

2008

# Historical and self-imposed asylums in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, *Malone dies*, and "First love"

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Historical and Self-Imposed Asylums in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*,  
*Malone Dies*, and "First Love"

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of British Literature  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
June 12, 2008

Keywords: asylum, Dundrum, Bethlem, Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, imprisonment,  
insanity, Foucault

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### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my director Dr. Susan Mooney for her support, encouragement, and patience throughout the completion of this thesis. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, doctors Hunt Hawkins, Regina Hewitt, and Silvia Ruffo Fiore, for their wonderful suggestions and helpful hints. Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé Andrew Guba for his words of encouragement when I needed them the most.

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Historical and Self-Imposed Asylums in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, *Malone Dies*, and  
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Abstract

This thesis examines the uses and implications of historical and self-imposed asylums in several of Samuel Beckett's works, most notably *Murphy*, *Malone Dies*, and "First Love." The first half of this study compares several historical Irish and British asylums to Beckett's frictional institutions in order to illuminate the recurring motifs of sanity, asylums as retreats for the wealthy, and the links between prisons and asylums. I also examine Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon guards as an alternate reading of Beckett's views on sanity. In *Murphy* and *Malone Dies*, for example, Beckett questions what it means to be sane through his role reversals of nurses and patients. His often under qualified and sadistic nurses are depicted as the real lunatics while their patients seem quite sane in comparison.

In the second portion of this study, I suggest that the self-imposed asylums in *Murphy* and "First Love" are in fact the protagonists' attempts at both erasing society and becoming physically invisible. Through and extended analysis of each text, I explore the various "cells" created by each hero as well as their social implications. By ostracizing themselves, for instance, I argue that the protagonists of *Murphy* and "First Love" gain a

form of power that the protagonists of *Molly* and *Malone Dies* lack. Murphy's and "First Love"'s demands for "imprisonment" under their own terms once again reverse the roles of helpless patient and powerful nurse.

## Introduction

Samuel Barclay Beckett's career clearly demonstrates his fascination with, and fear of, institutionalization. Works such as *Murphy*, *Malone Dies*, and "First Love" all deal with the underlying themes of sanity, imprisonment, and the wish for freedom. The author's interest in imprisonment and insanity seems to have developed well before his first work was ever written. According to biographer James Knowlson, Beckett often spoke of his interuterine memories, and was once quoted as saying, "I remember feeling trapped, of being imprisoned and unable to escape, of crying to be let out but no one could hear, no one was listening" (171). Beckett's fear of being "imprisoned" continued throughout his life, and was likely fueled through his visits to Bethlem Royal Hospital, Newcastle Sanatorium, and Luttringhausen Penitentiary.<sup>1</sup>

After visiting Luttringhausen Penitentiary to see a rendition of *Waiting for Godot* in 1954, for example, Beckett became close friends with several inmates, and even gave small sums to a German prisoner after he left on parole. Due to his "natural sympathy for those who were incarcerated," Beckett later financially supported a former inmate from San Quentin for several years (Knowlson 370).

Beckett was more than just a patron to prisoners, however, and was said to have had a complex relationship with the incarcerated. Douglas "Rick" Clutchey, the former

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<sup>1</sup> Beckett toured Bethlem several times in order to add credibility to *Murphy*, while his visits to Newcastle Sanatorium in Wicklow County, Ireland, and Luttringhausen Penitentiary near Wuppertal, Germany, were to see his uncle Boss Sinclair and a prisoner whom he befriended, respectively (Knowlson 198, 191, 369).

inmate from San Quentin, for example, became a son-like figure to Beckett, and frequently discussed his life in prison with the author (Knowlson 542). Clutchey's ability to endure and overcome the very conditions which most horrified the author fascinated him, mainly due to his "fear of enclosure and clausturation." In addition to his apprehension, Beckett also hated "violence and degradation," both of which can be prevalent in correctional institutions (542). Perhaps the most telling reason Beckett feared going to jail, however, was his "horror at a penal system in which for so many there was no hope either of rehabilitation or release." This fear of being "trapped" and unable to escape may very well be the key reason so many of his works include the theme of social or physical imprisonment.

Penitentiaries and criminals are rarely found in Beckett's works, however, while insane asylums and mental patients are common. By substituting lucid criminals for supposedly mentally challenged individuals, the author adds another dimension to the terror of imprisonment: the fear of incarceration for a crime one does not understand or did not commit. To reflect this anxiety Beckett's protagonists often begin their tales of captivity unable to explain why they were captured, or how they came to be in their current locations (e.g., Molloy, Malone, and Macmann). Since they do not understand their "crimes," the heroes have no way of justifying themselves, nor do they know how long they will be kept. Criminals are frequently imprisoned for specific periods of time, and may be released early for good behavior or cooperation with authorities; mental patients, however, often serve life sentences, since rehabilitation is commonly viewed as impossible.

This study is divided into two chapters as a result of the recurring historical, social, and self-imposed asylums in Beckett's works. The first chapter of this study "Institutionalization and the Question of Sanity in Beckett's Work," primarily focuses upon the historical accuracies and inaccuracies of asylums in Beckett's work. At the same time, it examines the recurring motifs of sanity, asylums as retreats for the wealthy, and the links between prisons and asylums. In *Murphy* and *Malone Dies*, for example, Beckett questions what it means to be sane through his role reversals of nurses and patients. His often under qualified and sadistic nurses are depicted as the real lunatics while their patients seem quite sane in comparison. Although there are many historical reasons for Beckett's cynical outlook on nurses, which are briefly addressed in Chapter One, several social implications are noted as well. Through a comparison of *Murphy's* nurses and Michel Foucault's Panopticon guards, for example, I suggest that Beckett's asylums are reflections of more than just an ever prying society: they also represent the madness of the mid-twentieth century.

The first portion of this study also explores the ways in which Beckett's depictions of asylums both mock and validate society's fears of, and views on, insanity. Through the exaggerated patient ratios of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, or M.M.M., for example, Beckett touches on the rampant fear of mass institutionalization in late nineteenth- and early twentieth- century Ireland. I argue that, although there were significant rises in the number of Ireland's committed and voluntary mental patients, these numbers are not nearly as staggering as *Murphy* indicates, suggesting Beckett's satirical outlook on the situation.

While the first chapter of this study, “Institutionalization and the Question of Sanity in Beckett’s Work,” explores the historical and social aspects of Beckett’s asylums, the second half, “Self-Imposed Asylums in “First Love” and *Murphy*,” examines the physical and mental barriers created by two of Beckett’s protagonists. This portion of the study argues that the protagonists of “First Love” and *Murphy* attempt to escape the pain caused by personal relationships through their various forms of self-imposed asylums. The protagonists’ end goal is to achieve a form of invisibility, to either erase themselves from society or to erase society itself.

Through extended analyses of “First Love” and *Murphy*, it is also established that the very materials used to create the heroes’ asylums are often products of society, and thus constant reminders of it. Moreover, despite their many attempts to physically leave society behind, each protagonist eventually returns to it, both physically and mentally. The protagonists’ inability to completely escape from society suggests a deep need for connection with the outside world. At the same time, it is argued that the very act of building self-imposed asylums is empowering, and places the asylum’s creator in a position of authority.

## Chapter One:

### Institutionalization and the Question of Sanity in Beckett's Work

Beckett's fear of imprisonment is most apparent in his portrayals of historical mental institutions. The frequent mixture of historical fact and humorous exaggeration in his works reveals a complex understanding of historical and social asylums. Through the reversal of the traditional roles of nurses and patients, for example, Beckett is able to both satirize and question social views of what it means to be sane. Moreover, *Murphy's* often humorous depictions of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, or M.M.M., explore the very real fear that asylums were becoming retreats for the wealthy. On a more historical note, the impact of World Wars One and Two can also be found in *Malone Dies*, through its use of sanitation and atmosphere. To cover such a range of topics, this chapter is divided into five sections, each addressing a slightly different topic while remaining on the major theme of the social asylum.

## 1. The Not So “Sane Eye”: Nurses in *Murphy* and *Malone Dies*

Like Foucault’s Panopticon guards, the nurses of the M.M.M. become an extension of an ever prying society. When Murphy visits the M.M.M.’s padded cells for the first time, the narrator describes them as, “windowless, like a monad, except for the shuttered judas in the door, at which a sane eye appeared, or was employed to appear, at frequent and regular intervals throughout the twenty-four hours” (109). The “shuttered judas” in this case becomes a sort of one-way window through which the nurses (or metaphorically speaking, the outside world) can view their wards without being viewed themselves. The word “judas” itself further connotes a feeling of betrayal, suggesting that the nurses, or “sane eye,” betray all that the patients do in order to shame or control them. Unlike the prisoners of the Panopticon, the wards of the M.M.M. may not realize the dangers or implications of being watched. The schizophrenic Mr. Endon, for example, seems to acknowledge Murphy’s existence when he stares at the judas during Murphy’s nightly round (144). While Murphy believes that this is a sign of Mr. Endon recognizing “the feel of his friend’s eye upon him,” the narrator intimates that Mr. Endon is incapable of having a friend and sees Murphy as “no more than chess” (144). Similarly, when the hypomaniac attempts to attack Murphy through the judas, he is simply reacting to the sudden light in his room and not because he is being watched (144). In both cases, the “sane eye” becomes more than a metaphor for a nurse or society attempting to shame an individual into compliance with social norms, since it is impossible to shame an individual who cannot or will not acknowledge the outside world. Instead, Beckett’s “sane eye” questions what it means to be sane. The nurses of the

M.M.M., for example, are depicted as either drunken poets like Ticklepenny (55) or as homosexual nepotists who are willing to keep even the most hopeless patients for financial gain (95, 97, 100). Even Murphy's sanity is questioned after he allows the schizophrenic Mr. Endon to roam the wards at night (148).

The question of the "sane eye" reappears in *Malone Dies*, when Macmann is assigned a new nurse, Lemuel. Lemuel inadvertently questions the line between the "insane" and "sane" when he summarizes Macmann's inquiry as to the status of the institution St. John of God's. Curious as to whether he is in a "hospice for the aged and infirm or a madhouse," Macmann asks Lemuel to find the answer. In response, Lemuel writes, "mad or like me" (260). Ironically, the narrator portrays Lemuel as being perhaps even more certifiable than Malone and Macmann combined. Lemuel's sadistic personality becomes apparent shortly after he introduces himself to his new ward. After casually telling Macmann that his nurse (and lover) has died, Lemuel commands Macmann to eat his porridge while it is boiling (259). The narrator later explains that Lemuel is "more stupid than malevolent, and yet his malevolence [is] considerable," and that he is prone to self-mutilation (259-60). In fact, Lemuel is so similar to the patients of St. John of God's that the only thing differentiating the "Macmanns [...] and Lemuels" are the "white cloak[s] with [their] blue butcher stripes"<sup>2</sup> worn by the wards (269).

Despite the similarities between Lemuel and the patients he oversees, Lemuel seems to be more of a symbol of the madness of the mid-twentieth century. While introducing himself, Lemuel says, "My name is Lemuel, [...] though my parents were probably Aryan" (259). Right away, Lemuel links himself to Nazi ideology and its

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, it is Lemuel who should be wearing "butcher stripes," due to his mass murder at the end of the novel.

aversion of anything Jewish, including names. The fact that he mentions his parents “were *probably* Aryan” (emphasis mine) means that he has doubt, and may be the reason for his self mutilation (259).<sup>3</sup> Given that *Malone Dies* was started in 1947, shortly after World War II, it is quite possible that Lemuel is a former soldier. According to Melling and Forsythe, it was common for old soldiers to be recruited to mental hospitals as caretakers (57). Taking this into consideration, Lemuel’s behavior points to more than just his being a “psychopath” as noted in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Ackerley and Gontarski 343). Lemuel displays several symptoms often attributed to shell shock or Post-traumatic Stress Disorder; for example, he has sudden outbursts of anger, enjoys the feeling of pain, often drifts off into a daze, and has flashbacks (*Malone Dies* 260). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder may also explain his brutal slaying of the sailors, whose uniforms may remind him of Marines, at the end of the novel.

Beckett’s cynical portrayals of nurses have some historical weight, and several biographers, such as Bair and Knowlson, have also noted Beckett’s strained relationship with his mother, May Beckett, whom once worked as a nurse.<sup>4</sup> Although May Beckett never worked in a mental hospital, Beckett was well aware of how asylums were run. His close friend Geoffrey Thompson, a senior house physician at Bethlem Royal Hospital, often gave Beckett tours of the institution (Knowlson 197).<sup>5</sup> As a result, Beckett was able not only to observe patients with various illnesses, but also the duties of nurses. He even interviewed at least one nurse at the hospital to bolster *Murphy*’s credibility (Knowlson 197-98). Therefore, he likely knew that poor working conditions took their

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<sup>3</sup> Since Lemuel’s name is Hebrew (often translated as meaning “belonging to God,” or “dedicated to God”) he may very well be of Jewish descent.

<sup>4</sup>Beckett’s mother, Mary Jones Roe (commonly called May), is often cited as having wild mood swings (Bair 8; Knowlson 26-27).

<sup>5</sup> Beckett also visited his uncle Boss Sinclair at Newcastle Sanatorium in 1935 (Knowlson 191).

toll on the attendants and doctors who stayed at mental asylums.<sup>6</sup> Lack of experience and pre-existing mental disorders also pushed many employees to the brink of insanity. For example, in one workhouse, an inspector found a nurse who herself was mentally ill in charge of the insane females (Torrey para. 265). To “reward” her for watching the patients, she was given “half a pint of beer daily.”

Long work hours with limited vacations were also major problems for the staff of most British and Irish hospitals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In keeping with this historical trend, head nurse Bim assigns Murphy ten-hour day shifts: “8 to 12 and 2 to 8” (*Murphy* 97). In addition to working ten hours a day, Murphy is expected to “make beds, carry trays, clean up regular messes, clean up casual messes, read thermometers, write charts, wash the bedridden, give medicine, hound down its effects, warm bedpans, cool fevers, boil gags, sterilize when in doubt, honour and obey the male sister, wait hand, foot and mouth on the doctor when he came, [and] look pleasant” (96). Aside from the fact that Murphy has no medical background, the narrator attempts to convey the nearly impossible list of nurses’ duties, while at the same time touching on the fact that hospitals such as the fictional M.M.M. had such a desperate need for attendants, that they would hire anyone willing to do the job. Even the poet Ticklepenny had no previous nursing experience before he was coerced into the position of nurse.

Despite the historical hardships nurses faced, the vast majority of asylum attendants were not abusive, nor were they clinically insane in the early twentieth

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<sup>6</sup> Several historians, such as Joseph Melling, Bill Forsythe, and Frank Crompton, have noted the high turnover rate of asylum workers. Crompton, for example, cites the lack of formal training and low wages as two of the most compelling reasons attendants of Powick Asylum quickly sought new employment (50).

century. Beckett's depictions of incompetent and abusive nurses are clearly exaggerated in order to add a combination of humor and horror to his works. However, they may also be the result of his fear of imprisonment. According to Knowlson, Beckett was both fascinated by and terrified of institutionalization. To him, "prison was a world that he did not know at all but one that made him shudder because of his fear of enclosure and clausturation, his hatred of violence and degradation, and his horror at a penal system in which for so many there was no hope of either rehabilitation or release" (Knowlson 542).<sup>7</sup> Although there are differences between prisons and mental asylums, both are known for their enclosure and clausturation, violence and degradation, and little hope of rehabilitation or release. The horror of being at the mercy of a sadistic caretaker is illuminated throughout *Malone Dies*, as are the social and historical links between prisons and asylums, which will be addressed in the following section.

## 2. The "Criminally" Insane: Links between Asylums and Prisons

Fear of the insane or mentally disabled has always existed in society. By the 1830's, this fear had become so intense in Great Britain and Ireland that several measures were taken to expel the insane from society. For example, *Sex and Seclusion, Class and Custody*, Jonathan Andrews and Anne Digby note that "in Ireland, legislation criminalized the insane and labeled the majority of pauper insane as dangerous" (27). This fear of the mentally ill eventually led to the Dangerous Lunatics Act. In "Gender and Insanity in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," Oonagh Walsh explains several of the Act's policies and procedures. For example, the Act allowed officials to arrest deranged

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<sup>7</sup> Beckett knew several prisoners, and even visited Luttringhausen penitentiary (369, 370, 540-42).

individuals, even if they had yet to commit a crime (77). The authorities simply had to bring the individual before two justices of the peace, and label the person as dangerous. After this was done, the accused was then taken to the nearest asylum and admitted (Walsh 77). While Walsh traces several historical cases in which mentally ill persons were arrested under this act, Beckett's works only briefly allude to it. In *Malone Dies*, for example, the narrator (Malone) explains how Macmann suddenly awakens in Saint John of God's, unable to understand how he came to be there (249). Although there is no mention of Macmann having been presented to justices of the peace, it is obvious that at some point he had been deemed dangerous to society, and therefore required hospitalization. Of course, the most likely reason for Macmann's institutionalization is the odd behavior he displays in the public park and the fact that he is a vagabond (*Malone Dies* 239).

What is most interesting about Macmann's admission, however, is the link created between asylum and prison. Not only is Macmann assigned a number to replace his name, like a criminal or prisoner, but his room is also called a "cell" (249). Likewise, the narrator uses words like "inmate," and "fugitive" (268), and depicts Macmann dressed in a "great striped coat" (267) to link at first subtly patients of mental institutions to prisoners; he then makes the connection extremely apparent when he first describes the patients wandering around St. John of God's and cries, "I was going to say [...] the *prisoners!*" (emphasis mine 270).

The fact that Macmann is put into solitary confinement also connects him with dangerous criminals. During the majority of his stay, Macmann is sequestered in his "cell," with his nurse Moll being his only link to the outside world. It is only when the

disturbed caretaker Lemuel takes over that Macmann is able to venture outside. Yet even the outside of St. John of God's is depicted as an imposing medieval castle or perhaps even the dreary mansion from Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Malone describes it with the zest of a good horror story:

It was a plateau, Moll had not lied, or rather a great mound with gentle slopes. The entire top was occupied by the domain of Saint John and there the wind blew almost without ceasing, causing the stoutest trees to bend and groan, breaking the boughs, tossing the bushes, lashing the ferns to fury, flattening the grass and whirling leaves and flowers far away. [...] A high wall encompassed it about, without however shutting off the view, unless you happened to be in its lee. (270)

Not only is St. John of God's surrounded by a wall, but this wall is "unbroken and smooth and topped uninterruptedly with broken glass" (*Malone Dies* 271). At the main entrance stands "two charming lodges covered by Virginia creeper." As a result, the connection between prison and asylum is hard to miss: the wall adorned with broken glass brings to mind modern prisons surrounded by tall fences topped with razor wire, while the "charming lodges" become modern guard shacks. Elizabeth Malcolm explains that it was not uncommon for people to compare asylums to prisons. According to Malcolm, one nineteenth-century asylum expert in particular, H.C. Burdett, was so thoroughly shocked by the sparse rooms and depressing atmosphere of Irish asylums that he once claimed, "It is probable that no workhouse in England presents nowadays so gaunt and cheerless an appearance as may be found in many Irish asylums, [there are] perpetual reminders of the prison" everywhere (qtd. in Malcolm 323).

The very attitude of the “prisoners” in *Malone Dies* is drastically different than that of earlier works such as *Murphy*. Unlike the patients in *Murphy* who play games and seem to enjoy their institutionalization, at least in Murphy’s mind, Macmann longs for something more, and even attempts to escape during one of his walks through the asylum’s gardens. Despite the open space around him, Macmann feels as if “space hemmed him in on every side and held him in its toils, [...] and the trapped huddled things changed and died each one according to its solitude” (271). Sadly for Macmann, even going on an excursion to a local island starts off as more limiting than freeing. On the way to the shore, the other patients are tethered by their ankles in pairs, while Lemuel holds Macmann by the arm (276). Although Macmann is not tied like the rest of the patients, he still feels the need to try making a “bid for freedom” (278). Yet after Lemuel kills the sailors, he forces Macmann and the other patients to set sail in the small boat that brought them to the island. Whether Macmann is finally free or the captive of what Foucault would call a “Ship of Fools” (vii) is left for debate, as the novel ends with the men drifting across the sea.

Beckett’s shifting depictions of asylums in *Murphy* and *Malone Dies* seems to be the result of the various perceptions of the characters viewing the mental patients. Since Murphy longs for the detachment the patients of the M.M.M. “enjoy,” he naively glosses over the suffering they might endure. Malone, on the other hand, has presumably lived in an asylum for quite some time, thus allowing him a firsthand account of the real horrors faced by asylum patients. Moreover, Murphy’s status as a nurse places him in a position of authority while Malone and Macmann are depicted as helpless patients. Since Malone cannot control his situation, it is understandable that his fictional character Macmann

would view St. John of God's as oppressive and make several attempts at regaining freedom.

### 3. Accuracy of Patient Admissions in *Murphy* and *Malone Dies*

The depictions of asylums in Beckett's works not only examine the parallel between asylums and prisons, but also raise the question of patient admissions. For example, *Murphy* mocks the differences between public and private institutions. In early passages, the narrator simply references various institutions to add to the humor of various scenes. The first allusion arises when lovesick Neary goes into a fit of rage in the General Post Office (29). When his old student Wylie realizes that Neary may be arrested for his crazed attack on a statue, he quickly hatches a plan to save his friend. Cleverly, Wylie begs the security guard to excuse his friend, by "tapp[ing] his forehead [...] as one sane man to another" and saying, "'John o' God's. Hundred per cent harmless'" (29). When the guard refuses to let them go, Wylie assures him that Neary is from "Stillorgan, [...] Not Dundrum," and that he is "John o' God's, [...] quite as a child" (30). One reason Wylie is careful to explain that Neary is from Stillorgan and not Dundrum is that Dundrum Asylum was opened in 1850 strictly for the criminally insane (Torrey 132). On the other hand, St. John of God's, located in Stillorgan, Dublin, was a private insane asylum (Torrey 142).

The theme of public versus private institutions is brought up again later in the novel. In one of the most famous scenes, Murphy is hired at the M.M.M. (a "hospital for the better-class mentally deranged" [54]) and shown around the facility. On his tour,

Murphy asks how many of the patients at the Mercyseat are actually certified. The first response is little more than a lecture on how to serve his patients, yet he is later told that, “about 15 per cent of the patients [are] certified,” and are “treated with exactly the same sanguine punctilio as the 85 per cent that were not certified” (97). The M.M.M. may be a private institution, which accounts for the high number of self committed individuals, yet the narrator goes on to explain that “the M.M.M. was a sanatorium, not a madhouse nor a home for defectives, and as such admitted only those cases whose prognoses were not hopeless” (97). The thought that such extreme patients as Clarke or Mr. Endon are not “hopeless” and will eventually return to society seems ridiculous. Yet the narrator justifies this discrepancy by noting that most patients who were deemed incurable were sent to another institution. The narrator remarks that, if the “chronic” were “a really charming chap, quiet, clean, biddable, and solvent, he might be allowed to settle down in the M.M.M. for the rest of his natural” (97-98). Here, Beckett is clearly satirizing the common view that mental institutions cater to the wealthy by becoming a retreat.<sup>8</sup> To support this attack, the schizophrenic Mr. Endon is portrayed as rich in his “fine dressing-gown of scarlet byssus faced with black braid, black silk pyjamas and neo-merovingian poulaines of deepest purple” and with fingers which “blazed with rings” (112).

Although Mr. Endon is the only patient portrayed as extremely rich, the narrator intimates that he is not the only one enjoying his stay. In fact, it is noted that, “There were a few such fortunate cases, certified and uncertified, enjoying all the amenities of a mental hospital, from paraldehyde to slosh, without any of its therapeutic vexations” (98). These “fortunate cases” may not be rich like Mr. Endon, but they are taking advantage of

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<sup>8</sup> Upper-class asylums such as Saint John of God’s or Holloway often treated patients to musical performances, balls, sporting events, and plays (Shepherd 242). Even several public asylums, such as Brookwood, believed in the healing powers of music (Shepherd 242).

the carefree lifestyle. In this way, Beckett is doing more than just accusing the rich of using asylums as retreats; he is in fact blaming many patients (both certified and uncertified) of escaping the burdens of society by becoming, or claiming to be, insane. The very fact that many of the “fortunate” patients are not benefiting from the “therapeutic vexations” simply proves that these patients have no need for the treatments in the first place.

Beckett may be parodying more than just those who fake a mental illness. Started only five years after the introduction of England’s 1930 Mental Treatment Act, *Murphy* plays with the fear that society is either becoming insane or indolent. According to David Pearce, the Mental Treatment Act of 1930 was more of an addendum of the 1890 Lunacy Act than a replacement (112). What is important about the Mental Treatment Act of 1930, however, is that patients could now admit themselves without the authorization of family members or doctors (Pearce 113). Since “85 per cent” of the patients of the M.M.M. are not certified (*Murphy* 97), one could conclude that after the passing of the 1930 Mental Treatment Act it was feared that there would be a dramatic rise in the number of self-admitted patients. Yet the true ratio of certified to self-admitted patients in mental institutions of Beckett’s time does not seem to support this fear. In Devon Mental Hospital, for example, nearly 250 patients were certified in 1931, compared to about 60 who voluntarily admitted themselves (Pearce 116). This trend dramatically increased from 1932 to 1934, where the ratio jumped to nearly 250 certified and 110 voluntary patients. The closest the populations came to one another was in the years 1937 and 1938, when there were roughly 250 certified and nearly 150 self-admitted wards (Pearce 116). Beckett may not have known the actual patient ratios before and

after the 1930 Mental Act, but due to his connections in the mental health field it is likely that he would have known if there was a sudden rise in self-admitted patients. Likewise, Irish newspapers, most notably the *Irish Independent*, frequently covered trials involving temporary insanity, as well as the rises and falls in committed patients.<sup>9</sup> However, the self-admitted patients never came close to the 85 percent mentioned in *Murphy*.

Therefore, it is quite likely that Beckett is simply mocking the public's worries of a mass institutionalization. He may also be implying a societal illness which pushes individuals to check themselves into asylums whether or not they are in need of medical treatment.

To further his comparison between asylum and retreat, Beckett also mocks the actual act of admission, as well as raises the question of how many patients admitted themselves out of fear or an inability to understand what they were doing. In the second half of *Malone Dies*, the narrator suddenly places his character Macmann in St. John of God's mental institution. Shortly after his arrival, Macmann is promised "an imperial half-pint of porter and a plug of tobacco on Saturdays" (249) should he sign an admission form. While the "half-pint of porter and plug of tobacco" may sound like a stretch, Beckett is correct when he writes that asylums provided these luxuries as well as "nourishment carefully calculated to keep you alive, and even well" (*Malone Dies* 249). According to Crompton, it was not uncommon for lunatic asylums to give patients beer and other alcoholic beverages during the late 1800's (51). Perhaps even more interesting, however, is that the Poor Law required a very strict diet for asylum patients, yet exempted pauper asylums (51). Crompton goes on to cite the tenth volume of S. and B.

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<sup>9</sup> *Irish Independent's* "Mental Hospitals" 1928, for example, discusses patient ratios from an Inspector's report, as well as the lack of uniformity in admissions and discharges, while "'Political Pressure' on Land Commission" 1938 proposes the building of a new mental hospital to ease the burden on Dundrum, along with discussions of the limited resources and poor working conditions for Attendants. Other archived Irish newspapers can also be found at [Irish Newspaper Archives.com](http://IrishNewspaperArchives.com).

Webb's English Poor Law Policy (1963) that pauper lunatics be given "whatever was necessary" to ensure their health (qtd. in Crompton 62 n 16). *Malone Dies* takes this theme of "whatever was necessary" to an extreme, by complaining that "when [patients] cannot swallow any more someone rams a tube down their gullet, or up their rectum, and fills them full of vitaminized pap, so as not to be accused of murder" (246).

There is more to Macmann's asylum admission than just an interest in his health, however. As noted by the narrator, Macmann obediently signs his own admission form. However, his obedience may stem from more than an acknowledgement of his unstable mental health; according to the narrator, "[...] Macmann obeyed, either because he was afraid of being punished if he refused or because he did not realize the seriousness of what he was doing [...]" (249). The fact that none of the doctors have evaluated his psychological health should give readers pause. Finding a disheveled man passed out in a park would certainly cause one to believe he is insane; however, Macmann later shows just how rational he really is. Not only is he able to form a loving, albeit somewhat bizarre, relationship with his nurse Moll, but Macmann also asks his next attendant Lemuel several important questions. For example, he questions whether Saint John of God's is a "private institution or one run by the State, a hospice for the aged and infirm or a madhouse" (259). He also asks if one were to wish to leave, how might one do so?

By challenging the admission practices of mental institutions, the narrator of *Malone Dies* leads readers to ask: why would an asylum want patients to admit themselves? Especially if *Malone Dies* takes place around World War I or World War II (more on this later), there would be no reason for an institution to want more patients; there simply were not enough supplies or staff to go around. Yet the medical staff in

*Malone Dies* seem quite anxious for Macmann's admission. One possible reason for the staff's anxiety ties back to the Marxist belief that there is little difference between society and mental asylums. Like most governments, the St. John doctors tell Macmann, "Take no thought for anything, it is we shall think and act for you, from now forward" (249). In a sense, the asylum becomes the government that writers such as Orwell and Kafka fear, a society in which the masses simply follow orders and serve time for crimes they do not remember committing. It is also possible that the institution receives an allowance for each patient admitted. In this case, the asylum may have had an empty bed that needed to be filled, or one more ward to meet a certain quota. In either case, this would mean Macmann is actually more of a commodity than a human, pointing to a Marxist reading.

#### 4. The "Link" between Pauperism and Insanity

While Macmann may seem like a good candidate for re-assimilation back into society, it is a historical fact that many institutions retained individuals for fear of a relapse. Pamela Dale and Joseph Melling explain in *Mental Illness and Learning Disability since 1850* that, like many other institutions, "Bethlem experienced a problem in the early modern period which is often associated with 'chronic' patients [...] : namely, the difficulties encountered in discharging idiots from care once they had been admitted" (4). This problem was also extended to paupers, and the fear that they would continue to burden society after being discharged. Edwin Torrey's *The Invisible Plague: The Rise of Mental Illness from 1750 to the Present* examines the histories of several institutions in England, Ireland, the United States, and Canada. His chapter "The Birth of

Bedlam: Insanity prior to 1700” examines several aspects of England’s obsession with the insane. For instance, Torrey notes that, “One measure of the increasing popular interest in insanity was the number of ballads written about it” (par. 50). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, two distinct forms of songs and verses came about: the ‘Bedlamite’ verses and ‘mad songs,’ respectively (Torrey par. 50). According to Torrey, the ‘Bedlamite’ verses used the theme of a “beggar released from Bethlem.” Often, these songs were printed so that they could be sung in the streets or at fairs, and most of them became quite popular. Yet what is even more interesting is the fact that many of these ballads both describe Bethlem Hospital, as well as why certain individuals became insane (par. 51). Torrey explains that unrequited love was one of the most common justifications in these particular songs, but the vast majority of Bedlamite ballads “described patients who had been released from Bethlem and were licensed to beg” (par. 52).

Since it was illegal for anyone but licensed insane to beg, sane paupers often began feigning insanity to avoid punishment (Torrey par. 52). This requirement that beggars must be insane in order to avoid corporal punishment may very well be the reason that in *Murphy* Cooper is imprisoned for “begging without singing” (75). On one hand, Cooper fails to follow society’s belief that the insane constantly sing to themselves, often loudly and out of tune. On the other, he also fails to provide a service, in this case singing, for the money he receives while begging. In both cases, Cooper has broken a societal code of conduct.

Ballads about insanity were not the only way to track the number of lunatics in a given area. In “‘Ireland’s Crowded Madhouses’: The Institutional Confinement of the

Insane in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Ireland,” Elizabeth Malcolm examines the once common but mistaken belief that pauperism is linked to insanity. She explains how Dr. W.R. Dawson, a lunacy inspector in 1911, strongly believed that, ‘in Ireland insanity tends to prevail in the agricultural counties, and has a close relation . . . to pauperism, which also prevails in rural districts’” (327). Although there is little evidence to support Dawson’s claims, Beckett uses the theme of insane paupers in several of his works. For example, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and “First Love” all create a connection between the countryside, pauperism, and insanity. In the novel *Molloy*, for instance, the protagonist Molloy wanders about the countryside, vainly attempting to find his mother’s home. When he reaches a small town, he is jailed for loitering. While it is never quite clear whether Molloy is in Ireland or England, he is believed to be an illegal beggar since he does not have his “papers” (16). According to Kathleen Jones, discharged patients from Bethlem Hospital were given recognizable badges which allowed them to beg in order to pay off their debts (paraphrased by Torrey par. 53). These former patients were a common sight throughout England, especially in towns and villages (Torrey par. 53). Since Molloy is unable to produce any proof of citizenship or release from an asylum, he is taken to the local jail until the officers decide to release him. Similarly, in *Malone Dies*, Sapo/Macmann is raised in a small town surrounded by farms, and although he would most likely be considered mentally challenged by today’s standards, he is admitted into a mental institution after becoming a vagrant. Even the narrator Malone has once been a beggar, as suggested by the line: “To think I shall perhaps die of hunger, after all, of starvation rather, after having struggled successfully all my life against that menace” (245).

In each of the aforementioned cases, the wandering protagonists (e.g. Cooper, Molloy, Sapo/Macmann, and Malone) are viewed as threats to society, whether or not they actually cause any harm. Aside from the historical misconception that pauperism and insanity are linked, Beckett's protagonists alarm those around them by breaking simple rules of conduct. Cooper's drunken begging and Molloy and Macmann's loitering, for instance, force upstanding citizens to face the poverty and possible insanity which surrounds them. Since England and Ireland made several attempts to conceal the seemingly out of control rises in poverty and insanity, Beckett's protagonists act as reminders that such problems will never be completely eradicated.

#### 5. Sanitation, Rationing and Atmosphere in *Malone Dies*

While the protagonist of *Malone Dies* insists that he is not in a hospital or madhouse, he mentions several details that undermine this assertion. For instance, directly after his claim that he has not been institutionalized, Malone casually notes that throughout the day and night he hears "sounds of men at large, getting up, lying down, preparing food, coming and going, weeping and laughing" (177). While the sounds of "men at large, getting up, [and] lying down" could very well take place just about anywhere, the sounds of "weeping and laughing" are often used in literature as symbols of mental institutions.

Yet it is the sanitation, or possible lack thereof, in *Malone Dies* that leads one to believe Malone is indeed in some form of hospital. Like the novel *Murphy*, which briefly details the duties of nurses, *Malone Dies* indirectly examines the ideal institutional setting. In the beginning of the novel, Malone muses over the things his caretakers have

taken into consideration. "I am looked after!" he exclaims, remembering the nurse who comes daily to replenish his soup and exchange his filled chamber pots for empty ones (178). But his current nurse is no longer the ideal caretaker, since "In the beginning it was different," Malone muses, "The woman came right into the room, bustled about, enquired about my needs, my wants" (179). Now all Malone sees is an arm reach in for the empty soup bowl and filled pots. Soon, even this disembodied arm no longer comes; for later in the novel, Malone complains that his chamber pots have not been emptied in some time; "one of the pots [...] remains full, and the other is filling slowly" (245). As disgusting as it is to imagine filled chamber pots, Malone intimates that this is not the only duty which his caregivers are failing to complete. For instance, Malone explains that he never bathes (179) and the hair in his ears is "yellowed by wax and lack of care, and so long that the lobes are hidden" (201). He also laments that it has been "some days now since my soup was renewed [...]. It is in vain I dispatch my table to the door, bring it back beside me, move it to and fro in the hope that the noise will be heard and correctly interpreted in the right quarters, the dish remains empty" (245).

Malone posits that the nursing staff is attempting to help him die by starving him (248). Yet there is a much more sinister reason Malone may be starving. If he is in an English asylum during World War One (we know that his character Macmann is in St. John of God's in Ireland), it is possible that his meals were purposely cut back. According to Torrey, the supply shortages during World War One caused many asylums in England to cut back on their rations (par. 319). The war also forced many doctors and nurses into the war zone to tend to wounded soldiers. As a result, England's mental institutions became even more short-staffed, and often had to turn away new patients

(Torrey par. 319). This lack of personnel to look after patients may explain Malone's complaints of dirty chamber pots and poor sanitation. With the devastating effects of war all around, the asylum would have been a chaotic scene, with wounded soldiers taking up the vast majority of beds.

The war may also explain the lack of lights in Malone's room: "when I examine the ceiling and walls I see there is no possibility of my making light, artificial light [...] someone would have to give me a lamp, or a torch" (Beckett, *Malone Dies* 215). With resources running low, it is likely that many asylums had to cut back on their use of electricity, or suffered from power outages. It is also possible that electricity was not yet available to Malone's hospital. Elizabeth Malcolm explains that many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish asylums had "meagre furnishing of wards and day rooms. Plain deal tables and deal forms without backs comprised the main furniture of dayrooms; floor coverings were rare; and windows seldom had blinds or curtains" (323). If asylums could not afford even cheap decorations, it is likely they would not waste money on lamps when windows could provide enough light to fill a room.

However, despite the possibility that World War One or budget cuts are the cause of Malone's ill-treatment, the most likely reason for Malone's "starvation" and neglect is his poor memory. He admits this fact when he mentions his lapses in memory (177); as a result, Malone may have simply forgotten the last time his soup and chamber pot were refreshed. Malone's poor memory should be no surprise to the reader at this point in the novel; throughout the text, Malone's mind constantly wanders and he often forgets what he has said, or what he owns. Likewise, Malone never mentions sights or sounds that would cause one to think of war. Instead, Malone's narrative depicts a lonely, yet often

quiet, atmosphere. Even his short story of Macmann displays a fairly serene setting where patients roam the grounds and go out on excursions.

Despite their frequently shocking or humorously exaggerated representations, Beckett's works often depict historically accurate portrayals of asylums. Through their mixture of history and horror, works such as *Murphy* and *Malone Dies* not only question what it means to be sane, but also what it means to be insane. The common roles of dutiful, rational nurses and violent, insane patients are frequently reversed; thus readers are obliged to question why peaceful patients such as Mr. Endon and Macmann are overseen by delusional, sometimes cruel, nurses like Murphy, Ticklepenny,<sup>10</sup> and Lemuel. Moreover, Beckett's works illuminate the changing social and historical outlooks on insanity and the differences between public and private asylums. Through exaggerated patient ratios, for example, Beckett is able to both acknowledge and undermine Ireland's fear of mass institutionalization. Likewise, his satirical description of Mr. Endon and the M.M.M.'s retention of "solvent" patients mocks the common view that asylums were becoming little more than retreats for the wealthy. However, Beckett's works cover more than just historical asylums, as will be examined in the following chapter when the theme of self-imposed asylums is addressed.

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<sup>10</sup> Although Ticklepenny is not nearly as malicious as Lemuel, he does have his streaks of cruelty: "I sit on them that will not eat, [...] jacking their jaws apart with the gag, spurning their tongues aside with the spatula, till the last tundish of drench is absorbed" (*Murphy* 54).

## Chapter Two: Self-Imposed Asylums in “First Love” and *Murphy*

The theme of imprisonment in Beckett’s works has thus far been examined primarily from a historical point of view. Yet his interest in isolation extends well beyond socially created institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals. This is evident when one notes that his heroes are not always imprisoned against their wishes. *Murphy*, for example, purposely ties himself to his chair, and often seeks ways to confine himself. Since society is made up of individuals who create and adhere to strict rules, Beckett’s works show how people both limit, and allow, themselves to be limited. Moreover, in “The Whole Story,” Robert Winer explains that Beckett’s plays portray a “destruction of connection in contemporary life” (73). According to Winer, this “destruction” is “not only a defense, in the service of avoiding the greater pain that connection can threaten us with, the pain of guilt or hurt or longing, but also a response to living in the preapocalyptic age.” Warner goes on to discuss the ways in which several of Beckett’s theatrical characters confuse time (past, present, and future) as a means of escaping the pain of reality. However, Winer’s revelation can be extended beyond a character’s unconscious forgetfulness to his or her physical or mental removal from society. In several of Beckett’s works, characters seek various forms of self-imposed asylums from a world they cannot cope with. To explore this recurring motif, this chapter will focus upon two major forms of self-imposed asylums: *self-inflicted asylums* and *personal asylums*. For the purposes of this study, a *self-inflicted* asylum is a physical cell or

barrier that the character has created in the hopes of shutting out the world. This type of asylum can be found in “First Love” and *Murphy* when the protagonists arrange various pieces of furniture to create cell-like atmospheres. Physically restraining one’s self and self banishment will also be considered *self-inflicted asylum*. For example, when the protagonist of “First Love” refuses to seek the comfort or protection of society after being thrown out of his father’s house, he creates a self-inflicted asylum. Instead of attempting to rejoin society, he physically removes himself from it by seeking a distant park where he lives in near solitude. *Personal asylum*, on the other hand, is a form of institutionalization that is self-contained in the sense that the character has no physical fortifications around him or her, yet he or she remains (or attempts to remain) mentally shut off from the outside world.

### 1. The Quest for Non-Being and the Power of Self- Inflicted Asylum in “First Love” and *Murphy*

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault explains that, “Ultimately, confinement did seek to suppress madness, to eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place within it; the essence of confinement was not the exorcism of a danger. Confinement merely manifested what madness, in its essence, was: a manifestation of non-being” (115). Beckett’s protagonists take Foucault’s views, but with a twist: it is they who carry out the task of seeking confinement, not society. Moreover, they not only “eliminate” themselves from the “social order,” but also do it to become as close to nothing as possible. Granted, the protagonists of “First Love” and

Murphy are not traditional mental patients; yet their attempts to be erased from the outside world are anything but normal.

What little literary criticism that has been previously written on “First Love” frequently turns to an Oedipal or sexual reading. Phil Baker’s interpretation of the short story is a prime example of the overwhelming focus upon the maternalistic imagery throughout the tale. In *Beckett and the Mythology of Psychoanalysis*, Baker meticulously traces the protagonist’s movements throughout the text, while noting various links to the womb. As compelling as these interpretations are, he does not acknowledge the hero’s conscious decisions to leave society behind. Instead, Baker focuses upon the protagonist’s unconscious link to his father, and considers it the reason behind the hero’s disgust for women (97). Baker does raise an important connection between the hero’s childhood home and the bench he later uses for refuge. In the opening of his explication of “First Love,” he briefly mentions the fact that both the hallway in which the protagonist changes and the park bench are guarded on three sides (93). Instead of tracing this and other connections to the protagonist’s later shelters, however, Baker instead turns to the text’s uses of female genitalia (93). Therefore, my study hopes to further explore “First Love”’s uses of enclosures as a means of escape from society.

“First Love” begins with the hero discussing the joys of walking through a graveyard. Aside from the peaceful silence and soft odor of decaying flesh, the protagonist relishes the solitude. Yet the true solace he finds in the cemetery is the lack of pretension of living persons. The graveyard does not attempt to hide its macabre sights and odors, while “The living wash in vain, in vain perfume themselves, they stink” (230). Since he cannot stand how seriously people take themselves in life, the

protagonist seeks the only company he can bear, the dead. It is the dead who seem to have a real sense of humor, since it is they who are remembered by their often comical epitaphs (230). But there was a time when “First Love”’s lead character enjoyed the company of the living, a time when he remembers the “lips that had kissed [him], [...] hearts that had loved [him], [and] hands that played with [his]” (233). It is only after his family forces him to leave his father’s house that he banishes himself from society. Instead of seeking refuge at a church or poor house, the protagonist decides to take up residence at a park presumably on the outskirts of town. This is the first physical barrier that the hero uses to distance himself from society at large. Not only does he create a gap between himself and his family by moving to a distant location, but he also attempts to shut off the vast majority of those who pass by. The bench he chooses to live on, for example, is “well situated” since it is “backed by a mound of solid earth and garbage,” flanked by “a pair of trees [...] at either end of the bench,” and nearly closed off in the front by the canal “a few yards away” (233). By choosing a bench that is surrounded by foul smelling garbage and “natural” barriers such as trees and the canal, the unnamed protagonist does what society often does to strange individuals: he confines or ostracizes himself.

But even these measures are not enough to stave off the curious passerby. Shortly after setting up residence on his secluded bench, a prostitute called Lulu (or Anna) seeks companionship with the protagonist, causing him to once again retreat from the prospect of society. The hero admits that “I abandoned the bench, less I must confess on [Lulu’s] account than on its”; however, instead of simply moving to another section of the park, this time the protagonist banishes himself to a deserted cowshed in the country, even

further from society than before (236).<sup>11</sup> Aside from the added physical distance from the protagonist's hometown, the countryside is an important site mentioned in Foucault's Madness and Civilization in relation to the banishment of physically or mentally ill patients. Ironically, "First Love"'s protagonist banishes himself to the countryside, and even though he is not a traditional mental patient, he seems instinctively drawn to nature. Shortly after relocating to the countryside, for example, the hero admits to falling in love with it, due to "its scant population" and the fact that "all is derelict" (236).

It is toward the end of this short story that one truly finds the extent of this character's need for self-inflicted asylum. After he realizes that he loves Lulu (now called Anna) and she offers him a room in her house, the protagonist moves in with her. However, due to his aversion of society and everything that reminds him of it, the protagonist insists upon an environment centered around himself. Hence, he removes from his room all the furniture but the couch. Visually and metaphorically, he creates his own "cell" within a barren room. By turning a couch around and pushing it against the wall, he forms an extremely confined space that only he can comfortably survive in (242). This concept of the "cell" is continued when Anna is directed to provide him with a bedpan. By turning his new enclosure into a place for sleeping, eating (Anna brings all of his meals), and physical relief, the protagonist has no reason to interact with the outside world.

The site of Anna's apartment is also important to the character's increasing social detachment since it is "at the top of an old house, with a view of the mountains" (241). With such a view, the house must be physically located in between the heart of the town

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<sup>11</sup> The protagonist of "First Love" is not the only Beckettian hero to seek refuge in the countryside; Molloy of *Molloy* likewise wanders the countryside while searching for his mother's home.

and the distant mountains. Socially, moreover, Anna's house serves as both a public and private location; as a brothel, her house is a place for men of various classes to be entertained. At the same time, however, Anna only entertains one man at a time, and often spends her days either catering to the protagonist's needs or entertaining herself. In short, the house is physically and socially in the middle of where the protagonist began his life (in the city) and where he wishes to be (free of society). Moreover, Anna's house provides the protagonist the inspiration for his final escape from society: the distant mountains.

Despite his best efforts, however, the protagonist is unable to completely disconnect from humanity. In the final lines of the story, he confesses, "For years I thought they [Anna's and her baby's cries] would cease. Now I don't think so any more" (245). Yet the cries of society are not all that bind "First Love"'s hero to civilization; when he attempts to shut himself off from the world, the materials he uses to do so are always reminders of society itself.<sup>12</sup> The secluded bench in the park, for example, was both created and placed there by people, as were the canal and garbage mound. The abandoned cow shack, Anna's apartment, and her couch are both the products of society and props the protagonist uses to hide from it. What is more is that each of these objects and places are reminders of a home. As Baker notes, the protagonist's eviction takes place while he is in the lavatory, for the hero recalls returning to his room after visiting the necessary house only to find his belongings in a "little heap, on the floor" ("First Love" 232). However, instead of this forcing the hero to "begin a new life" as Baker suggests (92), the protagonist simply continues his quest for solitude. This is evidenced

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<sup>12</sup> Murphy's "cells" are also man-made (eg. His apartment room, chair, and garret at the M.M.M.). The padded cells at the M.M.M. are even called a "creditable representation of what he kept on calling, indefatigably, the little world" (109).

by the fact that his father had apparently defended the boy on several occasions, once saying, “leave him alone, he’s not disturbing anyone” (231). The words “he’s not disturbing anyone” lead one to believe that the protagonist has not been interacting with anyone at all. This is further supported by the hero’s belief that his father “had stipulated in his will for me to be left the room I had occupied in his lifetime and for food to be brought to me there, as hitherto” (231). In both cases, the protagonist was already clearly used to being left alone and waited upon. Yet the physical objects and locations to which the protagonist is drawn are also unconscious links to his father’s house. His family’s lavatory and the cowshed are connected, for example, both by their relative size and shape (a small, presumably wooden, room), and the fact that they are equated with excrement.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the hallway in which the hero is forced to change his clothes at the beginning of the short story is described as “guarded on three sides only” (232), as is the bench in the park (233). Even the mound of garbage behind the park bench may be considered a reminder of the protagonist’s home, since he and his belongings are cast off as if waste.

Perhaps the most obvious links between the protagonist’s childhood home and his future dwellings, however, are the room and couch he lives on and in when staying with Anna. Although the hero never describes his room in his father’s house, he does provide some helpful clues as to what it was like. For instance, his belongings are described as “scanty,” a sign that he had few possessions, and therefore a relatively barren room (232). The starkness of the hero’s childhood room and the one Anna provides later is broken, however, by the presence of flowers. When describing his father’s house, the narrator

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<sup>13</sup> The protagonist is quite open with his discussion of constipation and diarrhoea when explaining his need to visit the “stool” on the day of his eviction (232). Similarly, he describes with great relish the cow manure strewn about the cowshed (236-37).

explains that he enjoyed tending “tomatoes, hyacinths, pinks and seedlings” (232). This explains why he later asks Anna to bring him a live hyacinth in a pot (244); it serves as a reminder of his father’s home. Yet, the protagonist himself creates the strongest connection between his new room in Anna’s home to the one he was cast out of at the beginning of the story. After settling into his new room, the hero mutters “Try and put me out now” (243). This threat echoes his previous promise, “I’d have barricaded myself in the room, they would have had to gas me out,” when discussing what would have happened had he regained access to his childhood room (232). Now that he has literally barricaded himself in “his room,”<sup>14</sup> he is determined to keep it, regardless of the noises he hears from other rooms.

Just as the protagonist in “First Love” attempts to create a personal asylum, the lead character in *Murphy* also struggles for personal freedom through a self-inflicted asylum. As noted by many critics, Murphy’s apartment is called a “cage,” a sign of his separation from the outside world (e.g., Knowlson; Begam; Baker). Like the main character of “First Love,” Murphy creates personal asylums by creating barriers between himself and the outside world. His first man-made asylum appears on the first page of the novel in the narrator’s description of his apartment. Murphy is introduced in a small room in which he has “eaten, drunk, slept, and put his clothes on and off” for the past six months (*Murphy* 3). Aside from living like a hermit, Murphy sits curtained off from the sun and tries to tune out the cries of society around him. Lest one wonder if perhaps Murphy is locked in a room that cannot be opened, it is noted that his “cage” has a door

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<sup>14</sup> See pages 241 and 242 for a description of the barrier created by Anna’s furniture.

that cannot lock and is literally hanging off of its hinges (6).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, while staying at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, Murphy insists upon living in a garret. The narrator explains that Murphy's delight at staying in the garret stems from his having lived in one previously in Hanover, thus allowing him to "experience all of its advantages" (98). What makes the M.M.M.'s garret "twice as good as the one in Hanover," however, is the fact that it is "half as large" (98). In fact, the dimensions of the room are so tiny that they spark a debate between Murphy and Ticklepenny over whether it is large enough to support a fire without becoming a hazard (99). Yet even the already small living space is too large for Murphy to feel at home. His longing for an ever more confining space is shown when he approvingly notes the position of his bed: "The bed [...] was wedged length-ways into the cleft of floor and ceiling, so that [he] was saved the trouble of moving it into that position" (98). The wedged space created by the bed and ceiling is a sort of pre-made "cell," and like the "cells" created in "First Love," signals an attempt to distance the protagonist from the outside world.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the protagonist of "First Love," however, Murphy also physically restrains himself. For example, he fastens himself to his rocking chair, making sure to restrain his arms, legs, and torso (3). Ironically, Murphy believes that physical restraint is the only way to gain his wish for freedom from the "big world" which "detain[s] him" (4). Murphy's physical restraint, however, may also be an unconscious form of self-punishment or a way to prevent himself from physically returning to society. Unlike the

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<sup>15</sup> Macmann from *Malone Dies* also attempts to seek comfort through isolation when he hides in his "lair" in the gardens of St. John of God's (267). Likewise, the "old boy" from *Murphy* never leaves his room and will not allow anyone to enter. Like the protagonists of "First Love" and *Malone Dies*, the "old boy" has his meals left for him (44).

<sup>16</sup> Murphy is also said to be a "strict non-reader:" yet another way in which he shuts himself off from society.

hero of "First Love," Murphy often goes out into public, whether it be to study the stars<sup>17</sup> or perform a mock job search. Both protagonists hear the call of society: "First Love"'s in the cries of Anna and her baby, *Murphy*'s in the "big world"'s demands for "*Quid pro quo*" (3, 6). Despite the protagonists' similar wish for privacy, Murphy is unable to simply walk away from society like the hero of "First Love." Instead, he attempts to drown out the demands of those around him by tying himself to his chair and coming "alive" in his mind (4). Moreover, by tying himself to his chair, Murphy takes Foucault's theory of self-restraint literally. In "The Birth of the Asylum," Foucault examines the shift in the types of restraint used in mental asylums (*Madness and Civilization* 241-78). Instead of continuing to use physical restraints, mental hospitals began using guilt and the fear of punishment to control unruly patients. By forcing patients to recognize their "madness" and take responsibility for their actions, mental institutions were able to convince patients to restrain themselves from disturbing "morality and society" (246-47). Instead of simply controlling his behavior to suit society's demands, however, Murphy reverts back to physical restraint to control his desires.

The protagonists of *Murphy* and "First Love" further subvert Foucault's theory of self-restraint through their unspoken demands for power. Foucault's "madmen" control themselves out of fear of punishment or ridicule; Beckett's men restrain themselves for personal satisfaction and a sense of power. Tying himself to a chair provides Murphy a sense of control over his mind and body, as well as a way to cheat society out of its demand for "*Quid pro quo*" (3, 6). Murphy and "First Love"'s protagonist also realize the power in creating one's own "cell" that is not found in simply being admitted to an asylum built by someone else. Creating one's own asylum allows the heroes to not only

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<sup>17</sup> See pages 11-13 for accounts of Murphy's interest in astrology.

decide which barriers to use, but how to use them. Murphy's apartment and garret, for example, are arranged to suit his needs, not those of an asylum nurse or attendant. Moreover, neither Murphy nor the hero of "First Love" is captured or admitted against his wishes; instead, they create self-inflicted asylums which become positive barriers between themselves (or what they know) and the outside world (or what they do not know or fear).

Directing others what to bring and when also places the protagonists of *Murphy* and "First Love" in the position of powerful ruler, instead of helpless patient. Patients like Malone and Macmann simply follow the orders given to them by the nurses and doctors of their respective institutions. The protagonists of *Murphy* and "First Love," however, seek absolute power over themselves and therefore attempt to create worlds in which everything revolves around them. For example, "First Love"'s hero directs Anna as to how to behave in her own house and threatens to leave if she does not obey him (244).

There is a paradox in the quest of "First Love"'s hero, however. Foucault explains that nineteenth-century asylums treated the insane as minors or children (252). By demanding that his meals be brought to him "at the appointed hours" and his bed pan cleaned, "First Love"'s protagonist subconsciously asks to be treated as a child (243). At the same time, however, his desires for asylum under his own terms convey his conflicting desire to be an authority figure. Ultimately, the hero resolves his quandary when Anna gives birth to "their" child (246). He is now forced to realize that he can no longer be the primary center of Anna's attention nor control the noises in the rest of the house. Without the perfect mix of attention and neglect, the protagonist's self-inflicted

asylum can no longer exist. As a result, the hero turns to the mountains for consolation (246).

Perhaps the most interesting aspects of the protagonists' self-banishments are their reasons for leaving society behind. The hero of "First Love" is cruelly cast out of his family's house while Murphy is dismissed by possible employers (49). In "Labor, Alienation, and the Status of Being," Lin points out that "What hurts Murphy, however, is not so much the rejection itself [...] as the scathing manner in which the message is put across" (257). Even before his encounter with the chandlers, Murphy attempts to find solitude when he himself leaves Miss Counihan under the false pretense of finding a "habitation meet for her" (34). After their respective rejections,<sup>18</sup> Beckett's protagonists seem unable or perhaps even unwilling to suffer the fickleness of society any longer. The unnamed hero of "First Love" longs for the life he had before his father's death, thus explaining his interest in graveyards at the beginning of the story and his childhood memories at the end of it. The protagonist's lost paternal connection likewise explains his choice of locations and materials used in his attempts of becoming invisible. Like Murphy, who abandons Miss Counihan and later Celia, the hero of "First Love" seems to be avoiding the pain personal connections can cause. As a result, the protagonist's first refuges are unconscious reminders of his father's house, yet physically distant from society. His movements away from society can be viewed as attempts at protecting himself from future abandonment. Ironically, by abandoning Anna after she has given birth to the baby, the protagonist consciously seeks a connection with his father in the mountains while unconsciously continuing the cycle of paternal abandonment. Although

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<sup>18</sup> The hero of "First Love" is rejected by his family, while Murphy both rejects Miss Counihan and Celia and is rejected by the Chandlers.

his father was apparently supportive during the hero's life, he nevertheless "abandons" him in death. Without his father to protect him, "First Love"'s hero is helpless to defend himself against his uncaring family. His helplessness is also the reason for his need to seek refuge. Perhaps unconsciously, the protagonist's inability and unwillingness to care for his own child are a result of his unconscious need and desire to become like his father, absent.

Ironically, the hero's desire to remember his father first leads him away from social contact, then toward it. While abandoning Anna, for instance, the hero searches for the Wains constellation. According to Kennedy, the Wains is frequently called the Bear and was considered by Homer as the "only constellation which never sets" (85). Now that his father is dead and therefore physically gone, the protagonist is unable to view the one constant reminder of the man he loved.<sup>19</sup> Searching for distant stars is soon not enough; his return to his father's grave shows his need for something more concrete. Tombstones and his father's body, albeit buried and decaying, seem to be the only objects which can satisfy his desire to connect with a lost loved one.

## 2. Murphy's Personal Asylum

In *Madness and Civilization* Foucault posits that "madness in the classical period ceased to be the sign of another world, and that it became the paradoxical manifestation of non-being" (115). He goes on to suggest that, "by confinement, madness is acknowledged to be *nothing*" (116). Through their respective forms of self-inflicted

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<sup>19</sup> The Bear is a powerful figure and may also embody the protection and navigational guide the hero lost when his father died.

asylum, “First Love”’s and *Murphy*’s protagonists attempt to physically erase themselves from society’s view, or in a sense to become invisible. Yet Murphy’s “asylum” extends beyond that of physical restraint into the depths of his mind, thus becoming a type of personal asylum. By retreating into his mind, Murphy attempts to create what he calls the “little world.” In his “little world,” nothing exists but what is created by his mind, for it “excluded nothing that it did not itself contain” (67). Murphy’s refusal to connect with others is depicted as a personal decision, and is therefore a self-imposed form of madness or imprisonment. Since he refuses to realize that his life is what Foucault would call “the symbol of madness [...] that mirror, which without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own presumption” (27), Murphy believes that he can attain freedom from society by mentally detaching himself from the outside world.<sup>20</sup> In many senses, he is right in his assumptions: one who is outside of society cannot be restricted by it. What Murphy fails to acknowledge, at least at first, is that he needs society in order to survive. Like the protagonist of “First Love,” Murphy needs society to provide shelter and food in order to keep him alive. Likewise, when he gazes into the schizophrenic Mr. Endon’s eyes, Murphy realizes that his dream of living solely within his mind is impossible; one simply cannot shut off the world around him without acknowledging its existence at the same time. In other words, if one cannot acknowledge the outside world, there is no way to appreciate the separation.

His mind itself, however, is both a self-inflicted asylum and a personal asylum, for “Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the

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<sup>20</sup> Murphy is not the only Beckettian protagonist to dream of living in his mind. “First Love”’s hero tells readers that “What mattered to me in my dispeopled kingdom [...] was supineness in the mind, the dulling of the self and of that residue of execrable frippery known as the non-self and even the world” (234).

universe without” (67). Since his brain is physically confined within his head, his skull becomes a physical barrier protecting him from the outside world. At the same time, however, Murphy’s skull<sup>21</sup> is not a barrier which he has physically built (like the “cells” in “First Love”), but one that he was born with, therefore making it a personal asylum as well. Every human is born with a mind; therefore, one must choose to shut out the world by living solely within it (barring mental illness, of course). Moreover, as Pattie notes, Murphy’s mind is “pictured as a series of concentric circles,” and his main goal is to live within the “central circle” (58). Once again, Murphy seeks both a mental and physical restraint, since he is not only confining his “world” to the physical location of his head, but seeks an even more confined space within it.

Perhaps unconsciously, Beckett’s heroes realize their dependence upon society, and as a result are both drawn to it (by using its materials to build their asylums) and repulsed by it (hence their need to physically or mentally run away). Yet both the unnamed protagonist of “First Love” and Murphy consciously bind themselves in their attempts at attaining freedom. Ironically, their endeavors are ultimately futile, whether due to the very materials used while creating their “cages,” or to their inability to completely forget their social ties. The protagonist of “First Love,” for example, fondly remembers the love he was once shown (233) and begins his retreat to the mountains with memories of his father (246). One should also note that the beginning of the story in fact takes place after the protagonist leaves Anna’s home. Although the hero speaks of

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<sup>21</sup> The skull motif appears regularly in Beckett’s works. For example, the set of *Endgame* is often portrayed as the interior of a skull, and Ackerly and Gontarski suggest that the narrator of *Malone Dies* is in a skull (343). The padded cells in *Murphy* can also be likened to the interior of a skull due to their “oyster-grey” upholstery and “concave” walls (109).

enjoying the solitude of graveyards (“as a place for an outing, when out I must, leave me my graveyards and keep --- you--- to your public parks and beauty-spots”), he nevertheless visits areas where he watches burials and even complains that his father’s gravesite is “too remote, way out in the wilds of the country” (230). The protagonist’s return to the outskirts of town, along with his complaints of the graveyard’s remoteness, suggests that he may eventually return to society itself. *Murphy*’s narrator similarly reveals that Murphy “needed a brotherhood” and a “feeling of kindred” (106). He eventually becomes so desperate for a sense of belonging that he “distort[s] all that threaten[s] to belie [his fantasies]” (106). Murphy also resolves to return to Celia shortly before his death (151). In both cases, the protagonists’ tales end in quests for companionship, even if their companions are unaware of the heroes’ presence. “First Love”’s protagonist, for instance, is content to watch mourners from afar, and even speaks to his remote listener (the reader). Murphy’s “brotherhood” of mental patients is likewise distant due to the patients’ inability to connect with those around them.

Overall, “First Love” and *Murphy* convey the futility of detaching oneself from the outside world. Even Mr. Endon, who does not acknowledge the “big world,” is still a part of it, since his actions impact those around him, most notably Murphy. Despite the mental and physical attempts each protagonist makes to live in an idealized isolation, each eventually realizes that once one has lived in the “big world” there is no escaping it. There will always be a connection between the self and the other, whether it be through DNA (e.g. Anna’s baby and Murphy’s ashes), the memories of others, or the very materials used to create one’s personal asylum.

## Conclusion: Asylums as Struggles for Power

Although Beckett's heroes are ultimately unable to attain the asylum from society they seek, their physical and mental barriers provide great insight into Beckett's views on institutionalization, as well as society's struggle to confine and control insanity. Fundamentally, the asylums in Beckett's works represent a fear of losing control over one's life and sanity. His semi-realistic portrayals of asylums and mental patients allow readers more than just a glimpse into asylum life in the early to mid 1900's. In these depictions of historical asylums, for example, Beckett's protagonists convey the terrors of losing control over one's body. Whether they are physically confined or force fed (e.g., Malone), patients such as Malone and Macmann no longer have command over their physical surroundings or beings. In some cases, the wards' bodies themselves become asylums in their own right, their minds unwilling or unable to communicate with the world around them (e.g., Malone and Murphy). The historical aspects of Beckett's asylums also push readers to acknowledge the horrors mental patients faced in early asylums while adding the realism needed to gain their sympathy. Macmann's and Malone's discussions of their hopes, desires, and love affairs, for example, provide humanistic touches which push readers to worry about their well being.

Beckett's use of negligent or sadistic nurses further the protagonists' sense of helplessness; in *Murphy* and *Malone Dies*, for example, inadequate caretakers dictate whether their patients will eventually regain freedom. Lemuel's, Ticklepenney's, and

Murphy's shortcomings not only acknowledge the shortage of qualified nurses during World Wars One and Two, but also address the terror of a relatively sane person being admitted against his or her wishes. In *Malone Dies*, for example, patients awake in institutions, unable to understand why they are there. For instance, Malone and Macmann both have lucid moments and seem to be more elderly or mentally handicapped than insane. Macmann's inability to hold a steady job, for example, conveys a lack of understanding instead of insanity. Likewise, his questions as to the status of St. John of God's show his ability to think critically and a desire for freedom. Malone's fantasies of escape, as played out in his stories of Macmann, further illuminate the patient's struggle for power.

Several of Beckett's works also address the fear of being unable to control insanity itself. For example, the M.M.M.'s staggering number of self-admitted patients not only mock Ireland's recurring fears of mass institutionalization, but also capture the era's hysteria regarding insanity and war. Aside from Ireland's and England's terror of being viewed as a countries gone mad, the rising numbers of self-admitted patients seemed to bolster the long standing view that asylums were becoming retreats for the rich and indolent. Although there was a significant rise in self-admitted patients, studies have shown that the M.M.M.'s numbers are anything but historically accurate. As a result, Beckett's depictions of an asylum overrun with sane individuals pretending to be insane suggest the author's view that people used whatever means necessary to escape the burdens of society.

The shifting depictions of asylums in Beckett's works also convey the protagonists' statuses in correlations with their respective power, or lack thereof. As a

nurse, for example, Murphy is in a position of power over the wards around him. His power, along with his desire to become like the patients themselves, allows him the luxury of misinterpreting the wards' suffering. Like other naïve observers of mental wards, Murphy wrongly views the inmates as intrinsically happy and believes one and all are having a "glorious time" (108). Patients themselves, such as Malone and Macmann, however, are quick to reveal institutions as places of violence and absurdity rather than retreats. Their inability to control the world around them (in this case, their cells), explains their oppressive depictions of the atmosphere around them.

Ironically it is through self-inflicted asylums that Beckett's fears of incarceration and their implications are most fully explored. Murphy's and "First Love"'s "cells," for example, echo the author's phobias of enclosure and clausturation through their physical and mental restrictiveness. One could argue that self-imposed asylums are the ultimate symbol of an oppressive society: Beckett's protagonists have become so accustomed to being watched and controlled that they imprison themselves when cast out of society and left to their own devices. However, Murphy's and "First Love"'s control, or attempts at control, over their environments can be empowering. In "First Love," for example, the protagonist is able to create an ideal habitat in Anna's home by rearranging her furniture and becoming an authority figure. Moreover, instead of attempting to stay within society, or finding communities of their own, Murphy and "First Love" consciously banish or seclude themselves. "First Love"'s hero, for instance, physically removes himself to the outskirts of town, and later to the distant mountains. In the end, however, his return to the fringes of society (the graveyard) suggests a deep-rooted need for connection with the outside world as well as society's powerful influence.

As a whole, the various refuges and asylums in Beckett's works represent the realization that there will always be a struggle for power between the self and the other. Through their early-childhood need for a connection with others, the protagonists of *Murphy*, *Malone Dies*, and "First Love" are all lead back to the very thing they sought to leave or forget: society itself. As a result, Beckett's works convey the absolute power of society and the inability to escape the "big world."

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