

Literary
Genre

A Whistle in the Dark by Tom Murphy

SETTING: does it heighten atmosphere and help the narration of the story?

- The action takes place in a house in Coventry around 1960 and opens in a '*confusion of noise, movement and preparation*' in a room that shows signs of '*misuse*'.
- The background setting is an economically depressed Ireland that drives emigration and where jaded symbolism blunts the grasp on realities: '**The economy destroyed since the demand for St. Patrick's Day Badges Fell**'.
- The derelict culture of rural Ireland is represented in sentimental songs of the previous century: '**I hear you calling me**'. This tendency to sentimentalise the past contributes to the lack of realism of the characters. The impoverished Dada pretends to have roomfuls of unread books worth thousands that he wouldn't sell—all because of attachment to the notion of being scholarly [66].
- Much of the action off stage takes place in building sites, alleyways and pubs where uneducated and immature men compete with each other in a primitive way for dominance and for the base fulfilment of rudimentary human needs.
- **STUDENT TASK: Select one key scene to provide a developed illustration of the influence of setting on the struggle of characters and their development, a scene that intensifies the audience's engagement with the story.**

How do LANGUAGE, DIALOGUE AND IMAGERY help to make the story more exciting and interesting?

- Harry reveals his aggression and innately hostile nature in comments that are bursting with malice: '**Too many people saying hello, too many**'. [p16]
- Harry captures the paradox of Michael's dutiful benevolence: "**it's you following us, and you don't like us**" [p16]
- Harry speaks in menacing monosyllabic English, sprinkled with coarse slang, befitting the minimalist uneducated man he is "**Crap, daff, bullshit! Do you think I'm an eejit? Des can do what he likes**".
- Surprisingly Harry coins a sinister nursery rhyme to intimidate Betty and dominate her in her own house: "**Betty Batter bought a pound of butter. Sly likle Betty does be earwiggin' at keyholes**".
- One of the recurring images of the play is the fight with the Muslims. This is used to create a little mystery that is eventually explained. It is also an event that shadows Michael's and Harry's relationship, as well as eventually illustrating Michael's reputation for cowardice [62].
- The trees that Michael planted before he left home were meant to represent each of the five sons. Their symbolism is increased when it emerges that Dada ignored them, thought them dangerous and comically claimed they release carbon dioxide into the air: "**Tid poison you**" [23]. Dada would reject anything that Michael brought to the family.
- **Witty dialogue** is employed [23] when the tables are turned on Michael's question to Des: '**What do you think of Coventry?**' and Hugo quips '**What does Coventry think of him?**' This serves to boost Des' self-image and exploits his raw cockiness so as to utilise him in the fights.
- Dada has a colourful image of Michael's reforming instinct and loyalty to his family: '**You're like a many dog; the harder it's kicked, the harder it sticks on**'. Later he actually refers to Michael as '**doggie**'.
- Dada comes up with some dramatic slogans, dark pronouncements: '**The man of words fails the man of actions**' [34].
- The play uses the idioms/slang of Mayo-men of the time: '**sham**', '**fly**' etc.

DRAMATIC DEVICES employed; dramatic irony, reversal, climax, coincidence, pantomime, letter, catalyst character etc. *[Find a key moment that enables developed discussion]*

- **Dramatic Irony**-When Mush drops in to inform Harry that one of his **“long-haired ones is waiting up the road”** Dada asks Harry if he is courting. The others laugh as they and the audience know that Harry is making an illegal living as a pimp [28].
- **Reversal/ Climax**- Michael’s aspirations to protect Des come to nought when harried and goaded by his father he slays Des in a drunken brawl in the play’s dark climax.
- **Premonition**—Michael indirectly foreshadows the tragic climax in his comments about Harry’s criminal activity: **‘I’ve this awful feeling that something terrible is going to happen’** [38]. He repeats his **‘awful feeling’** idea in relation to Des [39].
- **Coincidence**— the appearance of characters at various points of conversations that they interrupt and give mischievous direction to.
- **Pantomime**- there are lots of funny moments like when Harry and Mush enter when Michael is using the word ‘hair-brained’ to describe Dada. They recall a childhood rhyme **‘God made the greyhound to catch him by the arse’** [44].
- **Recitations**- in a mockery of the Irish bard, Mush composes heroic tributes to Iggy in banal and sentimental language, **‘Erin’s Fame**, amounting to doggerel [75]. For the audience this becomes a send up of the redundant nature of the culture and values of the Carneys.
- **Popsongs**- Hugo sings the popular Johnny Thunder Song ‘Here we go loopy loop’.
- **Catalyst Character**- Harry and Dad both harass and destroy Michael, goading him into self destruction. Harry taunts Michael through out: **‘Shams...you suck up to them, I fight them’** [48] As a result Michael becomes fraught and unsure and eventually implodes: **‘What’s wrong with me...’** [63] Even Betty caves in under the pressure and urges Michael to fight.

How do Memorable Characters bring the story to life?

- Harry, the funny hard guy begins by playing a game with smelly socks, calling them like a farmer would call a calf: **“now-now-now, sock-sock”**.
- Harry is full of himself and very menacing but he is also very straight talking: **“O.K. What’s your motive for going round with me?”** he suddenly throws at Mush [16]. **‘I know where I stand’** [48].
- Harry is a pimp and self-described **“thick lad,”** who in fact has the deepest sense of family loyalty of all the brothers.
- He speaks eloquently about the childhood humiliation he suffered at the hands of a schoolteacher, but that is a cry from an otherwise inarticulate man.
- Dada Carney is colourful, dapper and thoroughly deceitful, both a preener and a pretender. Dada is a fraud and a failure. He is trapped in the role of over-protective and authoritarian father and seems to live through his poorly brought up sons. He is capable of feigning charm and courtesy, while being a dark misogynist at heart: **‘Very tasty, you’re a very good cook mam’**.
- Michael Carney, flawed by indecision, is torn between a sense of decency, physical fear and misplaced duty to his out of date roots: **“it’s you following us, and you don’t like us”**-Harry [p16] He is a compellingly complex character and was once the main hope of the family for success. But in breaking from his father’s influence he has not been able to escape a fatal sense of duty to his disrespectful brothers. Michael has become mired in his own bitterness. Outwardly he is the articulate voice of reason and conscience. Actually he is a younger version of his cowardly father—**“afraid of his own shadow”** according to Harry. [18]