends the stairs with bags of groceries—mostly liquor, which he takes into the kitchen. He bends down under a scraggly Christmas tree to plug in some pitiful colored lights, and examines two small wrapped presents under the tree. Richard calls from upstairs, now drunk, to complain that he needs help coming down; Sharky assists him and begins to light the fire, griping at Richard for inviting Nicky to the house that evening. It is revealed that Sharky does know that former girlfriend Eileen is now dating Nicky, as he saw Nicky behind the wheel of the car he loaned Eileen before he left. Richard tells him to “grow up,” and remarks again that it is possibly his last Christmas; Sharky, retreating, proffers smoked salmon and bread, and even agrees to boil a kettle of water to clean the “puke and piss” the “winos” have left near the back door. They are interrupted by a loud knock at the front door; Sharky, thinking it’s Nicky, refuses to answer, but, goaded by Richard, eventually opens it to a distraught Ivan, who has been kicked out of the house by his wife for being drunk on Christmas Day. Ivan, still missing his glasses, accepts the drink the brothers’ offer and they toast to Christmas. As Sharky exits to clean the back porch, the doorbell rings, and Ivan ushers Nicky Giblin and Mr. Lockhart down the stairs and into the living room.

Nicky, about Sharky's age, produces a gift-wrapped bottle of whiskey and wishes Richard a happy Christmas. They embrace, and Nicky introduces Mr. Lockhart, a well-dressed, expensive-seeming man in his fifties. Richard directs Nicky to the libations in the kitchen, explaining to Mr. Lockhart that his sight was lost due to his "falling into a dumpster on Halloween." Nicky and Mr. Lockhart recount the pubs they had visited throughout the course of the day, and ultimately toast to Christmas with Richard and Ivan. Ivan exits to the back porch to retrieve Sharky as Nicky, Richard, and Mr. Lockhart enthusiastically decide to begin a game of cards; Sharky returns, dressed in a filthy apron and rubber gloves, and uncomfortably exchanges handshakes with Nicky and Mr. Lockhart. Nicky offhandedly remarks on seeing Ivan's car in the alleyway being sat upon by a 'bunch of winos,' Ivan, who did not remember driving it the previous evening, springs into action, and, aided by Nicky, leads a feisty, raging Richard out into the back alley to reclaim the car.

Sharky and Lockhart are alone. Lockhart comments on Sharky's sobriety, and Sharky, seeming to vaguely remember him, is unnerved by Lockhart's exact recollections of "all the places I've seen you." Lockhart says, "We met in the Bridewell, Sharky. Remember? We were locked up in a cell together." Sharky, shaken and unsettled, vaguely admits to remembering Lockhart, saying "You've a good memory," though it has been twenty-five years since he has last seen him. Lockhart, revealing that he has been in every pub with Nicky so that he could look for Sharky, is disappointed Sharky doesn't remember "the matter we discussed that night," saying "You're seriously standing there telling me that it's never struck you as odd? Down all those years you just walked out of jail?" Sharky, protesting, says he can barely remember what had happened that night that had landed him in the same jail cell. Lockhart provides all the details. Sharky, in the early hours of December 24th, 1981, had beat up a vagrant man named Lawrence Joyce behind O'Dowd's public house, and had killed him. Lockhart adds "I let you out. I set you free."

Sharky tries feebly to protest. Lockhart continues, coldly reciting the ways in which Sharky's failures over the past twenty-five years have added up to the pathetic existence he now has. Sharky asks him to leave, and Lockhart says, "I want your soul, Sharky."

Sharky asks if this is a joke. Lockhart just looks at him, and Sharky enters the grip of some unknown, excruciating pain, sinking to his knees and all fours as Lockhart, calling himself the "son of the morning" and the "snake in the garden," says that they made a deal to play cards for his freedom, and tonight, they will play for Sharky's soul. He ends with "you're coming through the old hole in the wall with me tonight, Sharky. Now get up."

Sharky, released from the pain, staggers back to his feet, silently crying. Lockhart, advancing towards him as though about to beat him, says "No crying!" and, laughing, references the electrocuted ghost man discussed earlier between Ivan and Richard. The other men enter and continue drinking as they recount their victories over the winos and settle down to play cards. As the game is about to begin, the lights dim on Sharky and

Mr. Lockart, standing at opposite ends of the room contemplating what is about to occur, as the others obliviously banter about food, drink, and cards.

In the second act, it is many hours later, with the wind howling outside and the lights dim. The card game is in progress, and numerous bottles, cans, and empty plates are strewn about. All the men are intoxicated with the exception of Sharky, who has managed to remain sober. The men are coming to the end of a round of heavy betting; Ivan, who with Mr. Lockhart has amassed the biggest pile of money, wins the hand. Richard offers some poteen to Mr. Lockhart, who accepts, and Ivan, Richard, and Mr. Lockhart begin to drink as Nicky explains his new line of business—cheese-mongering—and tells Sharky that Eileen’s daughter Carla had asked after him the other day. Richard, who remembers Carla as a little girl, reminisces fondly; Nicky, who thinks of her less kindly, explains that she is now fifteen or sixteen. Sharky inquires after his old car, making Nicky aware that the car had formerly belonged to him.

Mr. Lockhart, now “a maudlin, philosophical drunk,” says “This is the only time of year I really enjoy... a game of cards on Christmas Eve,” and details the numerous places of the world he has played cards in, ending the list with “Where do I know you from, Ivan?” Lockhart asks if it is true Ivan once won a boat in a card game on Christmas Eve. Ivan relays the story, ending by saying that he lost all the money again in three weeks, betting heavily and eating pub food to the point of “getting the runs so bad the doctor wouldn’t let me out of the house for four days.” The men are laughing until Mr. Lockhart asks what it is that Ivan had to gamble with that was worth as much as the other man’s boat; Ivan, now in a dark place, begrudgingly provides some of the details of a long-ago arson case from which he had been exonerated (although presumably implicated in several deaths), and explains that the bet was that if the other man won, he could ask Ivan what had happened that night.

There is an uncomfortable silence, before the men deal another hand and get up to fetch more liquor and beer. Sharky is the dealer. The men begin to bet. Nicky unexpectedly raises the stakes. Mr. Lockhart raises him. Richard and Ivan fold. Sharky stays in the game, although Richard is displeased, and it is revealed that both Mr. Lockhart and Nicky were bluffing. Sharky wins a hundred euros with a pair of fours, and Nicky, angry, kicks a wall. Mr. Lockhart tells him not to worry, as he’s going to “take Sharky down” by the end of the night. Nicky’s cell phone begins to ring, and the others listen as he begins to bicker with Eileen, who is wondering where he is. Ivan wanders to the stereo and puts on quiet, festive music; Mr. Lockhart, who claims to not like music as all he hears is “just an ugly noise,” asks Ivan to turn it off. Ivan complies. In the silence, Richard begins to tell the men about a dream he had in which he could see again and, while looking at a horsefly that had landed on his window, contemplated the beauty and intricacy of such a small creature. Upon waking, though, he woke up and of course, was still blind, and panicked at not knowing what time or day it was, fell in the kitchen and woke Sharky at five in the morning. He also, laughing, begins to tell Ivan that Sharky, while helping him bathe, discovered a lump near his groin; Sharky, disgusted, asks Richard to stop.

There is a loud bang outside the back door. Richard, Nicky, and Ivan exit to chase the winos; Sharky and Mr. Lockhart are alone. Lockhart, pouring himself more poteen, says he'll take Sharky in the next hand, and then take him through "the old hole in the wall," before swaying and falling over. Saying "to tell the truth, I never drink this much," Lockhart, now shouting, asks what is so great about humans, as they all age and wither while Lockhart will see thousands and millions more Christmas Eves.

Sharky asks what will happen to him if he loses. Lockhart replies he's going to hell. Sharky asks what hell is. Lockhart gives a small laugh and says that hell is just a small fraction of the self-loathing Sharky has felt in his life on earth, locked in a space smaller than a coffin, a thousand miles under the sea, cold and buried alive, unable to die but unable to sleep. He tells Sharky "you'd have loved heaven, it's unbelievable!" and explains that at a certain time each day, music plays, emanating from the sun with clear, "almost unthinkable," beautiful harmonies, and that time in heaven slips away. Time in hell is "bigger and blacker and so much more boundless than you could have ever thought possible."

Lockhart says to Sharky "You've really got it for her, haven't you?" Sharky asks who, and Lockhart replies "The wife of the fella you were working for [...] That sent you all those CDs this morning!" He adds "That's how I know you'll be coming with me tonight. I know you'll lose this next hand. Because you always make a pig's mickey of everything."

Sharky pauses for a moment, and then crosses to the bottle of poteen and pours himself a huge measure. Lockhart mocks him as he drains the glass, and then joylessly pours another. There is a commotion as Richard, Ivan, and Nicky return, laughing, and again pour more drinks and recount their latest battle against the winos. Mr. Lockhart declines another drink, but Nicky notices Sharky pouring himself a drink, and comments, drawing Richard and Ivan's attention. The atmosphere in the room is uneasy as Richard says that he believes in Sharky's ability to change, and Richard dredges up old family wounds as Sharky becomes more and more agitated, finally telling Richard that he'll leave him to fend for himself, saying "Go on, Mr. Lockhart [...] tell him. Tell him!" Nicky, trying to pacify him, stands up to hold him back; Sharky, enraged, tells him that Eileen is too good for him, and Nicky, retaliating, yells back, ending with "You're a nutcase, Sharky! Everybody knows!" Sharky, enraged, throws a punch, and the men fight before Ivan can pull Sharky away, who hurls a final insult at Lockhart as he leaves. Richard apologizes to Lockhart for Sharky's behavior and, as Nicky pours them all another drink, explains that Sharky has always been known for his temper, especially when he's been drinking. A sheepish Sharky emerges a few minutes later, apologizing to Nicky and Richard, but not to Lockhart, and the mood is uncomfortable before Lockhart suggests "let's all finish up like friends and play the last hand and we'll call it a night."

The men all agree. Lockhart deals. Sharky cuts the deck. The betting opens with five euros; Sharky raises to twenty. Richard is upset as Sharky already owes him money; Nicky, Ivan, Richard, and Lockhart stay in and take cards. The bet's to Sharky; he adds fifty. Nicky gets up and walks from the table, decides he's in, and throws in fifty. Ivan

and Richard stay in. Lockhart sees Sharky's fifty with fifty more. Nicky grabs his jacket, saying that it's just too expensive and no longer fun. Ivan and Richard stay in. Sharky raises to eighty. Lockhart raises to one hundred. Ivan and Richard stay in. Sharky, searching his pockets, pulls out some loose change, but says "Richard, I have it." Lockhart says "I'll play him." Richard says that if he wins, Sharky has to cook a meal he's been asking for, but asks what Sharky will pay Lockhart if Lockhart wins. Lockhart says "We'll go get it from that hole in the wall," but the men misinterpret and now believe Sharky to have a secret bank account. Ivan, Richard, Sharky, and Lockhart are all in. Sharky reveals his hand: four eights. Ivan and Richard show four fours; all seems well until Lockhart reveals four tens. Richard, realizing that Sharky is twenty short of being able to pay Lockhart, repeatedly tries to give Lockhart the money, while Nicky exits to try and find a taxi and Ivan runs to the bathroom. Richard, saying he is nervous about Sharky going out at this hour, again offers to pay Lockhart. Sharky says it is something he has to do himself. Richard asks him to promise to come straight home. Sharky pauses, finally saying yes.

Nicky re-enters to say he has found a ride home for himself and Ivan. Ivan emerges from the bathroom wearing a large pair of glasses, excited at finally having found them, and the men begin to say their goodbyes until Ivan notices the cards from the last hand, and exclaims that in his nearsightedness, he mistook four aces for four fours, and has won the bet. Lockhart finally takes the money and puts it on the table, saying "someone's done you a big favor, Sharky," and says goodnight. As he unsteadily climbs the stairs out the door, he says goodbye to Sharky, saying "perhaps we'll play again some time, when my luck changes. Or yours does." Sharky replies that he doesn't want to play anymore, and Lockhart remarks as he leaves that "someone up there likes you, Sharky. You've got it all."

The first rays of dawn seep into the room as Richard, Sharky, and Ivan are left alone. Ivan dozes off as Richard directs Sharky towards the Christmas tree, and Sharky unwraps his gift: a new mobile phone. The men wake Ivan as they make tea in preparation to walk to Christmas mass. Sharky begins to tidy up as Ivan puts on a CD, then helps Richard up the stairs. As the sunlight begins to stream through the windows, John Martyn's "Sweet Little Mystery" plays as Sharky takes the gift card out of his pocket, and stands reading as the lights fade out.

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

-ANONYMOUS

The Seafarer, c. 755 A.D.

Translated from the Anglo Saxon
by Richard Hamer

About The Author—Conor McPherson



"It's like there's a nuclear reactor of anxiety constantly churning away, and the product is these plays that pop out every so often."

-Conor McPherson on his writing process, as quoted to *The Guardian*, September 2006

Born August 6, 1971 in Dublin, Ireland and educated at University College Dublin, McPherson began writing his first plays as a member of UCD Dramsoc, the college's dramatic society, and went on to found Fly By Night Theatre Company which produced several of his plays. He is considered one of the best living contemporary Irish playwrights. His plays rose from humble beginnings in makeshift pub theatre spaces to international productions (notably in the West End and on Broadway). *The Weir*, which resembles *The Seafarer* in setting (a small Dublin pub) and tone (supernatural ghost stories are told as alcohol flows freely), won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play for 1999. His 2004 play *Shining City* prompted the London Telegraph to describe him as "the finest dramatist of his generation." A meditation on regret, guilt and confusion, the play's blend of everyday stories, subtle poignancy and humor made it a riveting experience. It subsequently opened on Broadway in 2006 to great critical acclaim, and was nominated for two Tony Awards, including Best Play.

In September 2006 McPherson made his National Theatre debut as both author and director with *The Seafarer* at the Cottesloe. Jim Norton, in the role of Richard Harkin, won an Olivier Award for his performance while McPherson was nominated for both the Olivier and Evening Standard Awards for Best Play. In October 2007 *The Seafarer* came to Broadway, retaining most of its creative team, including McPherson as director. The production on Broadway received rave reviews including such statements as "McPherson is quite possibly the finest playwright of his generation" from Ben Brantley at the New York Times and "Succinct, startling and eerie, and the funniest McPherson play to date" from the Observer.

The film of McPherson's first screenplay, *I Went Down*, was critically acclaimed and a great commercial success. His first feature film as a director, *Saltwater*, won the CICAIE award for Best Film at the Berlin Film Festival. His second feature film was *The Actors*, which he wrote and directed. He is the director and co-writer of *The Eclipse*, a film which had its world premiere at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival. He currently resides with his wife, a painter, in their three-story home and studio in his Dublin hometown.

Photo of the Set Model by designer David Gordon



A more detailed explanation of set's design and technical elements, by Arden Technical Director Glenn Perlman:

“The setting for The Seafarer is a lower-level living room in Ireland, with actors entering from the second floor above. Veteran Scenic Designer David Gordon has cracked this design challenge by very cleverly integrating a suggested ceiling that comes out over the thrust playing space, indicated by a broken away section of floor boards and ceiling panels above and below large wooden beams. These beams run the entire length of the stage at about 14 feet above the floor, approximately half the height of the cavernous Haas stage.”

“Lighting Designer John Hoey then called for the creation of a gridwork of steel pipes -- affectionately named the ‘Mega-Grid’ -- to be installed a few feet above these beams, so as to be able to shoot lights between the beams without casting large, unnatural shadows on the stage. So the Arden's production staff engineered, created, and installed this new grid two feet above the set, about seven feet below the existing catwalks, in order to light this uniquely designed set. This visual compression of the height of the Haas should create the feeling of the dank, underground environment where the play takes place.”

Vocabulary and Terms

*Some of the terms used by the characters in *The Seafarer* might be unfamiliar to American audiences. Below are listed some common slang words popular in Ireland, with their American translation.*

Anorak—parka; heavy jacket with a hood

Banshee—Irish mythological figure, a woman-messenger of death

Berk—idiot, jerk

Bollocks—literally, testicles, though more commonly used to mean “nonsense” or “useless.”

Chipper—Irish slang for “Fish and Chip Shop,” a restaurant specializing in quick, inexpensive fish fillets and potato chip takeout foods.

Coddle—a dish traditionally associated with Dublin, made of sliced pork sausages, bacon, potatoes, and onions; it is boiled and steamed and served in a large pot.

Craic—pronounced “crack”—difficult to translate, but close to “fun times and conversation”

The Dart—acronym for Dublin Area Railway Transit; public transportation system

Flathulach—generous

Frosties—Frosted Flakes

Gobshite—loud-mouthed person whose words amount to nothing

Jarred—intoxicated, drunk

Jacks—toilet, restroom

Johnny Weissmuller—American actor and professional swimmer best known as icon of physical fitness and strength

Kitchen Roll—paper towels

Kip—nap; can also be used to indicate a run-down house or hovel.

Loo—restroom

Lough Derg—third-largest lake in Ireland

Lorry—truck

Off-License—liquor store.

Matt Talbot—Irish aesthetic embedded in the popular mindset as a former alcoholic turned devout Catholic; icon for Ireland’s temperance movement

Pig’s Mickey—(to make a) mess of things

Poteen—illegally produced Irish whiskey; moonshine. Extremely potent.

Reef—beat (a person) up

Shebeen—similar to the American speakeasy; a bar where liquor is sold without a license

Slash—“to take a slash,” i.e. to go to the bathroom

Solicitor—a lawyer. In the United Kingdom, the legal profession is split between *solicitors* (who have direct contact with clients), and *barristers* (who only become involved with a case during advocacy before a court).

Sponger—one who sponges off others; parasite

Telly—television

Wanker—pejorative term more or less synonymous with “dick” or “jerk.”

Wino—a drunkard or alcoholic, someone intoxicated by wine

The Devil in Popular Culture, Legend, and Myth

In mainstream Christianity, the Devil, commonly viewed as an evil entity, is known as a fallen angel who has rebelled against God. Traditionally, Christians have understood the Devil to be the author of lies and promoter of evil; however, he can go no further than the word of God allows. He is often identified as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, whose persuasions led to original sin and the need for Jesus Christ's redemption. He is also identified as the Accuser of Job, the tempter of the Gospels and the dragon in the Book of Revelation. Alternate names for the Devil include Satan, Lucifer, Abaddon, Beelzebub, Belial, and Iblis, and titles such as Lord of the Underworld, Lord of Hell, Mephistopheles (or, He Who Avoids the Light), Old Scratch, Old Nick, Prince of Darkness, and the Antichrist. Modern conceptions of the Devil include the concept that it symbolizes humans' own lower nature or sinfulness.

The earliest version of the story of the favored angel's fall from heaven is found in the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 14, though it is important to note that the passage never specifically denotes that this is the story of Lucifer. Despite this, the popularly held belief is that Lucifer was a favored angel who grew prideful, and his fall from grace led to his title as the ruler of an underworld of sin and evil.



The Fall of Satan/Lucifer

Gustave Doré's illustration for *Paradise Lost* by John Milton

How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far reaches of the north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.'
But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the far reaches of the pit.
Those who see you will stare at you
and ponder over you:
'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who
shook kingdoms,
who made the world like a desert
and overthrew its cities,
who did not let his prisoners go home?'
All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his
own tomb;
but you are cast out, away from your grave, like a
loathed branch,
clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword,
who go down to the stones of the pit,
like a dead body trampled underfoot.
You will not be joined with them in burial,
because you have destroyed your land, you have
slain your people.

The evolution of Satan/Lucifer in literature and popular culture has a long and storied history over the years since its first appearance in the Bible, and the most prominent early reference is found in the *Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri. *Inferno* is the first part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and is a 14th century allegory detailing the journey of Dante through the medieval concept of hell. The notion of the "Nine Circles of Hell" comes from this work; with each concentric circle symbolizing a gradual increase in wickedness, culminating at the center of the earth where Satan is held in bondage. Each circle's sinners are punished in a fashion befitting their crime, and in Dante's version, Satan is represented as a giant, three-faced beast, waist-deep in ice and eternally gnawing on the bodies of three prominent traitors (Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar, as well as Judas Iscariot, the disciple whose betrayal led to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ). The three faces of Satan are a perversion of the Holy Trinity; while God's three faces are all-knowing, wise, and powerful, Satan's three faces are impotent, ignorant, and evil.



Satan in the Ninth Circle of Hell, as illustrated by Gustave Dore for Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*.



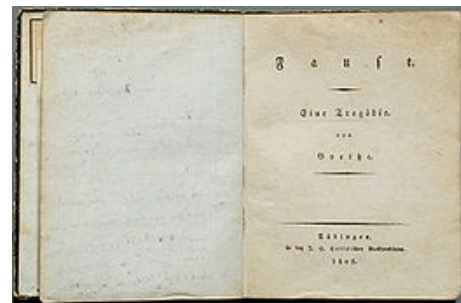
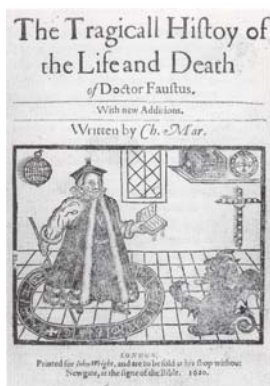
Depiction of Satan, as illustrated by Gustave Dore for John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Many of our contemporary conceptions of the devil, particularly as intelligent, astute tempter, are not found in Alighieri's account, but rather from English poet John Milton. Milton, whose epic poem *Paradise Lost* grapples with theological issues of fate, predestination, and the Trinity, chronicles the Fall of Man, the temptation of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Here, Satan is ambitious and proud, but also eloquent and a rousing public speaker who must employ his rhetorical abilities towards gaining followers to wage large-scale war against God. It is here that Satan becomes a more fascinating, fully realized figure: rather than simply the "embodiment of evil," Satan is given a motivation and explanation for his fall from heaven, and while in Dante's version he is held captive, here the gates of hell fly open whenever Satan wishes to enter or exit. Through his delusions and narcissism, creatures such as Sin and Death are begot, and in fact hell is a creation of Satan's own tormented mind.

The concept of the human soul as a commodity for the devil, however, is evolved not from the Italians or the English, but rather the Germans. Although the exact origins of the Faust legend are unclear, the major elements of the story remain unchanged from one version to another—Faust or Faustus, (Latin for “auspicious” or “lucky,”) makes a pact with the devil to sell his soul in order to gain knowledge. The earliest version of the story has been traced back to a pocket-sized German pamphlet published in 1587; various retellings of the story circulated around Europe until the publication of the first famous adaptation, Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Faustus, who is compared in the text to Icarus (a Greek mythological figure punished for excessive hubris), comments that he has learned all that he can possibly learn about every subject he has studied, and summons a devil called Mephistopheles to his room. Mephistopheles, explaining that he is an agent of Lucifer, acts as messenger to strike a bargain: Faustus has twenty-four more years of life on Earth during which Mephistopheles will act as his personal servant; afterwards, his soul will be given to Lucifer and he will spend eternity damned in hell. Faustus, essentially, spends the remainder of the play doing nothing of worth or purpose, and though encouraged throughout the play to repent, ultimately is taken to hell by Mephistopheles in the end.

In another famous adaptation of the legend, however, the play has a radically different tone as well as ending. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* is a tragic, epic play, considered by many to be among the finest works in German literature. Faust, a scholar searching to discover the true meaning of life, attracts the attention of the devil (rather than summoning the devil to him); Mephistopheles, in the form of a black poodle trailing fire, follows Faust home from a walk and, transforming his shape into the more conventional hooves-and-horned devil of popular imagining, proposes to serve Faust on earth if Faust will serve him in hell. The arrangement is complicated by the clause that if Faust is so pleased with anything the devil can give him on earth that he wishes to stay in the moment forever, he will die that instant; Mephistopheles is ultimately thwarted by this technicality in the final moments of the play, and angels descend to carry Faust’s body to heaven.

At left: The 1620 edition of *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe. At right: the 1818 first printing of Goethe’s *Faust*.



Notes on *The Seafarer*, Old English Poem

The Seafarer is an Old English poem recorded in the Exeter Book, one of the four surviving manuscripts of Old English poetry. It is a 124-line elegy (a mourning, sorrowful poem).

It is told from the point of view of an old seafarer, who is reminiscing and evaluating his life as he has lived it. In the opening lines, the seafarer describes the desolate hardships of life on the wintry sea. He describes the anxious feelings, cold wetness, and solitude of the sea voyage in contrast to life on land where men are surrounded by kinsmen, free from dangers, and full on food and wine. The climate on land then begins to resemble that of the wintry sea, and in the middle section, the speaker shifts his tone from the dreariness of the winter voyage and begins to describe his yearning for the sea. Time passes through the seasons from winter—"it snowed from the north" to spring—"groves assume blossoms" -- and to summer—"the cuckoo urges". It is here that the speaker's soul flies out over the sea in search of heaven and comes back eager and ready to depart.

Though this poem begins as a narrative of a life lived on the sea, it shifts in tone and content and becomes a praise of God. Halfway through the poem, the sea is no longer mentioned; instead the speaker preaches about the path to heaven. He asserts that "earthly happiness will not endure, that men must oppose "the devil with brave deeds", and that earthly wealth cannot travel to the afterlife nor will it determine the wealth of the soul. Next, the speaker asks to men to consider where they want to spend the afterlife and "then reflect upon how we could come there." Heaven is a goal for man to reach by living a good, honorable life. The poem concludes by praising God.

The poem has attracted considerable scholarly attention and has been translated from the Anglo-Saxon multiple times, including one version by the famous poet Ezra Pound. Early critics debated whether the poem was in fact voiced by two speakers (an elderly man cautioning against the hardships of life on the sea, contrasted with a younger man eager to begin his voyage), but more recent scholarship concludes that it is, in fact, a unified monologue. Though the literal and allegorical meanings of the poem have been debated for years, recent scholars have argued for the poem to be interpreted as a psychological allegory, with the hardship of life on the sea equated with the misery and exile of leading a sinful life.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Conor McPherson takes the title of the play from the Old English Poem? How do the two relate to one another?
2. In the opening of the play, McPherson takes great pains to vividly describe the location and setting of the house, emphasizing particularly that the action takes place in the lower level of the home. Why do you think McPherson does so? What parallels can you draw between the setting and the play's themes?
3. Mr. Lockhart does not enter until well into the second scene, and does not reveal his purposes for being there until nearly the completion of act one. How does Mr. Lockhart's character change the tone and theme of the play?
4. Does McPherson's interpretations of Mr. Lockhart fit with your own perceptions of the Devil? In what ways are they similar? In what ways does McPherson's personification change your perception of who or what the Devil is?
5. For most of the play, all the men but Sharky consume vast quantities of alcohol onstage. How does Sharky's abstaining from drink alter our perception of his character? When he does begin to drink in the second act, do we view him differently? Does alcohol alter the narrative or symbolism of the play?
6. There are several characters referenced in the play whom we never meet, several of them wives and girlfriends. Why do you think McPherson chooses to leave these characters offstage?
7. The character of Richard has recently been struck blind. How does blindness reoccur as a metaphor throughout the play?
8. Although the play appears initially to be grounded firmly in reality, several supernatural elements are introduced. Identify these themes. How do they change our understanding of the play's significance?