



A Study Guide by Dr. Rachel Price Cooper  
Instructor of Theatre, University of Southern Maine

# Fly Me to the Moon

By Marie Jones

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# ***Fly Me to the Moon***

By Marie Jones

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Instructor of Theatre, University of Southern  
Maine**

**THE PLAYWRIGHT.** Marie Jones made a huge splash on the Irish theatre scene with *Stones in His Pockets* (1996). Like *Fly Me to the Moon* (2012), the play is a darkly comedic two-hander set in contemporary Ireland. Both plays satirize romantic notions of Ireland and “Irish-ness” after the economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger transformed old Erin into a popular destination for tourism, foreign investment, and the film industry in the 1990s. Prior to this period, Ireland had been associated with a difficult colonial history and mass emigration. Jones’s theatrical career bookends the Celtic Tiger period, and much of her work is concerned with how Irish people have dealt with a period of unprecedented growth. More recently, it also deals with Ireland during the Great Recession period of 2008-2012.

Marie Jones grew up in a working-class family in Belfast. She started out as an actress Jones helped to found Charabanc Theatre Company in 1983. Charabanc was formulated to help create roles for women in Irish Theatre and remained active into the early 1990s. Jones went on to co-found Dublin Joint theatre company in 1991. After working collaboratively for roughly a decade with Charabanc, Jones transitioned into solo playwriting when she wrote five plays for Replay Theatre Company throughout the 1990s. She also appeared alongside Daniel Day Lewis in *In the Name of the Father* (1993). The film tells the story of a Northern Irish Boxer who had been falsely convicted of an IRA bombing.

*Stones in His Pockets*, her best-known piece, is set in a small town in rural County Kerry which has been scouted as the location for a Hollywood film. Most of the residents have been employed to work as extras during the shoot. While they are initially dazzled by the glamour of it all, they begin to feel taken advantage of, condescended towards, and misrepresented as the cast and crew overstay their welcome. The crux of the play lies in the fact that a local boy drowns himself after being humiliated by the film's leading lady in the local pub.

The play deals with the dangerous and confining nature of Irish stereotypes and explores the idealized notion of pastoral Ireland popularized in melodramatic plays like Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* (1860) and films like *The Quiet Man* (1952) starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara. Like *Fly Me to the Moon*, *Stones in His Pockets* places pressure upon idealistic generalizations about what it meant to be Irish in the service of a flourishing tourism industry; Ireland was marketed as the land of great craic (the Irish word for "fun"), jovial story-tellers, set musicians, and Aaron Island sweat-ers.

*Fly Me to the Moon* is set firmly amongst working-class characters that swear like sailors, talk about cheating the system by going on disability, and entertain the notion of stealing from a dead man so that they can go on holiday to Barcelona. Like contemporaries Martin McDonagh and Enda Walsh, Jones uses black comedy to explore notions of morality in Ireland today.

**THE SETTING.** The bulk of *Fly Me to the Moon's* action is set in a modest bungalow at 17 Miller's Row in contemporary Ireland. Judging from the fact that the characters refer to pounds rather than euros when discussing money, we can further infer that this is Northern Ireland. The characters also mention the fact that they are in an economic recession, leaving Loretta's husband out of work. This further locates the play between 2008 and 2012, when much of the world was in an economic decline after the housing bubble burst in the United States. The play is meta-theatrical in the sense that it is framed as a memory. Meta-theatricality refers to staging conventions that remind audiences that what they are watching is, on some level, a performance; a play within a play, characters playing multiple roles, and stepping out of the action to directly address the audience are just a few of the more common conventions.

The play's only observable characters, Loretta Mackie and Francis Shields begin in two separate pools of light. Each speaks as if to come to grips with past events. The audience does not yet know what has happened, but Loretta and Francis's brief snippets of a larger confession foreshadow that the actions they are about to act out are unchangeably driving towards some sort of negative end involving the eighty-four-year-old Davy.

This retrospective structure references the concept of fate that figures so strongly in the drama of the ancient Greeks. Often, in plays like Euripides' *Hippolytus*, a goddess would appear as part of the prologue to remind the audience that what they were about to see was utterly predetermined. With the very first lines, Jones sets up an incredibly tense situation where the audience is forced to wonder what sort of inevitable disaster they are being propelled towards. The unchanging set is the single room of a bungalow. The stage directions indicate an unmade single bed, a wheelchair, an arm-chair, and a bedside table topped with a CD player, some breakfast dishes, a newspaper, assorted medications, and a vase of plastic roses. It is clear from the sparseness of the flat, that these are not wealthy people. This is further reinforced as Loretta and Francis discuss their financial hardships throughout. Beyond what is seen, there is an offstage bathroom and the door to the outside world. We are made aware that it is raining outside. The presence of iPods, CD players, and mobile phones help to anchor the play in a realistic, modern-day setting.

**THE PLOT.** As noted above, the play begins with its two characters, Loretta and Francis, in separate pools of light at each side of the stage. Both are described as "Community Care Workers" in their thirties. Each woman reminisces about the morning which leads up to the events the audience is about to witness. It is established that Loretta was running late and that Francis had to uncharacteristically help the eighty-four-year-old, wheel-chair bound Davy to the bathroom alone. Francis's lines, "Maybe if I had waited, maybe if it hadn't been rainin, but I didn't and it was," belie some level of responsibility in regard to whatever negative outcome is about to occur.

The lights come up on the main room of Davy's small house. Francis enters wearing earphones and rubbing her back before settling into a chair to read the newspaper and wait for her co-worker. Loretta enters and calls to Francis offstage. Francis doesn't initially hear her. Loretta enters apologizing for

her tardiness and immediately inquires after Davy's whereabouts. Francis explains that when she arrived he was desperate to use the toilet, so she assisted him, nearly breaking her back. Loretta wants to know if her back is bad enough to file some sort of disability claim. This prompts a rant from Francis about how "health and safety will be the ruination of this country," because she assumes that her claim would be denied.

Francis proceeds to nostalgically reminisce about a time when the potholes in the area were so bad that one could injure themselves and be prescribed with a month's worth of painkillers just by walking down the street. This leads to a larger discussion about scamming insurance companies by riding the so-called "whiplash bus." Francis recalls that her uncle was the bus driver who planned an accident so that the riders could sue and ultimately lost his job as a result. Loretta objects that such a plot is "thieving" but Francis advocates for stealing from insurance companies on the grounds that corporations steal from them, albeit legally.

During this conversation, Loretta strips the bed and calls out to Davy to see if he's alright. She asks Francis to check if there are any fresh pajamas in his drawer. Rather than check for the pajamas, Francis tries to sell Loretta some bootleg DVD's that her son Jason is selling for five dollars each. Loretta encourages Davy to hurry up in the bathroom while Francis calls her son on her cell phone to check on the price and availability of a Chipmunk movie for Loretta's kids. Loretta frets over the fact that they need to still shave Davy and cut his toenails while Francis complains about the fact that Jason had been expelled from school for selling alcohol and cigarettes when she felt that they should have celebrated him for exhibiting a strong business sense. Loretta worries that Davy's lingering in the bathroom will make them late for their next client, Mavis, who she describes as "one crabbit bitch."

This initial interaction sets up a few important dynamics. Francis is repeatedly drawn as an opportunist prone to spinning morally questionable actions into righteous ones when she or her loved ones stand to profit from them. She is also completely stationary as Loretta is in constant motion. Loretta's industriousness doesn't come from an entirely altruistic place either. Her repeated calls to Davy are more to hurry him along so that she can move on to a client she describes as a "bitch" and get through with her workday.

Loretta continues working and Francis inquires as to whether she will be able to come on to Barcelona for their friend Jackie's hen (bachelorette) weekend. Loretta states that she cannot due to the fact that she must save to send her daughter on a school trip. Loretta encourages Francis to see if the school has any sort of financial aid, but Loretta refuses on the grounds that it is a selective enrollment grammar school, and having to accept charity would reflect poorly on her daughter. Francis shares that her live-in boyfriend, Mickey, was oddly supportive of her going on the trip to Barcelona which she took as an admission of infidelity. Despite this leading to a huge fight, Francis admits to Loretta that she doesn't actually care if he's "screw in someone else" because her kids have become attached to him and he has a job.

Loretta begins pounding on the bathroom door. When Davy fails to respond yet again, panic and realization begin to set in. Francis admits to having headphones on which would have prevented her from hearing a "thud." Loretta makes to call a doctor or "999" (the Irish equivalent of 911), but Francis deters her on the grounds that they will look foolish if it turns out that Davy isn't actually dead. Loretta thinks to call two other care workers who have experience with people dying during their shifts to inquire about the procedure, but Francis shoots this down on the same grounds. Loretta finally bolsters herself and goes in to check Davy's body.

The lights shift and Loretta and Francis resume their original positions at either side of the stage. Loretta confirms that he was absolutely dead. She even goes as far as to swear on her children's lives that this was the case. Francis recalls that even though they had been caring for Davy for two years, they only knew his name and that he loved Frank Sinatra: "he was just our 17 Miller's Row." The confirmation of Davy's death serves as the inciting incident that sets up the conflict and propels the action through a series of chain reactions towards the play's end. The characters must repeatedly deal with whether or not to delay reporting Davy's death in order to profit from the situation.

Lights come back up on the bungalow interior bringing us back into the past. Loretta and Francis are leafing through Davy's address book trying to locate his next of kin. Most names are crossed out. Loretta begins to dial someone named W. Hill, only to realize that this is Davy's bookie rather than a relative. Francis stops Loretta yet again when she realizes that Davy

died on a Monday before being able to withdraw his pension. Francis suggests that Loretta go and collect it, as usual, split it between them, and then report Davy dead. Loretta initially resists but ultimately comes around to the idea after Francis brings up that Davy would want them to have it rather than it going back to the government. Loretta brings up that it would be impossible for them to know that because Davy never spoke.

The lights fade back to the present day confessional. From her side of the stage, Loretta admits that Francis had her convinced that they “were doing nothing wrong” and that it was what Davy would have wanted. She recalls going to the ATM and thinking that she would be arrested for fraud at any moment. From her side of the stage, Francis recalls how she placed Davy’s usual bet and picked up his newspaper. She mentions how he always placed his bets sentimentally, usually on horses named after Frank Sinatra lyrics, and ponders the loneliness of Davy’s life:

That was all he had, his paper, the horses, memories of singing along with Frank Sinatra and a life of misery.. Sittin’ there day after day, no company, not able to talk just scribble notes and make noises, he was better off dead in my opinion.

The action resumes with their return to Davy’s apartment after going home to make their families lunch. They attempt to stage the scene to eradicate any evidence of wrongdoing on their part. Just as they are about to call the doctor to report Davy’s death Francis notices that Davy’s horse “Fly Me to the Moon” has come in at one hundred to one odds. Francis again petitions Loretta to stall on the grounds that the bookies would just be pocketing Davy’s five-hundred pound payout. The phone rings and a flustered Loretta answers. The community nurse is calling to see if the two women will be there to let her in to draw Davy’s blood the following day. Loretta realizes that in saying yes, she has further entwined herself in the plot. She must now continue the ruse that Davy is still alive. Francis calls Jackie to switch shifts and collects Davy’s meals on wheels without letting anyone in. Francis dictates that they must smear some of the food on Davy’s pajamas and eat the rest to make it look like he was alive for lunch.

The lights shift again to take us back to the retrospective monologues from the beginning. Loretta remembers having to smear turnips on to Davy’s dead body with disgust. She also notices a bruise on the back of his head. From her side of the stage, Francis recalls briefly being at home whilst her

boyfriend was watching a crime show featuring a pathologist. She realizes that a pathologist could determine Davy's time of death and begins to unravel. She recalls uncharacteristically waving to the woman they refer to as simple "across the street" (for her omnipresent surveillance of the neighborhood) upon her return to Davy's bungalow. Francis prevents Loretta from calling in Davy's death yet again, this time because of her new epiphany regarding what a post-mortem would reveal and worry that the bruise on his head might incriminate them.

Loretta briefly becomes suspicious of Francis, implying that perhaps she dropped him when she brought him into the bathroom and knew that he was dead all along but immediately retracts and apologizes. Act I ends as the women begin to laugh hysterically and the telephone begins to ring.

Act II picks up at the ringing phone. A frantic Francis picks up to find that it is a telemarketer trying to sell Davy a chairlift. She responds that he has no use for it because he is dead. Loretta grabs her coat, intent on confessing to the police. Francis ultimately decides to join her but reminds her that they must leave the money behind. Loretta admits to having given forty quid to her daughter and another twenty to her out of work husband. She replaces it with her rent money before they go.

The lights go down on Davy's apartment and the women recall walking arm and arm to the police station. Loretta notes that the woman across the street was oddly not at her window when they left, but they continued until Francis saw her son Jason passing by with a friend. She pulls Loretta into an entryway and convinces her to turn back because their children's lives would be ruined if their mothers were convicted of murdering an old man for his money.

The lights come back up as the women return to the apartment out of breath. The woman is back at her window when they look outside. Francis decides that they must burn the house down and make it look like an accident. They decide to pick up the brand of cigarettes that one of Davy's other care workers smokes and wipe the cigarette around in Davy's mouth for "DNA" before leaving it lit when they leave. They realize they have to stage the apartment as if Davy made it to the bathroom on his own. In order to do this, they role play. What occurs next is a kind of perverse slapstick routine; Francis gets into Davy's bed and transfers herself into his



wheelchair trying to be conscious that he only had the use of “one eye one hand and one leg.”

The intercom buzzer sounds. Francis answers and the voice on the other end identifies himself as Detective Constable Smith. Loretta and Francis panic, but the voice reveals itself to be Jason, Francis’s son, come to peddle a set of Frank Sinatra DVDs to Davy. Loretta pushes Francis to go down to buy them in order to get rid of Jason. She does, but she is put out by having to spend fifteen pounds on DVDs that no one will watch.

They resume the matter of burning the house down and it occurs to Loretta that they should try to do right by Davy at the moment of his cremation and realize once again they know almost nothing about him. They retrieve a box of memorabilia from under his bed. They find a ticket to a Frank Sinatra concert at the London Palladium from 1950, a framed photo of a young Davy and Sinatra, a manilla envelope containing Davy’s death policy, a wedding picture that Davy had cut his wife’s image out of, a silver medal for the hundred yard breaststroke, and an envelope containing his wishes in the event of his demise. They are relieved to hear that he wanted to be cremated and that he would like whoever is present at the funeral to sing “Fly Me to the Moon.”

Loretta gets a call from Brian, ecstatic that he has finally gotten on to a game show that films in London after an extended period of unemployment. This time it is Loretta who convinces Francis to take the money on the grounds that she can send her broken husband to England. Francis agrees. The last lines of Davy’s will reveal that he left all of his assets to Loretta and Francis, “the only people who ever cared about me.” Upon this realization, Loretta ironically reverses her stance and convinces Francis that they must put the money back. Francis tells the dead Davy that she will keep his Frank Sinatra photo safe and Loretta says that she will keep his swimming medal before they realize this will act as incriminating evidence and place them back in his box. Loretta insists that Francis should do the impromptu funeral service as she is a Protestant like Davy. Francis’s eulogy is a single line, “may Jesus take you to the moon and let you play among the stars.” The lights go down as the women approach the bed with a lighter whilst singing along to “Fly Me to the Moon.” Both women are heard in unison stating, “And that is the truth, the whole truth, so help me god” before the final blackout.

**THE CHARACTERS.** Characters act the way they do because they want things. They employ various tactics in order to get what they want. Often actors begin by trying to determine their character's objectives and identify the specific actions they might undertake in order to attain them. They also identify the stakes; how far are they willing to go? What risks would they take? The dramatic action arises when obstacles prevent characters from attaining their goals. In turn, their characters must adjust their tactics accordingly. Loretta and Francis are both dual protagonists. They also serve as one another's antagonists throughout the play. Loretta tries multiple times to report Davy's death, but she is continuously swayed by the more overtly opportunistic Francis. Conversely, Francis seems intent on making whatever profit possible and continuously must re-enlist a reluctant Loretta to the task.

Loretta is motivated by her fierce loyalty to her family and wants desperately to give her children opportunities that she did not have. She is also burdened with being the primary breadwinner after her husband Brian lost his job as a bricklayer, a fact that Loretta attributes to the recession. It seems that Brian has gone into a depressive slump since being laid off and obsessively pursues being a contestant on a game show in the hopes of winning prize money. Loretta is highly sympathetic to him and it is ultimately his ecstatic call about being selected for a show in London that prompts Loretta to instigate taking Davy's money after resisting Francis on that front for the entirety of the play.

Despite her hesitation and moral objections, however, Loretta allows herself to be easily swayed by Francis throughout. Loretta is also the one who immediately spends her cut of Davy's pension albeit not on herself; she gives forty to her daughter for her school trip and twenty to Brian because she can't stand to see him looking so pathetic.

Loretta also appears to be the more physically industrious of the two women. Much of the first act shows her doing most of the heavy lifting while Francis sits in an armchair on the grounds that she hurt her back while moving Davy. During the course of the play, we learn that she is a Catholic. Beyond her husband, she has a son who is constantly forgetting his PE uniform and a daughter who is attending grammar school. She refuses to accept charity for fear that her daughter will be looked down on which indicates a certain level of pride, but not necessarily pragmatism. Of the two

women, she seems to react to the situation more emotionally than rationally.

Francis is slightly more comfortable treading into a morally ambiguous territory. She reads situations through the lens of personal profit and justifies most of her actions from the angle that it is okay to steal from faceless institutions like insurance companies and the government because they constantly steal from working class people like herself. She feels a certain amount of entitlement in this regard and encourages the same sort of dodgy industriousness in her son Jason, who shows up as a voice on the intercom selling pirated DVDs. She tells the story of how her uncle cooked up a scheme to intentionally crash the bus he was driving so that the tipped off passengers could sue. She was one of the passengers apparently. After someone exposed her uncle and he was fired she states, "gettin the sack for having imagination.. not right."

She is the instigator of the two women in the sense that she comes up with all of the ideas of how they should capitalize on an unprecedented situation. We know that she has more than one child and that her husband walked out on them some time ago. She now has a boyfriend who works as a bouncer who she seems to fight with fairly frequently. She appears jaded in the sense that she interprets kindness as evidence that he is probably cheating on her. She states that she is mainly keeping him around because her kids like him and he has a job which makes one wonder what got her to the point where her standards are so low.

She too seems to care deeply about her children. She is exceedingly proud of Jason's "business." When she sees him as she and Loretta are on their way to the police station, it prompts her to abort the mission on the grounds that it could ruin the lives of their children. She ultimately agrees to burn the money along with Davy and his house out of guilt for taking it before they knew he actually wanted them to have it. In the end, she shows a conscience and exhibits some affection for Davy. She wants to do right by him in her own strange way. She also seems to care genuinely about Loretta.

Ultimately even though she is the more intellectually nimble of the two, her quick thinking is shown to be hugely flawed. The two women make countless mistakes along the way that incriminate them far beyond their actual crimes. The legal language of the final line indicates that the women have

been caught which further points to the flawed nature of Francis's quick thinking.

**THEMES.** Scholars like Angela Bourke, Nina Witoszcek, and Patrick F. Sheeran have published extensively about Irish writers' persistent gravitation towards death, wakes, funerals, and mourning. The Irish association with post-mortem scenarios is so pronounced that a 2015 episode of ABC's the *Bachelorette* flew its contestants to Dublin where they participated in a mock wake in order to get a taste of the local culture.

Funerary scenarios abound in Irish theatre as well. The Abbey Theatre notably marketed its 2016 season as, "Waking the Abbey" and in Chicago, the interactive *Flannagan's Wake* has been entertaining audiences since it was developed by Second City Alums in 1994.

On the tragic end, plays featuring Irish women whose dramatic action centers around the commemoration and/or burial of dead men feature prominently in twenty and twenty-first century Irish drama. John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904) famously features a widow keening over the drowned body of her last living son and Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate* (1906) centers around two women attempting to obtain the executed body of a male relative and ends with an extended duet of mourning.

There is also a tendency to satirize this tradition in comedic plays like In the *Shadow of the Glen* (1903) where the "dead" body of Dan Burke wakes up after spying on his faithless wife to cast her from the house. More recently, Martin McDonagh's *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) and Tom Murphy's *The Wake* (1998) place pressure on the romantic lamentation tradition. Rather than emphasizing women as mourners who realize their social role by burying and commemorating Irish men in heroic terms, we witness scenes of debauchery as a consequence of death; characters go on drunken benders and bones are inappropriately exhumed on kitchen tables.

*Fly Me to the Moon* similarly builds upon the depraved wake tradition in that it transgresses assumptions about reverence, lamentation, melancholy, and self-sacrifice as appropriate reactions to death. Jones's play evokes and then subverts an often romanticized Irish funerary tradition to grapple with several ethical questions: what are our responsibilities to the dead, is there such a thing as a victimless crime, and what might a person actually

do if they thought there were no foreseeable consequences. It also brings up the correlation between crime rates, socio-economic class, and education levels. Ultimately Jones resolves the scenario by the two women realizing the error of their ways, returning the money, and fulfilling Davy's funerary wishes in the best slap-dash way that they can, but the audience is left uneasy; they are still committing arson because they needed to cover up temporarily stealing from a dead man. Up until the final moments of the play, Davy's dead body is treated as a means to an end rather than the remains of a recently living man.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.**

1. When Loretta insists that Davy was dead when she checked on him for the first time in the bathroom, she goes as far as to swear on the lives of her children that this was the case. She also runs down the list of all of the things she did to make sure of this fact. Why do you think she felt the need to include all of this information?
2. How do you feel about Loretta and Francis? Do you prefer one character over the other? Why?
3. Loretta and Francis eventually discover that Davy willed them all of his money and wished to be cremated. Does this absolve them of wrongdoing?
4. The play goes back and forth between a present the past. Are there any disparities about what the women claim to have happened on the day that Davy died and what the audience witnesses? Are Loretta and Francis trustworthy narrators?
5. There is a brief moment when Loretta suspects Francis of wrongdoing. Do you think that Francis is hiding anything from Loretta?
6. Davy's body is never actually seen throughout the course of the action. Why do you think Jones chose to keep it immediately offstage throughout?