



# **TWO LATE PLAYS**

**The Words Upon the Window-pane /  
Purgatory**

**W.B. YEATS**

These versions of W.B. Yeats's *The Words Upon the Window-pane* and *Purgatory* were edited by David Clare and first published on the website [www.classicirishplays.com](http://www.classicirishplays.com) in 2016.

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Purgatory

W.B. YEATS

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# ***THE WORDS UPON THE WINDOW-PANE***

*In Memory of Lady Gregory,*

*in whose house it was written*

## **PERSONS IN THE PLAY**

DR. TRENCH

MISS MACKENNA

JOHN CORBET

CORNELIUS PATTERSON

ABRAHAM JOHNSON

MRS. MALLET

MRS. HENDERSON

*First performed at the Abbey Theatre on 17th November 1930.*

## THE WORDS UPON THE WINDOW-PANE

*A lodging-house room, an armchair, a little table in front of it, chairs on either side. A fireplace and window. A kettle on the hob and some tea-things on a dresser. A door to back and towards the right. Through the door one can see an entrance hall. The sound of a knocker. Miss Mackenna passes through and then she re-enters the hall together with John Corbet, a man of twenty-two or twenty-three, and Dr. Trench, a man of between sixty and seventy.*

**DR. TRENCH** (*in hall*). May I introduce John Corbet, one of the Corbets of Ballymoney, but at present a Cambridge student? This is Miss Mackenna, our energetic secretary. (*They come into room, take off their coats.*)

**MISS MACKENNA**. I thought it better to let you in myself. This country is still sufficiently medieval to make spiritualism an undesirable theme for gossip. Give me your coats and hats, I will put them in my own room. It is just across the hall. Better sit down; your watches must be fast. Mrs. Henderson is lying down, as she always does before a séance. We won't begin for ten minutes yet. (*She goes out with hats and coats.*)

**DR. TRENCH**. Miss Mackenna does all the real work of the Dublin Spiritualists' Association. She did all the correspondence with Mrs. Henderson, and persuaded the landlady to let her this big room and a small room upstairs. We are a poor society and could not guarantee anything in advance. Mrs. Henderson has come from London at her own risk. She was born in Dublin and wants to spread the movement here. She lives very economically and does not expect a great deal. We all give what we can. A poor woman with the soul of an apostle.

**JOHN CORBET**. Have there been many séances?

**DR. TRENCH.** Only three so far.

**JOHN CORBET.** I hope she will not mind my scepticism. I have looked into Myers' *Human Personality* and a wild book by Conan Doyle, but am unconvinced.

**DR. TRENCH.** We all have to find the truth for ourselves. Lord Dunraven, then Lord Adare, introduced my father to the famous David Home. My father often told me that he saw David Home floating in the air in broad daylight, but I did not believe a word of it. I had to investigate for myself, and I was very hard to convince. Mrs. Piper, an American trance medium, not unlike Mrs. Henderson, convinced me.

**JOHN CORBET.** A state of somnambulism and voices coming through her lips that purport to be those of dead persons?

**DR. TRENCH.** Exactly: quite the best kind of mediumship if you want to establish the identity of a spirit. But do not expect too much. There has been a hostile influence.

**JOHN CORBET.** You mean an evil spirit?

**DR. TRENCH.** The poet Blake said that he never knew a bad man that had not something very good about him. I say a hostile influence, an influence that disturbed the last séance very seriously. I cannot tell you what happened, for I have not been at any of Mrs. Henderson's séances. Trance mediumship has nothing new to show me – I told the young people when they made me their President that I would probably stay at home, that I could get more out of Emanuel Swedenborg than out of any séance. (*A knock.*) That is probably old Cornelius Patterson; he thinks they race horses and whippets in the other world, and is, so they tell me, so anxious to find out if he is right that he is always punctual. Miss Mackenna will keep him to herself for some minutes. He gives her tips for Harold's Cross.

*Miss Mackenna crosses to hall door and admits Cornelius Patterson. She brings him to her room across the hall.*

**JOHN CORBET** (*who has been wandering about*). This is a wonderful room for a lodging-house.

**DR. TRENCH.** It was a private house until about fifty years ago. It was not so near the town in those days, and there are large stables at the back. Quite a number of notable people lived here. Grattan was born upstairs; no, not Grattan, Curran perhaps – I forget – but I do know that this house in the early part of the eighteenth century belonged to friends of Jonathan Swift, or rather of Stella. Swift chaffed her in the *Journal to Stella* because of certain small sums of money she lost at cards probably in this very room. That was before Vanessa appeared upon the scene. It was a country-house in those days, surrounded by trees and gardens. Somebody cut some lines from a poem of hers upon the window-pane – tradition says Stella herself. (*A knock.*) Here they are, but you will hardly make them out in this light. (*They stand in the window. Corbet stoops down to see better. Miss Mackenna and Abraham Johnson enter and stand near door.*)

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** Where is Mrs. Henderson?

**MISS MACKENNA.** She is upstairs; she always rests before a séance.

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** I must see her before the séance. I know exactly what to do to get rid of this evil influence.

**MISS MACKENNA.** If you go up to see her there will be no séance at all. She says it is dangerous even to think, much less to speak, of an evil influence.

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** Then I shall speak to the President.

**MISS MACKENNA.** Better talk the whole thing over first in my room. Mrs. Henderson says that there must be perfect harmony.

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** Something must be done. The last séance was completely spoilt. (*A knock.*)

**MISS MACKENNA.** That may be Mrs. Mallet; she is a very experienced spiritualist. Come to my room, old Patterson and some others are there already. (*She brings him to the other room and later crosses to hall door to admit Mrs. Mallet.*)

**JOHN CORBET.** I know those lines well – they are part of a poem Stella wrote for Swift’s fifty-fourth birthday. Only three poems of hers – and some lines she added to a poem of Swift’s – have come down to us, but they are enough to prove her a better poet than Swift. Even those few words on the window make me think of a seventeenth-century poet, Donne or Crashaw. (*He quotes*)

“You taught how I might youth prolong  
By knowing what is right and wrong,  
How from my heart to bring supplies  
Of lustre to my fading eyes.”

How strange that a celibate scholar, well on in life, should keep the love of two such women! He met Vanessa in London at the height of his political power. She followed him to Dublin. She loved him for nine years, perhaps died of love, but Stella loved him all her life.

**DR. TRENCH.** I have shown that writing to several persons, and you are the first who has recognised the lines.

**JOHN CORBET.** I am writing an essay on Swift and Stella for my doctorate at Cambridge. I hope to prove that in Swift’s day men of intellect reached the height of their power – the greatest position they



ever attained in society and the State, that everything great in Ireland and in our character, in what remains of our architecture, comes from that day; that we have kept its seal longer than England.

**DR. TRENCH.** A tragic life; Bolingbroke, Harley, Ormonde, all those great Ministers that were his friends, banished and broken.

**JOHN CORBET.** I do not think you can explain him in that way – his tragedy had deeper foundations. His ideal order was the Roman Senate, his ideal men Brutus and Cato. Such an order and such men had seemed possible once more, but the movement passed and he foresaw the ruin to come, Democracy, Rousseau, the French Revolution; that is why he hated the common run of men, – “I hate lawyers, I hate doctors,” he said, “though I love Dr. So-and-so and Judge So-and-so” – that is why he wrote *Gulliver*, that is why he wore out his brain, that is why he felt *saeva indignatio*, that is why he sleeps under the greatest epitaph in history. You remember how it goes? It is almost finer in English than in Latin: “He has gone where fierce indignation can lacerate his heart no more.”

*Abraham Johnson comes in, followed by Mrs. Mallet and Cornelius Patterson.*

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** Something must be done, Dr. Trench, to drive away the influence that has destroyed our séances. I have come here week after week at considerable expense. I am from Belfast. I am by profession a minister of the Gospel, I do a great deal of work among the poor and ignorant. I produce considerable effect by singing and preaching, but I know that my effect should be much greater than it is. My hope is that I shall be able to communicate with the great Evangelist Moody. I want to ask him to stand invisible beside me when I speak or sing, and lay his hands upon my head and give me such a portion of his power that my work may be blessed as the work of Moody and Sankey was blessed.

**MRS. MALLET.** What Mr. Johnson says about the hostile influence is quite true. The last two séances were completely spoilt. I am thinking of starting a teashop in Folkestone. I followed Mrs. Henderson to Dublin to get my husband's advice, but two spirits kept talking and would not let any other spirit say a word.

**DR. TRENCH.** Did the spirits say the same thing and go through the same drama at both séances?

**MRS. MALLET.** Yes – just as if they were characters in some kind of horrible play.

**DR. TRENCH.** That is what I was afraid of.

**MRS. MALLET.** My husband was drowned at sea ten years ago, but constantly speaks to me through Mrs. Henderson as if he were still alive. He advises me about everything I do, and I am utterly lost if I cannot question him.

**CORNELIUS PATTERSON.** I never did like the Heaven they talk about in churches; but when somebody told me that Mrs. Mallet's husband ate and drank and went about with his favourite dog, I said to myself, "That is the place for Corney Patterson." I came here to find out if it was true, and I declare to God I have not heard one word about it.

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** I ask you, Dr. Trench, as President of the Dublin Spiritualists' Association, to permit me to read the ritual of exorcism appointed for such occasions. After the last séance I copied it out of an old book in the library of Belfast University. I have it here.

*He takes paper out of his pocket.*

**DR. TRENCH.** The spirits are people like ourselves, we treat them as our guests and protect them from discourtesy and violence, and every

exorcism is a curse or a threatened curse. We do not admit that there are evil spirits. Some spirits are earth-bound – they think they are still living and go over and over some action of their past lives, just as we go over and over some painful thought, except that where they are thought is reality. For instance, when a spirit which has died a violent death comes to a medium for the first time, it relives all the pains of death.

**MRS. MALLET.** When my husband came for the first time the medium gasped and struggled as if she was drowning. It was terrible to watch.

**DR. TRENCH.** Sometimes a spirit re-lives not the pain of death but some passionate or tragic moment of life. Swedenborg describes this and gives the reason for it. There is an incident of the kind in the *Odyssey*, and many in Eastern literature; the murderer repeats his murder, the robber his robbery, the lover his serenade, the soldier hears the trumpet once again. If I were a Catholic I would say that such spirits were in Purgatory. In vain do we write *requiescat in pace* upon the tomb, for they must suffer, and we in our turn must suffer until God gives peace. Such spirits do not often come to séances unless those séances are held in houses where those spirits lived, or where the event took place. This spirit which speaks those incomprehensible words and does not answer when spoken to is of such a nature. The more patient we are, the more quickly will it pass out of its passion and its remorse.

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** I am still convinced that the spirit which disturbed the last séance is evil. If I may not exorcise it I will certainly pray for protection.

**DR. TRENCH.** Mrs. Henderson's control, Lulu, is able and experienced and can protect both medium and sitters, but it may help Lulu if you pray that the spirit find rest.

*Abraham Johnson sits down and prays silently, moving his lips. Mrs. Henderson comes in with Miss Mackenna and others. Miss Mackenna shuts the door.*

**DR. TRENCH.** Mrs. Henderson, may I introduce to you Mr. Corbet, a young man from Cambridge and a sceptic, who hopes that you will be able to convince him?

**MRS. HENDERSON.** We were all sceptics once. He must not expect too much from a first séance. He must persevere. (*She sits in the armchair, and the others begin to seat themselves. Miss Mackenna goes to John Corbet and they remain standing.*)

**MISS MACKENNA.** I am glad that you are a sceptic.

**JOHN CORBET.** I thought you were a spiritualist.

**MISS MACKENNA.** I have seen a good many séances, and sometimes think it is all coincidence and thought-transference. (*She says this in a low voice.*) Then at other times I think as Dr. Trench does, and then I feel like Job – you know the quotation – the hair of my head stands up. A spirit passes before my face.

**MRS. MALLETT.** Turn the key, Dr. Trench, we don't want anybody blundering in here. (*Dr. Trench locks door.*) Come and sit here, Miss Mackenna.

**MISS MACKENNA.** No, I am going to sit beside Mr. Corbet. (*Corbet and Miss Mackenna sit down.*)

**JOHN CORBET.** You feel like Job to-night?

**MISS MACKENNA.** I feel that something is going to happen, that is why I am glad that you are a sceptic.

**JOHN CORBET.** You feel safer?

**MISS MACKENNA.** Yes, safer.

**MRS. HENDERSON.** I am glad to meet all my dear friends again and to welcome Mr. Corbet amongst us. As he is a stranger I must explain that we do not call up spirits: we make the right conditions and they come. I do not know who is going to come; sometimes there are a great many and the guides choose between them. The guides try to send somebody for everybody but do not always succeed. If you want to speak to some dear friend who has passed over, do not be discouraged. If your friend cannot come this time, maybe he can next time. My control is a dear little girl called Lulu who died when she was five or six years old. She describes the spirits present and tells us what spirit wants to speak. Miss Mackenna, a verse of a hymn, please, the same we had last time, and will everyone join in the singing?

*They sing the following lines from Hymn 564, Dublin Church Hymnal.*

“Sun of my soul, Thou Saviour dear,  
It is not night if Thou be near:  
O may no earth-born cloud arise  
To hide Thee from Thy servant’s eyes.”

*Mrs. Henderson is leaning back in her chair asleep.*

**MISS MACKENNA** (*to John Corbet*). She always snores like that when she is going off.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child’s voice*). Lulu so glad to see all her friends.

**MRS. MALLET.** And we are glad you have come, Lulu.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). Lulu glad to see new friend.

**MISS MACKENNA** (*to John Corbet*). She is speaking to you.

**JOHN CORBET**. Thank you, Lulu.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). You mustn't laugh at the way I talk.

**JOHN CORBET**. I am not laughing, Lulu.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). Nobody must laugh. Lulu does her best but can't say big long words. Lulu sees a tall man here, lots of hair on face (*Mrs. Henderson passes her hands over her cheeks and chin*), not much on the top of his head (*Mrs. Henderson passes her hand over the top of her head*), red necktie, and such a funny sort of pin.

**MRS. MALLET**. Yes. . . . Yes. . . .

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). Pin like a horseshoe.

**MRS. MALLET**. It's my husband.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). He has a message.

**MRS. MALLET**. Yes.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). Lulu cannot hear. He is too far off. He has come near. Lulu can hear now. He says. . . he says, "Drive that man away!" He is pointing to somebody in the corner, that corner over there. He says it is the bad man who spoilt everything last time. If they won't drive him away, Lulu will scream.

**MISS MACKENNA.** That horrible spirit again.

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** Last time he monopolised the séance.

**MRS. MALLET.** He would not let anybody speak but himself.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). They have driven that bad man away. Lulu sees a young lady.

**MRS. MALLET.** Is not my husband here?

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). Man with funny pin gone away. Young lady here – Lulu thinks she must be at a fancy dress party, such funny clothes, hair all in curls – all bent down on floor near that old man with glasses.

**DR. TRENCH.** No, I do not recognise her.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in a child's voice*). That bad man, that bad old man in the corner, they have let him come back. Lulu is going to scream. O . . . O . . . (*In a man's voice.*) How dare you write to her? How dare you ask if we were married? How dare you question her?

**DR. TRENCH.** A soul in its agony – it cannot see us or hear us.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*upright and rigid, only her lips moving, and still in a man's voice*). You sit crouching there. Did you not hear what I said? How dared you question her? I found you an ignorant little girl without intellect, without moral ambition. How many times did I not stay away from great men's houses, how many times forsake the Lord Treasurer, how many times neglect the business of the State that we might read Plutarch together!

*Abraham Johnson half rises. Dr. Trench motions him to remain seated.*

**DR. TRENCH.** Silence!

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** But, Dr. Trench. . .

**DR. TRENCH.** Hush – we can do nothing.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*speaking as before*). I taught you to think in every situation of life not as Hester Vanhomrigh would think in that situation, but as Cato or Brutus would, and now you behave like some common slut with her ear against the keyhole.

**JOHN CORBET** (*to Miss Mackenna*). It is Swift, Jonathan Swift, talking to the woman he called Vanessa. She was christened Hester Vanhomrigh.

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in Vanessa's voice*). I questioned her, Jonathan, because I love. Why have you let me spend hours in your company if you did not want me to love you? (*In Swift's voice.*) When I rebuilt Rome in your mind it was as though I walked its streets. (*In Vanessa's voice.*) Was that all, Jonathan? Was I nothing but a painter's canvas? (*In Swift's voice.*) My God, do you think it was easy? I was a man of strong passions and I had sworn never to marry. (*In Vanessa's voice.*) If you and she are not married, why should we not marry like other men and women? I loved you from the first moment when you came to my mother's house and began to teach me. I thought it would be enough to look at you, to speak to you, to hear you speak. I followed you to Ireland five years ago and I can bear it no longer. It is not enough to look, to speak, to hear. Jonathan, Jonathan, I am a woman, the women Brutus and Cato loved were not different. (*In Swift's voice.*) I have something in my blood that no child must inherit. I have constant attacks of dizziness; I pretend they come from a surfeit of fruit when I was a child. I had them in London. . . . There was a great doctor there, Dr. Arbuthnot; I told him of those attacks of dizziness, I told him of worse things. It was he who explained. There is a line of Dryden's. . . .



(*In Vanessa's voice.*) O, I know – “Great wits are sure to madness near allied.” If you had children, Jonathan, my blood would make them healthy. I will take your hand, I will lay it upon my heart – upon the Vanhomrigh blood that has been healthy for generations. (*Mrs. Henderson slowly raises her left hand.*) That is the first time you have touched my body, Jonathan. (*Mrs. Henderson stands up and remains rigid. In Swift's voice.*) What do I care if it be healthy? What do I care if it could make mine healthy? Am I to add another to the healthy rascaldom and knavery of the world? (*In Vanessa's voice.*) Look at me, Jonathan. Your arrogant intellect separates us. Give me both your hands. I will put them upon my breast. (*Mrs. Henderson raises her right hand to the level of her left and then raises both to her breast.*) O, it is white – white as the gambler's dice – white ivory dice. Think of the uncertainty. Perhaps a mad child – perhaps a rascal – perhaps a knave – perhaps not, Jonathan. The dice of the intellect are loaded, but I am the common ivory dice. (*Her hands are stretched out as though drawing somebody towards her.*) It is not my hands that draw you back. My hands are weak, they could not draw you back if you did not love as I love. You said that you have strong passions; that is true, Jonathan – no man in Ireland is so passionate. That is why you need me, that is why you need children, nobody has greater need. You are growing old. An old man without children is very solitary. Even his friends, men as old as he, turn away, they turn towards the young, their children or their children's children. They cannot endure an old man like themselves. (*Mrs. Henderson moves away from the chair, her movements gradually growing convulsive.*) You are not too old for the dice, Jonathan, but a few years if you turn away will make you an old miserable childless man. (*In Swift's voice.*) O God, hear the prayer of Jonathan Swift, that afflicted man, and grant that he may leave to posterity nothing but his intellect that came to him from Heaven. (*In Vanessa's voice.*) Can you face solitude with that mind, Jonathan? (*Mrs. Henderson goes to the door, finds that it is closed.*) Dice, white ivory dice. (*In Swift's voice.*) My God, I am left alone with my enemy. Who locked the door, who locked me in with my enemy? (*Mrs. Henderson beats upon the door, sinks to the floor and then speaks as Lulu.*) Bad old man! Do not let him

come back. Bad old man does not know he is dead. Lulu cannot find fathers, mothers, sons that have passed over. Power almost gone. (*Mrs. Mallet leads Mrs. Henderson, who seems very exhausted, back to her chair. She is still asleep. She speaks again as Lulu.*) Another verse of hymn. Everybody sing. Hymn will bring good influence.

(*They sing.*)

“If some poor wandering child of Thine  
Have spurned to-day the voice divine,  
Now, Lord, the gracious work begin;  
Let him no more lie down in sin.”

*During the hymn Mrs. Henderson has been murmuring “Stella”, but the singing has almost drowned her voice. The singers draw one another’s attention to the fact that she is speaking. The singing stops.*

**DR. TRENCH.** I thought she was speaking.

**MRS. MALLET.** I saw her lips move.

**DR. TRENCH.** She would be more comfortable with a cushion, but we might wake her.

**MRS. MALLET.** Nothing can wake her out of a trance like that until she wakes up herself. (*She brings a cushion, and she and Dr. Trench put Mrs. Henderson into a more comfortable position.*)

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in Swift’s voice*). Stella.

**MISS MACKENNA** (*to John Corbet*). Did you hear that? She said “Stella”.

**JOHN CORBET.** Vanessa has gone, Stella has taken her place.

**MISS MACKENNA.** Did you notice the change while we were singing? The new influence in the room?

**JOHN CORBET.** I thought I did, but it must have been fancy.

**MRS. MALLET.** Hush!

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*In Swift's voice*). Have I wronged you, beloved Stella? Are you unhappy? You have no children, you have no lover, you have no husband. A cross and ageing man for friend – nothing but that. But no, do not answer – you have answered already in that poem you wrote for my last birthday. With what scorn you speak of the common lot of women “with no adornment but a face –”

“Before the thirtieth year of life  
A maid forlorn or hated wife.”

It is the thought of the great Chrysostom, who wrote in a famous passage that women loved according to the soul, loved as saints can love, keep their beauty longer, have greater happiness than women loved according to the flesh. That thought has comforted me, but it is a terrible thing to be responsible for another's happiness. There are moments when I doubt, when I think Chrysostom may have been wrong. But now I have your poem to drive doubt away. You have addressed me in these noble words:

“You taught how I might youth prolong  
By knowing what is right and wrong;  
How from my heart to bring supplies  
Of lustre to my fading eyes;  
How soon a beauteous mind repairs  
The loss of chang'd or falling hairs;  
How wit and virtue from within  
Can spread a smoothness o'er the skin.”

**JOHN CORBET.** The words upon the window-pane!

**MRS. HENDERSON** (*in Swift's voice*). Then, because you understand that I am afraid of solitude, afraid of outliving my friends – and myself – you comfort me in that last verse – you overpraise my moral nature when you attribute to it a rich mantle, but O how touching those words which describe your love:

“Late dying, may you cast a shred  
Of that rich mantle o'er my head;  
To bear with dignity my sorrow,  
One day alone, then die to-morrow.”

Yes, you will close my eyes, Stella. O, you will live long after me, dear Stella, for you are still a young woman, but you will close my eyes. (*Mrs. Henderson sinks back in chair and speaks as Lulu.*) Bad old man gone. Power all used up. Lulu can do no more. Goodbye, friends. (*Mrs. Henderson speaking in her own voice.*) Go away, go away! (*She wakes.*) I saw him a moment ago, has he spoilt the séance again?

**MRS. MALLETT.** Yes, Mrs. Henderson, my husband came, but he was driven away.

**DR. TRENCH.** Mrs. Henderson is very tired. We must leave her to rest. (*To Mrs. Henderson.*) You did your best and nobody can do more than that. (*He takes out money.*)

**MRS. HENDERSON.** No. . . . No. . . . I cannot take any money, not after a séance like that.

**DR. TRENCH.** Of course you must take it, Mrs. Henderson. (*He puts money on table and Mrs. Henderson gives a furtive glance to see how much it is. She does the same as each sitter lays down his or her money.*)

**MRS. MALLET.** A bad séance is just as exhausting as a good séance, and you must be paid.

**MRS. HENDERSON.** No. . . . No. . . . Please don't. It is very wrong to take money for such a failure. (*Mrs. Mallet lays down money.*)

**CORNELIUS PATTERSON.** A jockey is paid whether he wins or not. (*He lays down money.*)

**MISS MACKENNA.** That spirit rather thrilled me. (*She lays down money.*)

**MRS. HENDERSON.** If you insist, I must take it.

**ABRAHAM JOHNSON.** I shall pray for you to-night. I shall ask God to bless and protect your séances. (*He lays down money.*)

*All go out except John Corbet and Mrs. Henderson.*

**JOHN CORBET.** I know you are tired, Mrs. Henderson, but I must speak to you. I have been deeply moved by what I have heard. This is my contribution to prove that I am satisfied, completely satisfied. (*He puts a note on the table.*)

**MRS. HENDERSON.** A pound note – nobody ever gives me more than ten shillings, and yet the séance was a failure.

**JOHN CORBET** (*sitting down near Mrs. Henderson*). When I say I am satisfied I do not mean that I am convinced it was the work of spirits. I prefer to think that you created it all, that you are an accomplished actress and scholar. In my essay for my Cambridge doctorate I examine all the explanations of Swift's celibacy offered by his biographers and prove that the explanation you selected was the only plausible one. But there is something I must ask you. Swift was the chief representative of

the intellect of his epoch, that arrogant intellect free at last from superstition. He foresaw its collapse. He foresaw Democracy, he must have dreaded the future. Did he refuse to beget children because of that dread? Was Swift mad? Or was it the intellect itself that was mad?

**MRS. HENDERSON.** Who are you talking of, sir?

**JOHN CORBET.** Swift, of course.

**MRS. HENDERSON.** Swift? I do not know anybody called Swift.

**JOHN CORBET.** Jonathan Swift, whose spirit seemed to be present to-night.

**MRS. HENDERSON.** What? That dirty old man?

**JOHN CORBET.** He was neither old nor dirty when Stella and Vanessa loved him.

**MRS. HENDERSON.** I saw him very clearly just as I woke up. His clothes were dirty, his face covered with boils. Some disease had made one of his eyes swell up, it stood out from his face like a hen's egg.

**JOHN CORBET.** He looked like that in his old age. Stella had been dead a long time. His brain had gone, his friends had deserted him. The man appointed to take care of him beat him to keep him quiet.

**MRS. HENDERSON.** Now they are old, now they are young. They change all in a moment as their thought changes. It is sometimes a terrible thing to be out of the body, God help us all.

**DR. TRENCH** (*at doorway*). Come along, Corbet. Mrs. Henderson is tired out.

**JOHN CORBET.** Good-bye, Mrs. Henderson. (*He goes out with Dr. Trench. All the sitters except Miss Mackenna, who has returned to her room, pass along the passage on their way to the front door. Mrs. Henderson counts the money, finds her purse, which is in a vase on the mantelpiece, and puts the money in it.*)

**MRS. HENDERSON.** How tired I am! I'd be the better of a cup of tea. (*She finds the teapot and puts kettle on fire, and then as she crouches down by the hearth suddenly lifts up her hands and counts her fingers, speaking in Swift's voice.*) Five great Ministers that were my friends are gone, ten great Ministers that were my friends are gone. I have not fingers enough to count the great Ministers that were my friends and that are gone. (*She wakes with a start and speaks in her own voice.*) Where did I put that tea-caddy? Ah! there it is. And there should be a cup and saucer. (*She finds the saucer.*) But where's the cup? (*She moves aimlessly about the stage and then, letting the saucer fall and break, speaks in Swift's voice.*) Perish the day on which I was born!

THE END

# ***PURGATORY***

## **PERSONS IN THE PLAY**

A BOY

AN OLD MAN

*First performed at the Abbey Theatre on 19th August 1938.*



## PURGATORY

*A ruined house and a bare tree in the background.*

**BOY.** Half door, hall door,  
Hither and thither day and night  
Hill or hollow, shouldering this pack,  
Hearing you talk.

**OLD MAN.** Study that house.  
I think about its jokes and stories;  
I try to remember what the butler  
Said to a drunken gamekeeper  
In mid-October, but I cannot.  
If I cannot, none living can.  
Where are the jokes and stories of a house,  
Its threshold gone to patch a pig-sty?

**BOY.** So you have come this path before?

**OLD MAN.** The moonlight falls upon the path,  
The shadow of a cloud upon the house,  
And that's symbolical; study that tree,  
What is it like?

**BOY.** A silly old man.

**OLD MAN.** It's like – no matter what it's like.  
I saw it a year ago stripped bare as now,  
So I chose a better trade.  
I saw it fifty years ago  
Before the thunderbolt had riven it,  
Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,  
Fat, greasy life. Stand there and look,  
Because there is somebody in that house.

*The boy puts down pack and stands in the doorway.*

**BOY.** There's nobody here.

**OLD MAN.** There's somebody there.

**BOY.** The floor is gone, the windows gone,  
And where there should be roof there's sky,  
And here's a bit of an egg-shell thrown  
Out of a jackdaw's nest.

**OLD MAN.** But there are some  
That do not care what's gone, what's left;  
The souls in Purgatory that come back  
To habitations and familiar spots.

**BOY.** Your wits are out again.

**OLD MAN.** Re-live  
Their transgressions, and that not once  
But many times; they know at last  
The consequence of those transgressions  
Whether upon others or upon themselves;  
Upon others, others may bring help,  
For when the consequence is at an end  
The dream must end; if upon themselves  
There is no help but in themselves  
And in the mercy of God.

**BOY.** I have had enough!  
Talk to the jackdaws, if talk you must.

**OLD MAN.** Stop! Sit there upon that stone.  
That is the house where I was born.



I here declare a capital offence.

**BOY.** My God, but you had luck! Grand clothes,  
And maybe a grand horse to ride.

**OLD MAN.** That he might keep me upon his level  
He never sent me to school, but some  
Half-loved me for my half of her:  
A gamekeeper's wife taught me to read,  
A Catholic curate taught me Latin.  
There were old books and books made fine  
By eighteenth century French binding, books  
Modern and ancient, books by the ton.

**BOY.** What education have you given me?

**OLD MAN.** I gave the education that befits  
A bastard that a pedlar got  
Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch.  
When I had come to sixteen years old  
My father burned down the house when drunk.

**BOY.** But that is my age, sixteen years old,  
At the Puck Fair.

**OLD MAN.**                   And everything was burnt;  
Books, library, all were burnt.

**BOY.** Is what I have heard upon the road the truth,  
That you killed him in the burning house?

**OLD MAN.** There's nobody here but our two selves?

**BOY.** Nobody, Father.

**OLD MAN.** I stuck him with a knife,  
That knife that cuts my dinner now,  
And after that I left him in the fire.  
They dragged him out, somebody saw  
The knife-wound but could not be certain  
Because the body was all black and charred.  
Then some that were his drunken friends  
Swore they would put me upon trial,  
Spoke of quarrels, a threat I had made.  
The gamekeeper gave me some old clothes,  
I ran away, worked here and there  
Till I became a pedlar on the roads,  
No good trade, but good enough  
Because I am my father's son,  
Because of what I did or may do.  
Listen to the hoof beats! Listen, Listen!

**BOY.** I cannot hear a sound.

**OLD MAN.** Beat! Beat!  
This night is the anniversary  
Of my mother's wedding night,  
Or of the night wherein I was begotten.  
My father is riding from the public-house,  
A whiskey bottle under his arm.

*A window is lit showing a young girl.*

Look at the window; she stands there  
Listening, the servants are all in bed,  
She is alone, he has stayed late  
Bragging and drinking in the public-house.

**BOY.** There's nothing but an empty gap in the wall.  
You have made it up. No, you are mad!

You are getting madder every day.

**OLD MAN.** It's louder now because he rides  
Upon a gravelled avenue  
All grass to-day. The hoof beat stops,  
He has gone to the other side of the house,  
Gone to the stable, put the horse up.  
She has gone down to open the door.  
This night she is no better than her man  
And does not mind that he is half drunk,  
She is mad about him. They mount the stairs.  
She brings him into her own chamber.  
And that is the marriage-chamber now.  
The window is dimly lit again.

Do not let him touch you! It is not true  
That drunken men cannot beget,  
And if he touch he must beget  
And you must bear his murderer.  
Deaf! Both deaf! If I should throw  
A stick or stone they would not hear;  
And that's a proof my wits are out.  
But there's a problem: she must live  
Through everything in exact detail,  
Driven to it by remorse, and yet  
Can she renew the sexual act  
And find no pleasure in it, and if not,  
If pleasure and remorse must both be there,  
Which is the greater?

I lack schooling.

Go fetch Tertullian; he and I  
Will ravel all that problem out  
Whilst those two lie upon the mattress  
Begetting me.

Come back! Come back!

And so you thought to slip away,  
My bag of money between your fingers,  
And that I could not talk and see!  
You have been rummaging in the pack.

*The light in the window has faded out.*

**BOY.** You never gave me my right share.

**OLD MAN.** And had I given it, young as you are,  
You would have spent it upon drink.

**BOY.** What if I did? I had a right  
To get it and spend it as I chose.

**OLD MAN.** Give me that bag and no more words.

**BOY.** I will not.

**OLD MAN.** I will break your fingers.

*They struggle for the bag. In the struggle it drops, scattering the money. The Old Man staggers but does not fall. They stand looking at each other. The window is lit up. A man is seen pouring whiskey into a glass.*

**BOY.** What if I killed you? You killed my grand-dad  
Because you were young and he was old.  
Now I am young and you are old.

**OLD MAN** (*staring at window*). Better looking, those sixteen years –

**BOY.** What are you muttering?

**OLD MAN.** Younger – and yet





And if I sing it must be to my mother,  
And I lack rhyme.

*The stage has grown dark except where the tree stands in white light.*

Study that tree.

It stands there like a purified soul,

All cold, sweet, glistening light.

Dear mother, the window is dark again,

But you are in the light because

I finished all that consequence.

I killed that lad because had he grown up

He would have struck a woman's fancy,

Begot, and passed pollution on.

I am a wretched foul old man

And therefore harmless. When I have stuck

This old jack-knife into a sod

And pulled it out all bright again,

And picked up all the money that he dropped,

I'll to a distant place, and there

Tell my old jokes among new men. (*He cleans the knife and begins to pick up money.*)

Hoof beats! Dear God,

How quickly it returns – beat – beat –!

Her mind cannot hold up that dream.

Twice a murderer and all for nothing,

And she must animate that dead night

Not once but many times!

O God!

Release my mother's soul from its dream!

Mankind can do no more. Appease

The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead.

THE END





W.B. Yeats's keen interests in the spirit world and the Irish Anglican Ascendancy come to the fore in these two gothic masterpieces from late in his career. In *The Words Upon the Window-pane* (1930), a Dublin séance is visited by the ghosts of Jonathan Swift and the two women he loved, Stella and Vanessa. In *Purgatory* (1938), an Old Man fruitlessly attempts to free his mother's soul from Purgatory by murdering his own son. Critics continue to debate how much Yeats subscribed to the controversial views on social class and spirituality articulated in both works.

**OLD MAN.** ...there are some  
That do not care what's gone, what's left;  
The souls in Purgatory that come back  
To habitations and familiar spots ... Re-live  
Their transgressions, and that not once  
But many times; they know at last  
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CP

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