

“The Very Seeds of Fire”: Chris Lee’s *The Map Maker’s Sorrow*

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“There is . . . in this humour the very seeds of fire. . . . In the midst of these squalid, ugly, and such irksome days, they seek at last, finding no comfort, no remedy in this wretched life, to be eased of all by death . . . to be their own butchers, and execute themselves”

(Robert Burton, *An Anatomy of Melancholy* 1.431-32).

In his survey of Irish plays featuring suicide staged from 1960 to 2007, Christopher Murray finds that the number of Irish playwrights who did “introduce suicide into realistic drama . . . remained quite small” (178-79). He contends that those he terms “the Irish sociological playwrights” avoided the topic altogether “because suicide was a taboo subject in Irish life” (178). Yet, he also claims that in the Irish poetic drama of those decades suicide “might safely feature at the climaxes of pseudo-classical or quasi-Shakespearean plays in Celtic costume” (178).

At almost the same time, 1960-2010, suicide was becoming slowly recognized as a major health problem in Ireland, but that recognition only fully occurred in the early years of the twenty-first century. According to a 2007 report in the *Irish Times*, the country had experienced “a tenfold increase in suicides since the early 1960s.”¹ Four years later, also according to the *Irish Times*, the “[l]atest figures indicate there was a rise in the suicide rate in Ireland between 2007 and 2011” (O’Brien). Subsequent years brought similar or worse reports as had already happened in other European countries. “In 1975 . . . suicide was the second or third leading cause of death in 15-24 year olds in several European countries, with the rates for males generally higher than those for females” (Hawton 25). The National Center for Health Statistics as early as 1984 reported that in England and Wales suicide rates per 100,000 among 20-24 year-old males more than doubled between 1960 and 1981 (qtd. in Hawton 22). Nor did the United States escape this terrible trend: “Suicide is the third leading cause of death in young people in the United States and the second for college students” (Jamison 21; see also 22-24).

Against this background Chris Lee’s *The Map Maker’s Sorrow* (1999), which focuses on the inexplicable aspects of a young person’s suicide and its messy aftermath, appears all the more prescient having been produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1999 only six years after Ireland decriminalized suicide and almost fifteen years before suicide was recognized as a national health

problem among the young. *The Map Maker's Sorrow* became the Peacock entry in the 1999 Dublin Theatre Festival. The production reunited the playwright with several of the Abbey Theatre staff and actors from his earlier Abbey play, *The Electrocuting of Children* (1998), including the director Brian Brady, the wonderfully imaginative designer Paul McCauley, and actors Chris McHallem (as the freelance polysomnographic technician, feckless husband, and father) and Catherine Mack (as an alluring and very self-assured Death). Ingrid Craigie joined the cast in the title role of Morag, the map-maker, reluctant teacher, and mother.²

Mirror up to suicide

The Map Maker's Sorrow opens swiftly, shockingly with young Jason hanging himself. Subsequent scenes in the play are not organized teleologically with one neatly dovetailing into another, nor are they arranged according to the Map Maker's imperative to "reduce complexity in order to be useful" (6). Instead, Lee's play attempts to present both the complexity of the act of suicide and its complicated aftermath by deploying a map's "simultaneous spatial logic" (40). Thus, while *The Map Maker's Sorrow's* division into scenes superficially resembles that of Lee's earlier play, *The Electrocuting of Children*, the division here serves a quite different dramatic purpose. Moreover, the scenes in *The Electrocuting of Children* progress serially from a clear if ironic beginning through those that develop action and character to conclude also ironically if bleakly with God announcing the end of the human race. By contrast, *The Map Maker's Sorrow's* abrupt beginning with a character the audience does not know and cannot know committing suicide creates immediate confusion as this scene leaves the audience in much the same position as that of the survivors, who find a family member dead by his or her own hand. Suicide, like Lee's opening scene, declares the strangeness of the other. The audience knows as little about what happened and why as Henry and Morag, the father and mother of the suicide in the play they are watching.

Unfortunately, Brady as director diminished the shock effect of this opening and dissipated the resulting confusion by introducing a new initial scene in which the various characters in the play appeared as if half-asleep, meandering about as they circled the stage. This intrusive scene ended with a blackout that in turn was followed by Lee's original first scene in contrast to the published text (5), but the shock effect of the initial hanging, while still present, was greatly weakened. Brady's unwelcome innovation not only violated the play's structure by unnecessarily placing the whole cast of

characters onstage before the original first scene but also confused—where it did not negate—the play’s crucial “issue of the incomprehensibility of suicide for those left behind” (see Morse, “Cry with Terror” 227).

Suicide almost inevitably produces fragmentation, which Lee mirrors in the structure of the play itself. The play’s series of vignettes—those short fragmented scenes that are themselves fragments—continually interrupt any emotional engagement by the audience thus avoiding even a semblance of sentimentality, for, as Morag rightly says, “Fragmentation defeats empathy” (89).³ “We ache for more of the relationship between parents and son,” perceptively wrote Dorothy Louise in her review. But she then lost patience with what she perceived as “hints [that] at first tantalize, then irritate, as we realize that we will never get closer to any insights on why these relationships have developed as they have” (22). But surely this absence of explanation is exactly Lee’s point: the central figure in these relationships, the person who might provide the very “insights” Louise longs for, cannot be interviewed since he hung himself at the beginning of the play.⁴ Also, beyond this obvious point, the play continually emphasizes that there are no real insights to be had since relationships simply happen. “There is,” as Kurt Vonnegut famously wrote in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, “no why” (66).

“The slippage into futility”

Kay Redfield Jamison in her authoritative study of suicide, *Night Falls Fast*, argues rightly that “[s]uicide will have seemed to its perpetrator the last and best of bad possibilities, and any attempt by the living to chart this final terrain of a life can be only a sketch, maddeningly incomplete” (73). She also contends that:

Suicide is a particularly awful way to die: the mental suffering leading up to it is usually prolonged, intense, and unpalliated. There is no morphine equivalent to ease the acute pain, and death not uncommonly is violent and grisly. The suffering of the suicidal is private and inexpressible, leaving family members, friends, and colleagues to deal with an almost unfathomable kind of loss, as well as guilt. Suicide carries in its aftermath a level of confusion and devastation that is, for the most part, beyond description. (24)

And, it is exactly this level of “confusion and devastation” that *The Map Maker’s Sorrow* sets out to dramatize. Part of the strength of Lee’s play, therefore, lies in its forcing audiences to confront this ultimate act’s

indecipherable nature through the very form of the play itself: a non-linear spatial form that organizes scenes by contiguity rather than by either logic or sequence. “Maps are not mirrors of reality,” warns Morag in the play (5). But maps do relate to reality however approximately, as the scenes in this play do relate to confused bereavement while they do not attempt to reproduce it. There is also no attempt, for example, to elucidate what must remain inexplicable, since suicide by definition resists conventional knowledge—there are no forms, no shapes that fit this act.

But dramatizing confusion on the stage will sometimes have the unintended consequence of arousing resentment on the part of an audience or a reviewer. As mentioned earlier, Louise is one such reviewer, who, by ignoring the messy nature of suicide, erroneously described Lee’s calculated confusion as a negative dramatic effect: “Although every scene has its point, like a sound-bite, few last long enough to develop into something probing or revealing, and many end with punch lines that effectively abort what might otherwise have moved into more complicated terrain” (Louise 21). This comment, however, confuses dramatization with characterization. For example, at the end of Jason and Jess’s conversation about his approaching suicide (scene 13, “Fuck”) there appears what looks like a clear example of what the reviewer calls Lee’s “punch lines”:

JASON. I’ll fix us something to eat.

JESS. You know I don’t have any money.

JASON. It’s not a problem.

JESS. Are you asking me to fuck for my rent?

Pause.

JASON. Look, I’ll be dead before you learn to hate me. (45)

Those two last lines definitely qualify as hard-hitting “punch lines,” but I would suggest that rather than creating a shallow “effect,” they emanate from deep within each character’s experience, and, therefore, each line reflects the distinctive personality and values of the speaker. As a young prostitute, Jess would indeed be suspicious that Jason’s offer is actually to trade sex for food and shelter. She, therefore, confronts Jason with what she honestly views as the dominant issue behind his offer. Jason’s response similarly arises out of his character and his immediate situation. He has, after all, worked hard at disengaging his feelings, avoiding confrontation, and nursing his low self-esteem. His line, “I’ll be dead before you learn to hate me,” reiterates both his preoccupation with suicide and his penchant for

devaluing himself. Given the context, Jason's "I'll be dead" appears neither boastful nor pretentious but could be an attempt to communicate his desperate situation, which various research studies testify as typical of suicidal personalities. As I have noted elsewhere:

In a landmark study of 134 suicides, Eli Robbins and his colleagues at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis conclude that "The high rate of communication of suicidal ideas indicates that in the majority of instances it is a premeditated act of which the person gives ample warning" (qtd. in Jamison 237). Based on her own extensive research Jamison agrees: "Most of those who commit suicide explicitly and *often repeatedly* [italics added], communicate their intentions to kill themselves to others [...] before doing so." . . . Such communication "is fortunate," she believes because "it allows at least the possibility of treatment and prevention." (Morse, "Death and the Playwright" 236; compare Morse, "Cry with Terror" 229)

All of which is true, but for such communication to be effective it must, of necessity, involve both parties; that is, both the potential suicide and his or her listener. Thus Jason's confessing his intention to kill himself to someone as aloof, uninvolved, and indifferent as Jess, may well prove futile and, therefore, not lead to prevention (see, for example, *Map Maker's* 44).

Lee does give voice to the suicide, however, through the play's retrospective exposition where all Jason's seemingly innocuous remarks, frustrations and inexplicable temper tantrums acquire significance in hindsight. As we follow his scenes sporadically inserted into the present action, we see that "the slippage into futility is first gradual, then utter" (Jamison 104). This progress into futility mirrored in the play is far truer to the experience of suicides than if Jason had, as the reviewer Dorothy Louise naively wished, "report[ed] the causes of his feelings" (21). He may very well not know himself what those "causes" might be and, if he did know, to whom should he tell them? In the play, as in life, there simply is no way to grant such wishes, understandable as they are, and as frequently as they may be expressed after a suicide.

True to its subject, loose ends abound in this play. When Morag asks Jess, for example, if Jason hated her, Jess replies: "He didn't hate you. He was hurt by you. He couldn't bear the weight of expectation. That's why he cut himself off" (28). Louise, after quoting this scrap of conversation in her review, adds, "But this is feeble. . . . we never see Morag pressuring Jason, so we have to wonder about Jason's accuracy in reporting the causes of his

feelings. And why could he not just as well have been spurred to accomplishment by his mother's ambition for him, assuming she harboured such a prospect?" (21). Perhaps a more relevant question might be: Is Jess accurately reporting what she heard Jason say or might she not be inventing? Underlying this scene may well be Jess's desire to wound Morag and, if possible, lower her self-esteem since in her view the older woman's behavior radiates a belief in her own superiority, especially her superiority over a young prostitute. There can be, of course, no answer to the question as to why Jason "could . . . not just as well have been spurred to accomplishment by his mother's ambition for him" either in the play or in the life of that family. Based on what the audience knows, we might conclude that Morag appears to be a good mother, ambitious for herself and—one could presume—for her son as well. What we do know from their scenes together is that neither appears to understand the other. For instance, Jason has mastered various statistics about the solar system at his mother's request, but he finds such knowledge pointless. As the scene builds, he rattles off a complicated recipe in all its detail before running out of the room in frustration shouting, "Who cares? Who cares about anything?" (17). Jason's retrospective scenes all end abruptly either with his physically leaving or his suddenly ending the conversation (45, 63, 78)—or both (17). The visual image of Jason fleeing not just from his parents but from any true confrontation with them or with anyone else where his own feelings might be revealed, typifies not only his actions in the play (compare 48), but that of virtually all suicides. Suicide is, above all, an attempt to escape from what has become intolerable. Why life should become intolerable, can rarely, if ever, be known by others. What this reviewer saw as negative—"we remain in the dark about what his [Jason's] parents have done" (22)—is as dramatically positive as it is psychologically true. Perhaps his parents have done nothing to provoke or merit his hostility. There is no way for an audience to know. Not only do "we [in the audience] remain in the dark," but so do Henry and Morag and everyone else Jason left behind to clean up his mess (compare Hawton 90).

"The best kisser in the universe"

Death in *The Map Maker's Sorrow* is not the stock figure of a bony skeleton with scythe and hourglass but a young woman whose beauty derives from death, for as Wallace Stevens so memorably wrote: "Death is the mother of beauty" ("Sunday Morning" l 63). Yet Lee appears to warn an audience against turning this observation into something more positive and more general, such as, for example, the psychiatrist Rollo May's generalized

notion of the positive value of being aware of death. “This awareness of death,” May contends, “is the source of zest for life and of our impulse to create not only works of art, but civilizations as well” (103). True, but not in this play where Jason’s continually conjuring death does not lead to any such “zest for life,” much less any wish to help “create . . . civilizations.” May continues by arguing that the “awareness of death also brings benefits. One of these is the freedom to speak the truth: the more aware we are of death, the more vividly we experience the fact that it is not only beneath our dignity to tell a lie but useless as well” (103). While Jason may tell the truth as he knows it—often shockingly—he has no interest in such philosophical questions about the meaning of life in the face of death, since having already found no meaning in life, he simply has no more desire to live. Nor is he about to die because of some existential crisis in his life. Such notions, although common, are, Jamison cautions, only superficial:

Although it is tempting to imagine suicide as obituary writers often do—as an “understandable” response to a problem of life, such as economic reversal, romantic failure, or shame—it is clear that these or similar setbacks hit everyone at some point in their lives. . . . For every grief or strain that appears to trigger a suicide, thousands of other people have experienced situations as bad or worse and do *not* kill themselves. (199)

In *The Map Maker’s Sorrow*, for instance, both of Jason’s parents find themselves in almost impossible economic, emotional, and professional situations, yet neither contemplates suicide. His father has large gambling debts owed to shadowy underworld figures that have threatened to maim and/or kill him if he fails to repay the loan within a very short time. Additionally, he has ruined his marriage, alienated his son, and lost his job. Still, he goes on and opens a freelance consulting business based on his profession as a polysomnographic technician. He meets “adversity and danger armed with an ironic sense of humour, verbal agility and a baseball bat” (Morse, “Cry with Terror” 232). Jason’s mother has seen the very foundations of her research and lifework destroyed. After doing extensive research on the building of the Rajasthan Canal in India Morag wrote a book celebrating the canal as indicative of a bright future for the country (45-50). When that canal was finally finished, however, the results proved disastrous as many people died by drowning, others had their lives, work, and culture destroyed while the land itself was decimated and the environment poisoned (88-89). Her only son, in whom she believed and for whom she had such high

hopes, killed himself, yet she, like Henry, never thinks of killing herself. Like her husband and millions of others, she may drown her sorrows in alcohol to the point of endangering her health but she appears quite capable of jettisoning this short-term non-remedy. Both parents feel understandably that their lives individually and together have been shattered by Jason's suicide as well as by their own failures, yet, unlike Jason and those who are genuinely suicidal, they do not feel totally paralyzed or robbed of the "otherwise vital forces that make us human" (Jamison 104). They do not feel trapped in the suicide's "airless . . . [world] without exits" (Alvarez 293). They appear baffled but they are not defeated. Nor is there any "slippage into futility" that Jamison argues is so typical of suicides (104). Instead both Morag and Henry illustrate her contention that "[t]he normal mind, although strongly affected by a loss or damaging event, is well cloaked against the possibility of suicide" (Jamison 199). This contrasts vividly with Jason, whose experience of the utter futility of his life in every aspect remains stark.

Moreover, Jason's suicide is clearly not motivated by his desire to "solve" any problem, neither his own nor his family's, unlike, say, Willy Loman, one of the most famous suicides in modern drama. Willy decided to kill himself because he believed his death would actually solve all of his and his family's problems through the proceeds from his life insurance. In his mind, the insurance becomes "a guaranteed twenty-thousand-dollar proposition . . . like a diamond shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand" (442-43). Jason sees no glittering prospective diamonds accruing from his death. Instead his case resembles one of the most famous cases in the annals of existential psychoanalysis: that of Ludwig Binswanger's "Lola." Binswanger recalls that "Lola" killed herself because her "despair is not only, as in other cases, despair at having to be in the world in a particular way and no other; it is despair at being-in-the-world at all" (286). For "Lola," all life consisted of "conflict between the ideal and the resistance from the dull world ('reality')" (287). Her immersion in the "despair at being in the world at all!" echoes throughout Lee's play as it does in numerous studies of suicide. Keith Hawton, for example, on the basis of his extensive research into suicide and its causes, concludes that "a sense of hopelessness, rather than general depression, is a major factor in determining suicidal behavior" (90). Jason throughout the play illustrates this deep "sense of hopelessness"—this "despair at being in-the-world at all."

In *The Map Maker's Sorrow*, Lee thus presents Jason's suicide as a direct challenge to life understood as a mostly orderly progression from birth through maturity to death as well as his rejection of memory. His death

becomes his attempt to deny not just May's "zest for life" in the face of mortality but, in ways similar to Binswanger's "Lola," the very premise of lived life itself. In denying the future, Jason attempts also to negate all the past, which is carried in memory; that is, carried both in his own and in the community's memory.⁵ Asserting that memories are simply too awful to live with bring not consolation but only pain and provide no enjoyment through recall and, therefore, everything becomes futile, Jason exclaims, "Who cares about anything?" His goals—typical of most suicides—become to lessen the hold on him of the living, whether in his immediate family or beyond, and to eliminate the awful compulsion to remember.

Although Jason's life may be seen by many as barely begun, from his perspective his life has been far too long and his accumulated memories far too many and far too poisonous.⁶ His life is, quite simply, "too long" (*Map Maker's* 91). His death onstage reflects the acute, painful mystery of young adult suicide that in many countries has reached almost epidemic proportions. In dealing with what Jamison calls this "most serious public health problem" (21),⁷ Lee alters the traditional image of life as an arrow coming from the past to the present and going into the future, moving from birth to death, "from the unknown to the known" (Joyce 697). Through the figure and soliloquies of lovely, attractive Death, the play presents the ultimate mystery of life and death within the space-time cosmos: "It might be said that a life is fixed like a line on a map of space-time. Science says there is fate. Quantum mechanics, on the other hand, celebrates the chaos of unpredictability. . . . a life is like a sub-atomic particle. You can never know where it will be if you also want to know how fast it's moving" (*Map Maker's* 54). "We live in an old chaos of the sun," proclaimed Wallace Stevens (l.110)—that is, we live with uncertainty, with unpredictability. Only in hindsight do the pieces fall into place in the puzzle that became Jason's suicide and even then those left behind must search futilely for several missing pieces because of the "chaos of unpredictability" (*Map Maker's* 54).

Death herself, in the last soliloquy of *The Map Maker's Sorrow*, urges humans to accept death as the natural end of all life including that of the suicide. As God was the guiding, highly ironic presence in *The Electrocutation of Children*, so death, Walt Whitman's "lovely and soothing death" (l.135) governs all life in *The Map Maker's Sorrow*. Lee's Death, that beautiful, purposeful, and composed "lovely young woman," offers the last kiss of forgetfulness to those who embrace her, "the best kisser in the universe" (3, 23). Within this human as well as cosmic context, Morag and Henry confront the inexplicable as they themselves wrestle with life's purpose or the lack of it. As parents, they have a life to grieve and "[n]o one tells you how to grieve" (88). "Let's cry," says Morag. "Let's start from there" with

tears that wash away grief, leaving memory and love (90). But for Jason that “old chaos” ends. As Death says to another character, “All sorrow lies in the past. There is no future. And the present is closing its eyes” (88).

Conclusion

St. Augustine in his *Confessions* famously asks: “What kind of compassion is it that arises from viewing fictions and unreal sufferings?” (1.13, 3.2). Donald Wesling persuasively but only partially answers Augustine in *Joys and Sorrows of Imaginary Persons (on Literary Emotions)* (2008) by attempting to demonstrate to psychologists as well as the general reader that fiction, including drama, does provide psychological case studies far more valid than those life presents because such “fictions” are often able to give us the whole person complete with motivations for actions that in life are frequently absent or hidden from view.⁸ *The Map Maker’s Sorrow* is an excellent example of emotions that in this instance are inherently ambiguous since occasioned by suicide but which may be analyzed, discussed, and debated through the play’s imaginary persons, hopefully leading to better understanding of an—at best—opaque human dilemma.

Lee’s powerful play remains “unique in the Irish theatre,” as Christopher Murray claims, because of its daring, “thorough representation of young Jason’s suicide, the thinking that lay behind it . . . and the effects on his parents, particularly on his mother” (189). The play provides no “insight . . . on why these relationships have developed as they have” (Louise 22), but then that was not its subject. Instead, *The Map Maker’s Sorrow* remains a sketch of “this final terrain of a life” that must of necessity remain forever “maddeningly incomplete” (Jamison 73). Through its unflinching confrontation with one of the most difficult as well as one of the most complex tragic human situations Chris Lee’s play offers an eloquent and positive answer to St. Augustine’s question: “What kind of compassion is it that arises from viewing fictions and unreal sufferings?”

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Notes

I would like to once again thank Judy Friel, then at the Abbey Theatre, for supplying me with a script of Chris Lee’s *The Electrocution of Children*.

¹ Eithne Donnellan 8. The data for the 1960s may, however, be woefully incomplete since suicide was not decriminalized in Ireland until 1993. Before that suicide was often reported as accidental death.

² A prolific Irish playwright with over thirty plays to his credit, Chris Lee works in London and was well on his way to having his plays produced at the Abbey Theatre when his career became derailed by a change in Abbey directors. Patrick Mason as Abbey Director

championed Lee inviting him to become a Writer in Association with the Abbey 1999-2000, which resulted in the Abbey producing *The Map Maker's Sorrow* as its entry in the 1999 Dublin Theatre Festival, as earlier the theatre had produced *The Electrocuting of Children* that shared the annual Stewart Parker New Playwright Bursary for 1998. The latter was an intellectually ambitious play superbly directed by Brian Brady with an outstanding cast. The play, as I have written elsewhere, depicts a world in which people have forgotten how precious the gift of life is and how fragile human beings are. Humans, "here by chance" and as "glorious accidents of an unpredictable process" (Gould 216), squander their opportunities to be creative, turn their backs on relationships, fail in their attempts to communicate, and prey upon one another. ("Magnificence of Bacteria" 97). For a detailed analysis of the play and this production, see Morse, "The Simple Magnificence of Bacteria." When Ben Barnes replaced Mason as Abbey Theatre Director he lost no time in dismissing Lee. Thus the Abbey and Ireland forfeited future productions of this cutting-edge playwright.

³ In contrast, *The Electrocuting of Children* moves sequentially through a series of scenes drawn from the debris of lives and isolated relationships to the seemingly more remote but perfectly plausible and often predicted collision of an asteroid with the earth. "An error," as God admits in the play. Regrettable, but still "for you [humans] it's good night." See Paul Davies, *Three Last Minutes*, especially 1-2 for a description of this eventuality.

⁴ This same reviewer might have wished to see another play—one that accounted for all the emotions revealing exactly why Jason felt as he did and how that inevitably led him to hang himself (Louise 21-22).

⁵ On a community level, Jason's suicide negates all the arts since, as the Greeks believed, Mnemosyne was the mother of all the muses, hence memory is the basis of all the arts.

⁶ One hypothesis for the high suicide rate among holocaust survivors, for example, assumes that such people cannot face living when so many others perished and so one-by-one they commit suicide. Whether valid or not, far too many people of genius who were both compassionate and articulate and who survived the death camps have killed themselves. Primo Levi, the chemist, holocaust survivor, and witness to the terror unleashed in the twentieth century, wrote compellingly of his and others' unimaginable ordeals. Yet years—decades—later, after considerable fame and success as a writer, he killed himself (Bailey xiii). Jason has no such memories of, or guilt feelings about, being a survivor.

⁷ "One percent of all suicides occur in the first fifteen years of life, but 25 percent occur in the second" (Jamison 202). "Suicide in the young, which has tripled over the past forty-five years, is, without argument, one of our most serious public health problems" (21).

⁸ Wesling's examples include Joyce Carol Oates, *Black Water* (1992), and a series of plays about Phaedra from Aeschylus through Racine to Sarah Kane. He suggests generally that using fictive case studies could empower psychology in a way that other studies, such as those that commonly sample college students, cannot, since such samples can never, by virtue of their using living subjects, be complete.

Martin Amis offers an alternative approach in suggesting that "[s]uicide is a mind-body problem that ends violently and without any winner,' since there can be no real answers to questions about the human motivations and relationships that may have led to this final act" (*Night Train* qtd. in Morse, "Cry with Terror" 224).

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