

Sentimental Ballad: Popular Song, Weeping and Masculinity in Grant Wood's Painting

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As the first musicological study on the 1940 painting *Sentimental Ballad* by the American artist Grant Wood, this article relates said image and its creation to the American history of song and the popular. The painting's depiction of a group of male sailors who sing and weep over their alcoholic drinks is traced back not only to its Hollywood background, a scene from the movie *The Long Voyage Home* (directed by John Ford), but also to the cycle of plays by Eugene O'Neill on which the film is based and to the Tin Pan Alley song "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" by Chauncey Olcott, George Graff Jr. and Ernest R. Ball. From a Situational Analysis perspective, the article examines Grant's painting in relation to contemporary concepts of high/low-hierarchies and popularity, to nostalgia for Irishness in popular culture as well as to processes of negotiating the relation of masculinity and sentimentality.

A quick online image search for the term "sentimental ballad" today brings up multiple representations of the 1940 painting with the same title by the American artist Grant Wood.¹ The painting depicts a group of seven men gathered around a table, singing and weeping. The few recognisable objects, such as the table with beer glasses, suggest that the scene is set in a pub or a similar venue; the men's suits and headwear, as well as their "white" skin tone, indicate a Western setting. While the painting naturally remains silent, some of its elements clearly indicate that it depicts an act of music-making. One man is playing a flute, and the half-open mouths of others appear to be sounding song; the two men whose bodies are leaning towards each other in the image's centre seem to adopt a typical posture of communal singing. The men's varied facial expressions, ranging from tear-stricken grimaces to solemn concentration and gently radiant devotion, all reflect the emotional intensity of the moment. Although the pub setting suggests that the singers are performing primarily for themselves, they appear to be staged in the style of a theatrical performance with their bodies facing the viewer and illuminated from the front, an impression further heightened by the low-angle perspective. Contemporary audiences in the USA were aware that the painting was modelled on a scene from the movie *The Long Voyage Home* and would probably have recognised popular actors such as Barry Fitzgerald, Thomas Mitchell, and John Wayne in the almost photographically rendered figures.

In art historical research on Wood, *Sentimental Ballad* occupies a rather peripheral position. Wood, who achieved scarcely any public notice upon his death in 1942 and did not experience a kind of renaissance in the US art world until the 1980s, is known, among other things, for his Regionalism inspired by European models, his depictions of rural life, and his sometimes caricatured, exaggerated portrayals of characters (Dennis 1975; Corn 1983; Taylor 2006; Evans 2010;

1 In addition to the numerous online representations of the painting, readers are referred to the digital reproduction and related materials in the eMuseum of the New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; Charles F. Smith Fund 1962.01, <https://ink.nbmaa.org/objects/587/sentimental-ballad;sessionid=B845B69888384F0BCA2F720DF87D7BA9ctx=6b6c60964504a3476bc73cdf3e1a011baec07899&idx=0>; accessed: 10 May 2026.

Haskell 2018). His painting *American Gothic* (1930) has achieved iconic status, which is also evident in the numerous parodies of this work in popular culture (Corn 1998). *Sentimental Ballad* is notable due to its quasi-photographic depiction of the characters, which departs from what Wood is known for (Corn 1983: 56), and due to the still unanswered questions concerning Wood's particular choice of motif. Since he, together with other artists, was commissioned by Hollywood producer Walter Wanger to produce a painting on any motif from the above film, which was still in production at the time, why Wood chose precisely this scene with a weeping performance of a sentimental song is open for debate. From a musicological perspective in particular, it is interesting to take a closer look into how Wood came to paint this group of men weeping and singing. Since the music-related aspects of the painting have not yet been examined in art or music history, it is worth reconnecting it with its model, the pub scene from *The Long Voyage Home*: The specific sentimental ballad sung in that scene can be identified as "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling", written by Chauncey Olcott (lyrics), George Graff Jr. (lyrics), and Ernest R. Ball (music). Wood's painting raises a number of questions that, as I will argue in this article, shed a multifaceted light on the cultural significance of the sentimental ballad as a type of popular song in twentieth-century USA. To begin with, *The Long Voyage Home*, directed by John Ford, is an adventure-filled, ultimately tragic war drama centred on the crew of the cargo ship Glencairn, which passes through a war zone on its transatlantic journey from the Caribbean to London. Since the film can hardly be described as a tear-jerking melodrama or a "weepee" (cf. Gotto 2015), one may ask how it came to include the sentimental scene that became Wood's motif of choice. Here it is relevant to consider the film's dramatic model, a cycle of four one-act plays by Eugene O'Neill. The featured song "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling", a product of the famous Tin Pan Alley, poses questions as to the film's – and hence the painting's – relation to pop music. As its title indicates, the song leads to an interrogation of its connection to the contemporary popularity of Irish nostalgia. Furthermore, the fact that Wood chose to paint the very scene in which the sailors collectively indulge in sentimental song is revealing, raising questions regarding historical images of masculinity in relation to sentimentality. Finally, the painting is an interesting case of crossing-over between diverse fields: art and pop, high and low culture. As I will show, this intermedia aspect drew the attention of contemporary American audiences to a mixing of previously distinct social worlds and their specific media.

In order to explore the intricate relation between Wood's painting and the history of the sentimental ballad, it is necessary to take a wide range of factors into account – the picture's contemporary popularity to the various actors involved (the performers depicted, the painter Wood, the commissioner Wanger, the lyricist and singer Olcott, etc.), the interrelated media of drama, film, song, and painting, and the relevant discourses, including those on the high/low relationship between art and film, on nostalgia for Ireland, and on masculinity and emotions. Drawing on the methodological approach of situational analysis developed by Adele Clarke (Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2018), I understand Wood's creation of *Sentimental Ballad* as a social act that was part of a complex historical situation. This situation consists of the aforementioned actors and artefacts, discourses, as well as spatial and temporal elements. Conversely, all these elements, by relating to one another in complex and co-constitutive ways, are what constitute the situation in the first place (cf. Clarke, Friese and Washburn 2018; Keller 2023). Applied to the interpretation of cultural artefacts and practices, a situational analysis suggests that, instead of referring to a specific cultural text and its context, we conceive of the "text" – be it painting, song, film, or drama – and its historical situation as mutually dependent. For instance, Wood's *Sentimental Ballad* would not exist without its complex entanglement with the history of Hollywood cinema and the ideals of masculinity that dominated the USA in the early twentieth century, nor would that historical situation be entirely complete with regard to the cultural significance of the sentimental without Wood's painting. In this sense, the following interpretation of *Sentimental Ballad*

as well as of the related cinematic, dramatic, and musical artefacts does not seek to contribute to their canonisation. Rather, a situational analysis is based on a sociologically grounded understanding of painting, film, drama, or song as products of intricate interactions. The approach is thus broadly in line with the circuit of culture approach in cultural studies, with the notion of decentring the individual artefact and an understanding of research as situated knowledge (Haraway 1988; Korsyn 2003; DuGay et al. 2013; Suer and Heesch 2025). Regarding the latter, my own situated analysis of *Sentimental Ballad* is influenced by my focus on popular music studies and, in this case, critical masculinity studies; in addition, readers may notice that I could not completely escape my scholarly roots in music-related intermedia studies. In practical research terms, situational analysis offers interpretative methods for considering the kind of heterogeneous empirical material that is relevant in his case. In addition to the artefacts mentioned, this study examines discourses from the fields of art, music, film, and literary studies, as well as other discursive materials, and draws on a systematic analysis of these sources based on relational maps (Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2018: 127–146).

The following study is divided into three parts. First, I will trace the creation of Wood's painting and its popularity. Building on this, the second section focuses on the ballad "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" and the associated themes of Irishness, nostalgia, and the Tin Pan Alley aesthetic. In the third section, I examine the relationship between weeping, masculinity, and sentimental song.

How *Sentimental Ballad* emerged as a result of "high-brow publicity"

On 15 August 1940, when an exhibition of paintings inspired by the film *The Long Voyage Home*, including Wood's *Sentimental Ballad*, opened at the Associated American Artists Gallery in Manhattan, it attracted an "all-time attendance record" (*Time*, 26 August 1940). In addition to the 1,132 visitors who came during the first two hours, many more would see the exhibition over the following months; after its run at 711 Fifth Avenue in New York ended on 15 September, it toured 26 museums across the USA. The considerable attention it received was subsequently reflected in articles in major newspapers and art magazines.² If popularity is defined as that which gets noticed by many (Werber et al. 2023), several questions arise: What made this exhibition so popular in the States at that time? What did this popularity in turn mean for the artefacts involved, namely both the images on display and the film, as well as for their producers? By starting my analysis of Wood's painting from this perspective, I aim to situate it not only in relation to popularity in the broadest sense but also to contemporary popular culture. As the art exhibition in question illustrates, popularity in general is not restricted to popular culture, or pop culture for short (ibid.). Conversely, not every pop product attracts a level of attention that might count as popularity. Concepts of art and pop as related on a high/low dualism are contingent on time and space. While we might rightfully question the validity of such concepts from today's transnational perspective, the notion of a high/low divide in culture was important in public discourse in the USA in around 1940. Hence, situating *Sentimental Ballad* entails discussing the painting's complex relations to contemporary concepts of the distinctions between art and pop, high and low. Since the crossing-over between Hollywood and the art world of painting was regarded as the novel aspect of the exhibition, I begin by examining how the underlying collaboration came about.

2 *American Artist*, September 1940; *Art Digest*, June–October, 1940; *Baltimore Museum of Art News*, November 1940; *The Daily Iowan*, Iowa City, 11 August, 1940; *New York Times*, 18 August, 1940; *New York World Telegram*, September 1940; *Time*, 10 June, 1940; *Time*, 26 August, 1940; digital copies of the articles in question are available online in the eMuseum of the New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; Charles F. Smith Fund 1962.01.

The connection between the film and the visual arts started with an agreement between two individuals, Hollywood producer Walter Wanger and Reeves Lewenthal, director of the Associated American Artists. Lewenthal, who had the relevant contacts among artists, is said to have been the one who put forward the idea for the collaboration (*American Artist*, September 1940; *Time*, 10 June 1940; Corn 1983: 56; Haskel 2018: 242). Meanwhile, Wanger was in the midst of the ambitious production process for *The Long Voyage Home*. According to the commission conceived by Lewenthal and Wanger, nine artists were to paint motifs from the film then in production. Three fundamental conditions were to apply:

[F]irst, that the artists were to have complete freedom of choice of what they were to paint. Second, they were to have studios on the movie lot and a projection room in which to view each day's rushes. Third, they were to have access to all the sets during the filming – for purposes of sketching – and the cast would be available at any time, in costume, for sittings. (*American Artist*, September 1940: 4)

From the artists' perspective, the commission entailed outstanding conditions, not least in economic terms. In relation to Wanger's investment of \$50,000 (*American Artist*, September 1940: 4; *Time*, 26 August 1940), Wood's share at \$10,000 was relatively high. Wood, who had been teaching painting at the University of Iowa's School of Fine Arts since 1934, had already secured several commercial commissions through Lewenthal's mediation and saw a significant improvement in his financial situation as a result of Wanger's commission (Corn 1983: 56). In addition to their fees, he and the other eight artists were provided with virtually ideal working conditions. It is reported that Wood's colleague Raphael Soyer

declared Hollywood 'an artist's paradise' – fine, free models, flunkies to run errands, set-men to build easels, chauffeurs at beck & call. When he asked whether it would be possible to get some paint rags, a mountain of rags appeared almost before the words were out of his mouth. (*Time*, 10 June, 1940)

From the film industry's perspective, the collaboration generated extraordinary publicity, thereby proving Wanger's investment to be highly profitable: "Scheduled for a tour of U.S. museums, Producer Wanger's experiment in cultural publicity had by last week garnered so much attention for *The Long Voyage Home* that he considered his \$50,000 well spent" (*Time*, 26 August 1940). As the same article reports, Wanger's promotional model already seemed to be attracting interest from competitors: "Meanwhile another Hollywood studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, was nosing around picture galleries, wondering whether it shouldn't commission some paintings too" (*ibid.*).

The fact that collaboration with the art world could generate such "cultural publicity" was attributed to its high-culture status by *Time* magazine. The media transformation of film motifs into paintings, executed by established artists, thus resulted in their transition into high culture: "[Wanger] hired nine of the best U.S. painters he could get to go to Hollywood and paint real high-brow pictures of scenes from the movie" (*Time*, 26 August 1940). Looking at the capital distribution – in Pierre Bourdieu's (1992) sense of the term – between the film and art worlds, the collaboration and the responses to it indicate that the latter possessed greater cultural capital in the form of what contemporaries such as Russell Lynes ([1949] 1976) described as "highbrow". *Time* magazine accordingly titled its article on the exhibition featuring the paintings commissioned by Wanger "High-Brow Publicity" (*Time*, 26 August 1940). From the perspective of the art magazine *American Artist*, the transformation realized by the paintings also had the potential to make audiences view the film from a different, art-oriented perspective:

The paintings in turn will serve the film well. They will emphasize its dramatic values [sic]. And the artists' interpretations will encourage the public to search the film from an entirely new angle, from the artist's angle, seeking that which is especially significant in action and in characterization. (*American Artist*, September 1940: 4)

Beyond this art-oriented interpretation, the concept of “highbrow publicity” implies an expanded cycle of capital that does not stop with the transformation of economic capital (\$50,000 plus expenses) into cultural capital (highbrow), but instead channels the latter into the popularisation of the film product, which in turn ultimately has the potential to generate economic capital (box office sales).

The discourse concerning a pop product’s “highbrow publicity” confirms a socio-cultural pattern whereby a crossing-over between distinct art worlds (Becker [1982] 2008) has an effect on the image of the transgressors.³ As Wanger’s investment “left him the owner of enough good contemporary U.S. art (twelve canvases) to put him in the running as one of Hollywood’s leading collectors”, his new status as an art collector underpinned his highbrow image (*Time*, 26 August 1940). Conversely, sensationalist observations concerning Wood and the other painters in an unfamiliar Hollywood setting saw them approach the status of film stars. Such convergences between the art world and Hollywood took place in the form of social encounters, such as when “Painter Biddle and Actor John Qualen (of whom he did a portrait) played flute duets” or at a reception for the painters that “400 of Hollywood’s Who’s Who” reportedly attended (*Time*, 10 June 1940). The painters – whose “mass painting” was followed by the curious eyes of numerous “cinemen & women” – enjoyed a lifestyle close to that of a Hollywood star by “going swimming, playing tennis, eating and drinking” together while maintaining their connection to current world events by “taking time out every 15 minutes or so to listen to war news” (*ibid.*). Naturally, the artists did not entirely blend into the film world but remained recognisable as tourists visiting the Walt Disney Studios and were caricatured by director Ford in his characteristic whimsical manner as “the damnedest miscasting I ever saw” (*ibid.*). Altogether, the public portrayal of Wanger and the painters he commissioned reveals that the crossover resulting from their project concerns not only the relationship between moving images and paintings, but also their associations with highbrow and lowbrow culture. The crossover caused this relational dynamic to also be projected onto the image of both Wanger and the painters giving rise to unstable perceptions of image, as the ironic descriptions show.

The worlds-crossing collaboration not only shaped the production process of the paintings, it is also directly reflected in their subjects, which depict either individual actors or a group (and in one instance, the director as well) in a specific scene, as various illustrated articles on the project show (*American Artist*, September 1940; *Art Digest*, September 1940; *PM*, 4 July 1940). An examination of the paintings’ popularity would therefore not be complete without considering the popularity of the actors depicted in their dual roles as characters and star personae (cf. Dyer 2004). Although the paintings may not count as Pop Art, they feature pop culture motifs in a dual sense: movie motifs and star motifs. Concerning the latter type of pop motifs Wood’s *Sentimental Ballad* depicts the following actors (with their characters in brackets), seen from left to right: John Qualen (Swanson), John Wayne (Olson), Thomas Mitchell (Driscoll), Joseph Sawyer (Davis), David Hughes (Scotty), Jack Pennick (Johnny) and (sitting) Barry Fitzgerald (Cocky).

As art critics and art historians have often highlighted, Wood’s almost photographic depiction of this group of actors makes his painting resemble a film still (Dennis [1975] 1986: 241). Furthermore, the painting can be linked to his marked and lifelong interest in theatre. As Shirley Reece-Hughes (2018) has shown, Wood’s experiences as a co-founder of an amateur performance group, in painting stage scenery, and in designing tableaux vivants were reflected in some of his painted portraits. For example, the characters in *Woman with Plants*, *Arnold Comes of Age*, *Plaid Sweater*, and *Daughters of Revolution* are “[p]osed in front of artificial-looking backdrops [...]

3 Clarke, Frieze, and Washburn’s (2018: 147–149) use of “social worlds” is in line with Becker’s ([1982] 2008) concept of “art worlds”.

appearing like front-lit staged actors in tableaux vivants” (Reece-Hughes 2018: 52). This staging is remarkably similar to the front-lit figures in *Sentimental Ballad*, set against the dark background; due to the low-angle perspective, they appear as if they were standing on a stage, as much actors in a tableau vivant as actors in a film scene. Dennis describes the contrast effect with equal clarity and impressiveness in the following words: “The bright, ruddy faces, Wayne’s pink tie, the patterned jacket, scarf, cap, and trousers emerge as spotlighted from a murky background of stippled browns and dark gray” (Dennis [1975] 1986: 241). The extreme low-angle shot makes one inclined to agree with Dennis that “the observer assumes a seat in the movie audience” (ibid.); however, in this respect, Wood has adopted almost the same angle of view as the film camera. Wood could thus be said to borrow the theatrical perspective of the group appearing on a raised stage from the film, just as he adopts the photographic representation of the actors. Wood even reinforces the theatrical effect by rearranging the film characters from the scene in his painting. He positions the trio of Wayne (Olson), Mitchell (Driscoll) and Fitzgerald (Cocky), who are particularly important to the plot, in the centre of the frame, flanked on one side by Qualen (Swanson), whose figure is broadened by his traverse flute, and on the other by the remaining three standing close together. According to Wood’s own commentary, his aim was specifically “to put a strong accent on one of the actors, Barry Fitzgerald” (*American Artist* 5c, September 1940: 12; cf. Wood Graham 1993: 166). Altogether, Wood’s interest in the scene appears to lie less in Hughes (Scotty), whose solo singing in the film takes up the longest section of the musical number, but rather in the collective singing of the whole group, coupled with a sentimental outpouring of emotion that is most clearly evident in Fitzgerald’s (Cocky’s) weeping figure in the foreground.

How Irish Nostalgia meets Tin Pan Alley popular music in “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling”

At the time of its travelling exhibition, Wood’s depiction of a musical performance was not simply as silent as any other painting. While any pictorial representation of music – whether based on a real event or fictional – potentially raises the question of which sounds are heard or imagined by the depicted figures and their painter, this question was particularly relevant to *Sentimental Ballad*. For although the first viewers knew that the picture was based on a movie scene and thus on an audio-visual event, most of them had not (yet) seen the film or heard the accompanying music. For this reason, both these and later viewers may well have asked themselves questions such as: What is the sentimental ballad mentioned in the painting’s title that the sailors are singing? How does their song, accompanied by a single flute, sound in the pub setting? And how does the song relate to the film’s plot on the one hand and to pre-existing listening experiences on the other?⁴

It goes without saying that the specific sentimental ballad in question – “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” – can be heard simply by watching the corresponding scene from the film *The Long Voyage Home*.⁵ The popular song, which appeared in print as early as 1912, before its stage premiere, can be considered an excellent example of the industrial production of sheet music in Tin Pan Alley, which was designed for the widest possible distribution (cf. Shepherd 1982). The song’s composer, Ball, worked from 1907 to 1927 as a staff pianist and composer for M. Witmark & Sons,

4 At this point, a striking gap emerges in the discourse surrounding the painting. None of the newspaper and magazine articles from 1940 to which I have access make even the slightest reference to the specific piece of music. Instead, the reports and reviews content themselves with generic remarks about the singing. The references in *Time* magazine to a “barbershop septet in a bar” (*Time*, 26 August 1940) associates the scene with another type of popular music known for its all-male line-ups, but it misses the point of the actual vocal performance. Art-historical discourse does not examine the sound or the specific piece of music (see Corn 1983; Dennis 1975/1986; Haskell 2018). Garwood’s (1944: 233) description of the actors as being “shown around a piano”, probably reflects a stereotypical notion of bar singing; however, on closer inspection (even without knowledge of the film), this proves to be a misinterpretation: the “piano” visible in the foreground is in fact a table.

5 The song starts at time code 1:24:13.

one of the leading companies on Tin Pan Alley (Cockrell 2013). Together with the lyricists Olcott and Graff, he wrote numerous stage scores; “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” was originally written for the Broadway musical *The Isle o’ Dreams* (New York 1913). The Irish reference in the titles of both the song and the stage play was characteristic of the collaboration between Ball, Olcott, and Graff. Ball wrote many of his popular songs with Irish themes for the Irish-born tenor John McCormack, alongside a number written for Olcott, who also performed as a singer. Olcott, born in Buffalo, NY, to an Irish mother, initially enjoyed success as a singer in US productions of sentimental operettas on Irish themes following vocal studies in London (Budds 2001). His own compositional output included entire musicals with Irish references, as well as other songs on Irish themes, such as “My Wild Irish Rose” (1899).

“When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” is not only one of the best-known pieces by the trio of authors Ball, Olcott, and Graff, but also an extremely popular song generally. Having appeared during the early days of the gramophone, the song went on to be recorded a remarkable number of times. Starting with Olcott himself and Harry Macdonough in 1913, at least twelve different recordings were released by 1940, including two featuring the aforementioned McCormack (1917 and 1923) and one with Colin O’More (1927), another “Irish Tenor with orchestra”.⁶ The song’s outstanding popularity in the USA between 1930 and 1950 is particularly evident from its numerous appearances in films of various formats and genres. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists a total of 19 films, including *The Long Voyage Home*, featuring “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” for the period 1930–1940, and a further 15 films for 1941–1950, including tributes to two of the song’s three composers: the melodrama *Irish Eyes Are Smiling* (1944), based on Ball’s life, and the musical biopic *My Wild Irish Rose* (1947) about Olcott.⁷

Olcott and Graff’s lyrics praise being Irish as an exceptional ability to express happiness and cheerfulness. While the first word of the eponymous chorus, “when”, leaves open the question as to in which situations the Irish might be happy, it becomes clear that, in such instances, they are capable of extraordinary emotional expressivity, which, through their visual and auditory qualities, evokes the most wonderful comparisons (spring mornings, angelic singing) and has an infectious effect on those around them. The reference to a stolen heart in the final line underscores the song’s romantic content. Smiling Irish eyes thus radiate a romantic allure which, as the generalised address “you” indicates, has a universal effect.

When Irish eyes are smiling,
Sure it’s like a morn in Spring,
In the lilt of Irish laughter
You can hear the angels sing.
When Irish hearts are happy,
All the world is bright and gay,
And when Irish eyes are smiling,
Sure, they steal your heart away.
(Olcott and Graff 1912)

As noted above, such sentimental references to Ireland were a typical feature of the authors’ extensive “Irish” musical output. Furthermore, songs in this vein continue a tradition of sentimental Irish ballads that can be traced back to Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies* (1808–1834). By transposing an Irish-Gaelic past into parlour songs with English lyrics, the Irish poet Moore

6 The original standard line-up was expanded in recordings by Primo Scala’s Accordion Band (1935) or in the form of a piano medley with Charlie Kunz (1936); the version featuring the Casa Loma Orchestra conducted by Glen Gray (1940) was performed in the now-contemporary jazz orchestra sound, to which Kenny Sargent was added as a singer, bringing a warmer baritone timbre. Many more recordings were to follow, including arguably the most popular one featuring Bing Crosby, which first appeared in 1947 on a St Patrick’s Day compilation. Without any claim to completeness, the information on recordings was taken from Discogs (www.discogs.com); accessed on 24 April 2026.

7 The corresponding entries on IMDb can be found under the soundtrack category on Olcott’s profile page, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0646052/?ref_=ttsnd, accessed on 24 April 2026.

“translated the sentiments of one culture into the language of another, dominating and colonialising one, but also rendered musically communicated Irish nationalist sentiment verbally articulate” (Morgenstern 2021: 190). In the nineteenth century, Moore’s *Irish Melodies* served both as an expression of the experiences of displacement and colonisation and as a source of musical empowerment for Irish people in various regions of the English-speaking world (Bohlman 2009: 89–90; Morgenstern 2021: 191; Twigger 2016). As Felix Morgenstern (2021) highlights, this established a topos of melancholic nostalgia for Ireland that continues to resonate to this day. Tin Pan Alley music carried this nostalgia for Ireland into the twentieth century in the form of sentimental ballads such as “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” – a form which, as we have seen, achieved enormous popularity.

The song’s strong Irish references raise the question of its thematic connection to the film *The Long Voyage Home*. Considering the film scene in relation to its dramatic source by Eugene O’Neill sheds some light on this matter. Research on O’Neill, who was born as the son of Irish immigrants in New York in 1888, shows that he explored his complex relationship with Irish identity in some of his dramatic characters (Lee 2014). Of these characters, the Irish sailor Driscoll is particularly relevant here; he is a crew member of the British freighter Glencairn, which serves as the connecting element between the four one-act plays – originally written independently of one another – on which the film adaptation is based: *Bound East for Cardiff* (1914), *In the Zone* (1917), *The Long Voyage Home* (1917), and *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1917) (Brietzke 2006; Lee 2014; O’Neill 1919/1946). In O’Neill’s Glencairn cycle, the deliberate mix of the ship’s crew’s origins produces a striking variety of accents and dialects, which adds to the dramatic sound of the performance (Brietzke 2006: 39). Alongside the Irishman Driscoll, the crew includes Yank (American), Cocky (Cockney), Smitty (English), Ivan (Russian), Olson (Swedish), Paul (Norwegian), and Scotty (Scottish) (Rust 1965: 282). Of this group, Driscoll contributes in particular to the unity of the Glencairn one-act plays (Rust 1965: 283; Lee 2014: 142). Driscoll’s stereotypical Irishness is expressed, among other things, in his fondness for Irish whiskey and in his singing, which is particularly evident in the one-act play *The Long Voyage Home*. This play, the only one in the Glencairn cycle set on land, not only bears the title chosen for the film; it also includes the pub scene whose cinematic adaptation Wood used as the basis for his painting. In a London pub, Driscoll emphatically and repeatedly orders Irish whiskey for himself and his comrades, and in the play he is the one who strikes up an Irish song, “The Boys of Wexford” (O’Neill 1919/1946: 63, 65, 68; cf. Lee 2014: 512).

Comparing this scene in O’Neill’s play with its adaptation in the film reveals a striking difference in the portrayal of “Irishness”. It is true that the film adaptation, through the performance of an Irish song, draws on a connection to Ireland already present in the original play. However, the specific Irish song performed and in what manner and how it is dramaturgically embedded create a significant difference. The shared starting point for the singing in both works is initially a moment of homesickness – a long-standing topos of seafaring, evoked here by Olson, who plans to end his service as a sailor on the Glencairn in order to return to his native Sweden and become a farmer. In O’Neill’s play, Cocky mocks Olson for this plan, which earns him a sharp rebuke from Driscoll:

DRISCOLL – Lave him alone, ye bloody insect! ’Tis a foine sight to see a man wid some sense in his head instead av a damn fool like the loike av us. I only wisht I’d a mother alive to call me own. I’d not be dhrunk in this divil’s hole this minute, maybe.

The mention of a missing mother triggers a sentimental outburst in Cocky, prompting Driscoll to intervene with harsh words:

Cocky – (Commencing to weep dolorously.) Ow, down’t talk, Drisc! I can’t bear to ’ear you. I ain’t never ’ad no mother, I ain’t —

Driscoll – Shut up, ye ape, an’ don’t be makin’ that squealin’. If ye cud see your ugly face, wid the big red nose av ye all screwed up in a knot, ye’d never shed a tear the rist av your loife. (Roaring into song.) We ar-re the byes av We-e-exford who fought wid hearrt an’ hand! (Speaking.) To hell with Ulster! (He drinks and the others follow his example.) [...]
(O’Neill 1919/1946: 65)

Driscoll’s behaviour is consistent with his domineering vigour and cursing (“this devil’s hole”; cf. Lee 2014: 140f.) throughout the Glencairn cycle and particularly in *The Long Voyage Home*, as Andrew Lee (2014:142) emphasises: “Driscoll suggests a stereotyped bellicose Irishness – all bluster with little substance underneath.” This is reinforced by his insulting his comrade with animal names (“ye bloody insect”; “ye ape”) and his gruff attempts to stop Cocky’s crying, accompanied by disparaging comments about the sound (“squealin’”) and his facial expression (“your ugly face...”). The popular song that Driscoll then strikes up, “The Boys of Wexford”, recalls the failed United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798. With a thematically fitting mix of curse and toast (“To hell with Ulster!”), Driscoll immediately interrupts himself and urges the others to raise a glass. Morgenstern (2021: 224) points out that “rebel songs” such as “The Boys of Wexford” “became aligned with a performative display of masculinity” in male-dominated folk music scenes. This confirms the gendered semantics inherent in Driscoll’s singing. Driscoll performs a traditional, combative, and boozy masculinity that is incompatible with the sentimental outburst of his seafaring comrade. Accordingly, his rebel song is unsentimental and well-suited to stopping his comrade’s unbearable weeping. In Lee’s study of various Irish characters in O’Neill’s plays, Driscoll thus emerges as the antithesis of the sentimental Paddy, through whom the playwright grappled with what he perceived as a superficial nostalgia for Ireland that had gripped his father James, as well as many other Irish people living in the USA at the time:

[Paddy’s] sentimental looking backward to an idyllic past may be analogous to James O’Neill’s romantic idealization of the Emerald Isle and, by extension, Irish immigrants generally, as evidenced by his susceptibility to being swindled by anyone ‘with an O’ in front’ of his name. (Lee 2014: 144)

Unlike O’Neill’s stage play, screenwriter Dudley Nichols and director Ford provide ample room for sentimental Ireland nostalgia in their film adaptation.⁸ The scene in the film begins at a similar point: on the eve of his return to his native Sweden, Olson is taken to a London pub by his Glencairn colleagues, including Cocky and Driscoll. In the pub, the group calls out for an Irish song, and Scotty strikes up “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” to Swanson’s flute accompaniment. The exchange between Cocky and Driscoll about homesickness and longing for a mother is omitted; instead, Cocky is visibly moved by the ballad. Towards the end of the fourth line (“You can hear the angels sing”), he audibly breaks into sobs and buries his face in his hands. Driscoll, for his part, departs from his aggressive, anti-sentimental pattern of behaviour in the play. Instead of rebuking Cocky for crying, he pats him on the back in a comradely manner, then even takes off his cap in a solemn gesture and sings the last two lines, apparently with the most vigour of all. Instead of bellowing a rebel song, Driscoll joins in the sentimental group singing with his sonorous baritone, leaving Cocky to sob uninhibitedly. The scene’s duration (around one minute and ten seconds) and its sonic intensity give the song the effect of a veritable musical interlude. This is further enhanced by the flute accompaniment and the very solemn tempo. Hughes (Scotty) sings the melody in a tenor register (F major), similar to the early recordings with Olcott (E-flat major), McCormack (F major), and others. Qualen (Swanson) plays a second part alongside him, initially in variations of third intervals (tenths and sixths), and in the second part of the chorus in a high register with some octave leaps, creating an extended polyphony. The singers joining in

⁸ Since Ford has been ascribed a crucial role in promoting Irish themes in Hollywood, he certainly contributed to the film adaptation’s Irishness; cf. Flanagan 1997.

on the final lines – Wayne (Olson), Mitchell (Driscoll), Sawyer (Davis), and Pennick (Johnny) – sing an octave lower than Hughes, creating a full, almost choral overall sound, which is extended by a *ritardando* and *fermata* (on the penultimate word “heart”). Due to the exceptionally slow tempo, the performance takes a correspondingly long time; moreover, unlike the light-footed, dancing character of a cheerful waltz in contemporary gramophone recordings, the song sounds solemn and melancholic. Through this mournful performance of “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling”, accompanied visually and aurally – through Fitzgerald’s (Cocky’s) sobs – by weeping, the reference to Ireland assumes a completely different character to its presence in O’Neill’s play. In the film adaptation, unlike the play, the performance of an Irish song becomes a sentimental moment of nostalgia. Key aspects of this transformation are the replacement of “Boys of Wexford” with “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” and this song’s passionate, melancholic, and simultaneously musically expansive performance, together with Driscoll’s altered behaviour and the affective unity of sentimental singing and a nostalgic outburst of emotion.

Men who sing and weep

Viewing Wood’s *Sentimental Ballad* as a visual contribution to the cultural-historical understanding of this type of popular song highlights the interplay between musical practice and emotional arousal: the image captures the collective performance of a sentimental ballad, which becomes a moment in which singing and weeping go hand in hand. Furthermore, for 21st century viewers looking at the painting without knowing its backstory, it is striking that a painting of a sentimental outpouring depicts men exclusively. I would therefore like to examine the phenomenon of men weeping whilst singing sentimental songs by starting with Wood’s personal artistic interest in the motif, shedding light on the aspect of emotional tears, and finally situating the association between weeping and masculinity in the history of the sentimental ballad.

The fact that Wood’s painting depicts men crying and singing is, at first glance, hardly surprising given his commission to paint a scene from *The Long Voyage Home* with its overwhelmingly male cast (cf. Lueger 2010). While Wood focused on the main group of characters – the all-male Glencairn crew – it is nevertheless noteworthy that he chose, of all the moments in the film, the scene of collective sentimental singing. If we take as our starting point the scant historical information regarding Wood’s choice of motif – which is consistently reported by various sources – his interest was captured by the very moment in which the men collectively surrender to the “sentiment of the song [...] and they are all crying into their beer” (Wood Graham 1993: 166; cf. *American Artist* 5c, September 1940; *The Daily Iowan*, 11 August 1940). To my knowledge, no attempt has yet been made in art-historical discourse to explore Wood’s choice of motifs in depth in relation to sentimentality and masculinity. Although a comprehensive examination would be beyond the scope of this article, I would like to point out some existing approaches in the literature that lend themselves to this. Wood had already depicted a sentimental man several years earlier in his painting *Sentimental Yearner* (1936), one of several illustrations he produced for an edition of Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Main Street* (Evans 2010: 223–225). The picture shows a middle-aged dandy – also a fictional character – holding a carnation to his nose with a dreamy look on his face. Whilst the portrayal of the solo dandy contrasts with the sense of communal bonding in the group scene in *Sentimental Ballad*, both share a moment of ambivalent masculinity. The extraordinary significance of ambivalent masculinities in Wood’s life and work has been explored in particular depth by art historian Tripp Evans in his monograph. According to Evans (2010: 223–225), *Sentimental Yearner* stands counter to another illustration from the same cycle: *The Radical*, “a caricature of rugged masculinity”. The juxtaposition of these two types reflects a binarism that constitutes a major theme running throughout Wood’s work and, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s term “pseudo-opposition” (1990: 183), follows the lines of effeminacy ver-

sus masculinity, urban versus rural, and homosexual versus heterosexual. In a detailed combination of biographical analysis and visual analysis, Evans demonstrates the extent to which Wood negotiated ambivalent aspects of masculinity and homosexuality in his personal identity and his artwork throughout his life. It is revealing that Wood grew up in circumstances that were particularly shaped by “the cultivation of ‘true’ manhood”, both within his family of origin and more broadly in American society at the time (Evans 2010: 18). Consequently, Wood and his art in general appear in a significantly more ambivalent light than suggested by the simplistic “popular image as the Artist in Overalls” (Evans 2010: 3), which embodied traditional American values:

Faced with Wood’s public reputation as a naïve, parochial artist, moreover, we must account for his early training in a prestigious French atelier, his ambitious one-man debut in a Paris gallery, and his careful study of Old Master paintings. Finally, we must reconcile this apparent paragon of such ‘heartland’ values as civic virtue and traditional Christian morality with a man who often bristled at small-town life, belonged to no church, and spent most of his life masking – not always successfully – his homosexuality. (Evans 2010: 4)

Whereas Wood’s personal interest in the scene featuring the sentimental ballad can be situated within the theme of ambivalent masculinities – a subject of great importance to him – Evans’s analysis tellingly reveals the situated nature of masculinities in general. As this analysis indicates, the scene depicted by Wood represented a striking departure from the ideal of masculinity that dominated the United States in the first half of the twentieth century.

Wood’s description of his fascination with the scene concisely sums up a fundamental aspect of the emotional and physical impact of sentimental ballads: “They [the sailors] begin to sing and presently the sentiment of the song overtakes them and they are all crying in their beer” (*American Artist* 5c, September 1940: 12). This description can be read as a tangible expression of what Leslie M. Meier (2008) describes as “body genre”. Meier borrows this term from film scholar Linda Williams, who uses it to refer to the characteristic way in which the cinematic genres horror, pornography, and melodrama provoke certain physical reactions in the audience. As Meier demonstrates in her application of the term to popular music, certain musical genres are similarly associated with physical and emotional excesses, such as sentimentality. Sentimental ballads can thus be understood as a musical body genre, especially considered in the light of their performative practice, which often involves pathos-laden gestures. Meier is especially interested in the associated evaluative processes, in particular critiques that deem excessively sentimental music “bad” precisely because of such characteristics. She emphasises that such associations are often feminised, thereby underscoring the ambivalence of a phenomenon such as men bursting into tears while singing a sentimental ballad. Setting aside the evaluative aspect, it can be noted that sentimental ballads inherently possess an affordance (DeNora 2003) for pathos-laden gestures like weeping. The sentimental ballad can thus be conceived as the musical version of the “weepy”, whose cinematic appearance is characterised by Lisa Gotto (2015: 289) as “the openly expressed demand to lose oneself and be absorbed in the tears shed together”.

The physical manifestation of sentimental emotion, particularly in the form of weeping, is reflected in medical research through the term “emotional tears” (Messmer 2009). While basal tears and reflex tears serve physical functions, the human body also produces emotional tears, which, as measurements have shown, have a different chemical composition. Characteristically, emotional tears are “often accompanied by changes in facial musculature, changes in voice, and sobbing” (Messmer 2009: 597), as the film scene analysed here also demonstrates. Interestingly, the strikingly limited medical research on emotional tears has also drawn upon (everyday) knowledge of the characteristic effect of the melodrama genre by showing test subjects “sad movies” (Frey et al. 1981: 561) in order to elicit tears. From the perspective of comparative cultural studies, it is also logical to see the tear as a “central anthropological formula of pathos”

(Weigel 2013: 107). However, the sometimes unequal participation of the genders in weeping is subject to cultural-historical variation and transformation just as much as the occasions for tears and the evaluations of the pathos expressed therein (cf. Möhrmann 2015).

With regard to historical change, it is clear that the relationship between sentimental song, weeping, and gender identity has by no means always been the same. As Emily Gale (2014) demonstrates in her history of sentimental songs in the United States, both men and women participated in this musical practice during the time of the practice's establishment in the late eighteenth century. During this period, sentimentality was initially not seen as conflicting with masculinity. In the early nineteenth century, the emotional response to singing sentimental songs was staged as a spectacle, with weeping appearing as part of the performance instructions in editions of sentimental songs (Gale 2014).⁹ From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the sentimental was devalued in art, literature, and music within academic discourse. At the same time, a stereotypical association of sentimental music with femininity became established (Middleton 1995; Nink 2025). In Tin Pan Alley music production, which manufactured popular music with a view to maximising sales through sheet music, the sentimental ballad became one of the most successful genres. While it had already broken away from the models of the traditional narrative song that its historical precursors followed – namely popular numbers from ballad operas and other musical theatre pieces – the portrayal of sentimental emotion became central to the Tin Pan Alley sentimental ballad (Shepherd 1982). This was further heightened by the fact that, in the case of particularly popular pieces, often only the chorus circulated widely, while the verses (with a more narrative character) could be omitted (von Appen and Frei-Hauenschild 2012). The same can be observed in “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling”: While the song's earliest recordings, such as those by Olcott himself, still included the verse, later versions focused entirely on the chorus, as does the musical interlude in *The Long Voyage Home*.

Conclusion

Wood's *Sentimental Ballad* is an insightful visual testimony to the musical history of this song type. Through its visual elements and in conjunction with its title, the painting affirms the character of the sentimental ballad as a musical body genre with an affordance for shedding emotional tears: singing and weeping go hand in hand. The almost photographic depiction in the style of a film still reveals, on the one hand, the intermedia reference to the Hollywood film *The Long Voyage Home*; on the other hand, it presents – at least to its contemporary American audience – an image of popular film stars, staged in a defining moment of the film's narrative, with the corresponding implications of recognition. As was evident, Wood draws on visual elements of cinematic representation, such as the low-angle shot of the group of actors, while rearranging the figures and emphasising the contrast of light and shadow to give the scene a distinct tableau vivant-like character, which enhances the effect of its momentary freezing. As contemporary public discourse shows, Wood's painting attracted considerable attention when it toured the United States, alongside the other artworks commissioned by Wanger for his film. In particular, the collaboration between Hollywood and the art world, which was perceived as novel, generated great interest. In various respects – the unusually luxurious working conditions enjoyed by the painters on the film set, the painterly depiction of the film stars described above, and the transformation of film producer Wanger's image through his “rise” to the status of art collector – this collaboration also resulted in a crossing of the boundaries between low and high culture.

⁹ See also Gale's chapter in this special issue of *EJM*.

The specific song whose sentimental performance is visualised in Wood's painting, "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling", links the image to expressions of sentimentality in American popular culture during the first half of the twentieth century. It is only in the Hollywood adaptation that the reference to Ireland, established in O'Neill's dramatic original, takes on the sentimental and nostalgic character expressed in the musical performance accompanied by weeping. By replacing the aggressive roaring of the traditional rebel song "The Boys of Wexford" with the solemn, resonant choral performance of the sentimental Tin Pan Alley ballad "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling", the pub scene becomes a distinctive musical number familiar to contemporary film audiences through Broadway productions, sheet music, various gramophone recordings, and numerous other films.

By choosing this sentimental musical number of all the possible scenes as the motif for his "still", Wood highlighted a moment in the film that has an ambivalent relationship to dominant notions of masculinity – both within the film's plot and in contemporary American society. While the depicted scene can be read, on the one hand, as a historical reference to the early nineteenth-century practice of performing sentimental songs which incorporated singing men weeping as part of the spectacle – on the other hand, the prevailing ideal of masculinity during Wood's lifetime inherently involved a distancing from the sentimental and from other cultural practices considered feminine. As is evident not only from the dramatic figure of Driscoll, the plot surrounding the Glencairn crew is dominated by unsentimental performances of masculinity defined by strength and dominance – an image also embodied by film stars such as Wayne, who is generally known for his "male action-hero image" (Dyer 2004: 10). The scene painted by Wood is at odds with such an ideal, as it depicts the very moment in which a group of men collectively indulges in the physical excess of sentimental singing, united in the visible and audible pathos of shedding emotional tears, even including Wayne who, deviating from his allegedly fixed image, acts "more sweet than Swede" in the film, as Robert Horton (2014: 61) writes with a wink.

For all these reasons, Wood's *Sentimental Ballad* is significant not only for those interested in twentieth-century American art and in Wood's diverse artistic practices and works beyond his canonised pieces. My interpretation of Wood's painting, as evidence of the history of the sentimental ballad (as a type of popular song), also entails situating it historically, taking into account the corresponding limitations on its interpretive significance. The singing scene depicted by Wood is limited to men of Western origin, which is linked to the film's cast and the nostalgia for Ireland inherent in the musical score. While the portrayal of men singing sentimental songs in 1940s United States must be interpreted as an exceptional act, it is also evident that attitudes towards weeping men have changed since then. Since the end of the twentieth century, weeping men have become a more common sight, including in Western public spheres. In films, sport, TV talent shows, and elsewhere, the gender balance in relation to the shedding of emotional tears has become more equal (Kohl 2020; Messmer 2009; Ribbat 2026). Taking a broader view, this could be situated in the popularisation of alternative masculinities that are no longer characterised by emotional restraint.¹⁰ In my view, however, it is precisely these historical limitations on the painting's interpretative significance that make it so interesting as a specific testimony for the American history of sentimental song, weeping, and masculinity. *Sentimental Ballad* demonstrates that even in a historical situation in which ("white") masculinity and sentimentality were considered largely incompatible, an aesthetic depiction of a pathos-laden collective male chorus was able to achieve acceptance and great popularity.

10 For example, historian Benno Gammerl (2021) explicitly refers to a "history of emotions" in connection with the lived realities of gay people in Germany. On the complex relationship between masculinity and emotion, see also Frevert 2010; van Tricht 2020; Liebl 2026.

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