

REPRESENTATIONS OF GOTHIC CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH LITERATURE:  
A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN PATRICK MCCABE'S *THE BUTCHER BOY*, SEAMUS  
DEANE'S *READING IN THE DARK*, AND ANNA BURNS' *NO BONES*

by

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## ABSTRACT

Ireland is not a country unfamiliar with trauma. It is an island widely known for its history with Vikings, famine, and as a colony of the English empire. Inevitably, then, these traumas surface in the literature from the nation. Much of the literature that was produced, especially after the decline in the Irish language after the Great Famine of the 1840s, focused on national identity. In the nineteenth century, there was a growing movement for Irish cultural identity, illustrated by authors John Millington Synge and William Butler Yeats; this movement was identified as the Gaelic Revival.

Another movement in literature began in the nineteenth century and it reflected the social and political anxieties of the Anglo-Irish middle class in Ireland. This movement is the beginning of the Gothic genre in Irish literature. Dominated by authors such as Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker, Gothic novels used aspects of the sublime and the uncanny to express the fears and apprehensions that existed in Anglo-Irish identity in the nineteenth century.

My goal in writing this thesis is to examine Gothic aspects of contemporary Irish fiction in order to address the anxieties of Irish identity after the Irish War of Independence that began in 1919 and the resulting division of Ireland into two countries. I will be examining Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, and Anna Burns' *No Bones* in order to evaluate their use of children amidst the trouble surrounding the formation of identity, both personal and national, in Northern Ireland.

All three novels use gothic elements in order to produce an atmosphere of the uncanny (Freud); this effect is used to enlighten the theme of arrested development in national identity through the children protagonists, who are inescapably haunted by Ireland's repressed traumatic history. Specifically, I will be focusing on the use of ghosts, violence, and hauntings to illuminate the social anxieties felt by Northern Ireland after the Irish War of Independence.

## DEDICATIONS

They were doomed, by a legacy, by Ireland, by England, by prehistory, by everything that had gone before them, always and forever to be one, four and six years old.

- Anna Burns, *No Bones*

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ireland is not a country unfamiliar with trauma. It is an island widely known for its history with Vikings, famine, and as a colony of the English empire. Inevitably, then, these traumas surface in the literature from the nation. Much of the literature that was produced, especially after the decline in the Irish language after the Great Famine of the 1840s, focused on national identity. In the nineteenth century, there was a growing movement for Irish cultural identity, illustrated by authors John Millington Synge and William Butler Yeats; this movement was identified as the Gaelic Revival.

Another movement in literature began in the nineteenth century and it reflected the social and political anxieties of the Anglo-Irish middle class in Ireland. This movement is the beginning of the Gothic genre in Irish literature. Dominated by authors such as Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker, Gothic novels used aspects of the sublime and the uncanny to express the fears and apprehensions that existed in Anglo-Irish identity in the nineteenth century.

My goal in writing this thesis is to examine Gothic aspects of contemporary Irish fiction in order to address the anxieties of Irish identity after the Irish War of Independence that began in 1919 and the resulting division of Ireland into two countries. I will be examining Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, and Anna Burns' *No Bones* in order to evaluate their use of children amidst the trouble surrounding the formation of identity, both personal and national, in Northern Ireland.



All three novels use gothic elements in order to produce an atmosphere of the uncanny (Freud); this effect is used to enlighten the theme of arrested development in national identity through the children protagonists, who are inescapably haunted by Ireland's repressed traumatic history. Specifically, I will be focusing on the use of ghosts, violence, and hauntings to illuminate the social anxieties felt by Northern Ireland after the Irish War of Independence.

### **The History**

Ireland's history is haunted by violence, destruction, and death. From the Viking raids in the 800s to the Great Famine of 1845, from the Easter Rebellion of 1916 to the Troubles of Northern Ireland in the late twentieth century, the people of Ireland have inescapably been confronting the trauma of their ancestry. Following the independence of the Irish Republic in 1922, six counties in the North of Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom due to the assumption that the counties were comprised of a mostly Unionist population (Mulholland 23). However, the arbitrary line drawn around these counties to designate Northern Ireland inevitably contained a small, yet significant, percentage of Catholic Nationalists.

I will be centering the focus of this paper to the division of Ireland and the consequences of identity for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has experienced exceptional historical trauma as a result of the conflicts between the Nationalist and Unionist communities during what has been popularized as "The Troubles." Northern Ireland had experienced unease and violence from the Irish War of Independence and the

events that led up to it, and while the official beginning of the Troubles is placed during the late 1960s, the exact date is little agreed upon. The Troubles were perpetuated by the anxiety and conflict caused by the separation of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Culture, religion, socio-economic class, and politics are all driving forces in the violence of Northern Ireland (Hussey 5-6).

No longer Irish and yet undoubtedly not British, divided by Nationalist Catholics and Unionist Protestants, Northern Ireland's identity became ruptured, rebuked, and refuted. Amid the cyclical nature of trauma to the peoples of Northern Ireland, their identity has necessarily embodied this violence and fracture. An example of this during the Northern Troubles is the Hunger Strikes of 1981. George Sweeney details in his article "Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice" that "the hunger strike is an integral part of Irish history and mythology" present in pre-Christian Ireland, Catholic Ireland, and even in the story of St. Patrick (Sweeney 421). The hunger strikers of 1981 are memorialized and celebrated by the Catholic people of Northern Ireland, serving not only as a reminder of the prison protests but also of a distant memory of Ireland's history of other hunger strikes (Howard 71).

The conflict that informs the identity of Northern Ireland is an integral part of literature from the nation. I am focusing on this formation of identity, or lack thereof, in three novels that have been produced from this schism and hostility of Northern Ireland: *The Butcher Boy* by Patrick McCabe, *Reading in the Dark* by Seamus Deane, and *No Bones* by Anna Burns. The violence that permeates identity is present not only at a national level, but

at the communal and individual levels as well. These three novels demonstrate the inability of the characters to escape a haunting past and form a cohesive, progressive identity.

### **The Gothic**

The Gothic genre appropriately embodies and reflects the past that haunts the Northern Irish identity. Gothic literature employs “either horror or terror to convey cultural desires, fears, and anxieties through examination of the transgressive, the taboo, the grotesque, the excessive, or the supernatural” (Oliver). Scholars seem to unanimously agree that Gothic literature first appeared with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Over the next fifty years, a number of other novels were published that modeled the Gothic form present in *The Castle of Otranto*, such as Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron*, Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian*, Matthew G. Lewis’s *The Monk*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Manderer* (Hillard 689). It was these novels that provided the beginning of the Gothic genre canon.

Early Gothic writing is characterized by the tropes that are present in these novels at the emergence of the genre. Neil Cornwell details these aspects of the early Gothic genre in his essay “European Gothic”:

What we now see as ‘classical Gothic’, then, will normally involve dynastic disorders, set at some temporal and spatial distance and in a castle or manorial locale; defence [*sic*], or usurpation, of an inheritance will threaten (and not infrequently inflict) violence upon hapless (usually female) victims amid a supernatural ambience. Often (but not always) the heroine will be

saved, the villain unmasked and the supernatural phenomena dispersed (explained or confirmed, as the case may be). (Cornwell 29)

Considered as a whole, these elements of the early Gothic novel comprise a “fairly clear generic [pattern], and many scholars have thus concluded that the literary Gothic is best understood as a specific genre” (Hillard 689). However, Tom Hillard proposes that when approaching varied novels, it is appropriate to use “Gothic” as an adjective to describe “certain *aspects* of the texts, rather than a discrete category into which these works unerringly fit” (Hillard 689).

I will be using the Gothic as such, a literary mode, to approach these novels regarding the formation of identity in Northern Ireland, so that I avoid making any claim that the novels as a whole are Gothic novels. It is important to distinguish, then, what is particularly Irish about these Gothic aspects in *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark*, and *No Bones*, as well as the plethora of other Irish novels that implement similar devices.

Siobhán Kilfeather states in her essay “The Gothic Novel” that before 1798, the Irish Gothic novel was similar to its English Gothic counterpart “in terms of its dual interests in early British and Irish history and in ghosts and sensational terrors” (81). It was only after 1798, at the emergence of the Irish Rebellion that the particular terrors implemented by the Gothic became immediately relevant to contemporary Ireland and the realism of the aspects was in itself horrific and dangerous (Kilfeather 81). For the purposes of this paper I will be focusing on the Irish Gothic aspects that result from the political and social disruptions in Ireland, specifically Northern Ireland.

Linden Peach discusses the application of Gothic elements in his book *The Contemporary Irish Novel*:

Even a cursory reading of Irish fiction in the 1980s and 1990s suggests that it is a 'haunted' literature. I don't mean by this that it is preoccupied with ghosts and phantoms in their conventional sense, signifying the traditional association with the limits of life and death. But rather that it is concerned with haunting, ghosts, and spectres as manifestations of what, in the cultural critic Fredric Jameson's words, 'makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world – indeed of matter itself – now shimmers like a mirage.' (Peach 41)

The Gothic is readily available to contemporary Irish authors because it lends itself easily to represent the history that haunts the nation. History permeates the identity of Northern Ireland and thus arrests the development of a new, modern identity.

The dualism of appearance versus reality is an important Gothic trope to Irish novels. The appearance of time progressing chronologically is contrasted by the reality of a community trapped by its past and living among the ghosts of history. This is also important to Ireland because it is living in the shadow of projected English stereotypes – the drunkard, hotheaded, ignorant Irishman. While trying to escape from the authority of the English, many of the characters perpetuate this stereotype – giving reason to believe that appearance is reality.

In *The Gothic Family Romance*, Margot Backus examines a particular narrative pattern in Irish Gothic texts which depicts the position of children (and the nuclear family) within the contemporary Northern Irish social order (1). She analyzes novels that attempt to understand the relation between history and narrative, the involuntary recurrence of history, and the victimization of children (Backus 4-19). The victimization of children is crucial to representing identity in the wake of the Irish War of Independence; children who should be free from the trappings of history are not, and their development is hindered by traumatic events instigated by the repression of political history.

Freud describes this effect and labels it as the “return of the repressed.” He explains,

If psychoanalytic theory is right in asserting that every affect arising from an emotional impulse – whatever kind – is converted into fear by being repressed, it follows that among those things that are felt to be frightening there must be one group in which it can be shown that the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns. This species of the frightening would then constitute the uncanny, and it would be immaterial whether it was itself originally frightening or arose from another affect. (Freud 147-48)

The return of the repressed is made manifest in the novels I’m investigating through the supernatural, ghosts, and monsters. These elements produce an atmosphere of the uncanny, which is central to Gothic literature.

## The Child

I am taking particular interest in children in this thesis. All three novels, *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark*, and *No Bones*, are centered around a child protagonist. The most notable example of Ireland represented as a child in modern Irish fiction is James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The novel is a bildungsroman, as the child protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, resists the entrapments of Ireland (family, school, church, politics...), until he finally is able to establish and take ownership of his own identity. While *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* takes place in Dublin, its implications are still valid for the children protagonists of literature from Northern Ireland. The significance of a child is that he, or she, is in the process of forming an identity for the first time. The children of Northern Ireland, however, come into a world in which history, represented by family, politics, and Irish institutions, already defines their identity, as the three novels I'm analyzing illustrate.

Irish Literature traditionally feminizes Ireland, from "Dark Rosaleen" by James Clarence Mangan to *Cathleen ni Houlihan* by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, from *The Gathering* by Anne Enright to the song "The Wind that Shakes the Barley" by Robert Dwyer Joyce. In all cases, the female character, representing Ireland, is marginalized by the powerful male representation of England. Additionally, the child is also a representation that is repressed by the masculine; L.P. Curtis considers the English views of the Irish as he states, "The self-consciously mature and virile Anglo-Saxon had no intention of conferring his sophisticated institutions upon the child-like and feminine Irish Celt" (qtd. in Haslam 1). Thus the relationship between a child and his mother can be seen in Irish literature as the

relationship between a country and her people.

It is important, then, that the child is portrayed as haunted. A child, an initially helpless being, is supposed to be protected and innocent. However, in the aftermath of the Irish War for Independence, the child becomes burdened with the history that the mother has lived through. This history becomes manifest in the Gothic and therefore exists as a force which haunts not only the child, but spans through the family and through the generations.

The role of the child in Irish literature is exemplified in William Trevor's novel *Fools of Fortune*. Haunted by the traumas of her father's past and the diary entries of her mother, Imelda goes mad, observing scenes from a past she never lived. Willie, Imelda's father, reflects at the conclusion of the novel that insanity is esteemed in the Irish community. Richard Russell states "Willie cynically realizes that [...] the local community has valorized his daughter for her muteness in its collective attempts to forget the atrocities of the past" (85). Views of children dating back to the romantic era have been revered as inherently pure and innocent, but Imelda is revered in her traumatic insanity, her inability to recover from the trauma of her ancestry. This functions as a Gothic element in Irish novels because if even a child is not innocent and immune from the traumas of the past, no one else can be free from it. Imelda's mother reflects in her diary that with each discovery of the past that haunted them, they became "*truncated lives, creatures of the shadows. Fools of fortune, as [Willie's] father would have said; ghosts we became*" (Trevor 201-02). Thus Imelda represents the Gothic child in Ireland, entrapped by circumstance of history.



## The Novels

In this thesis, I will be analyzing the Gothic child in *The Butcher Boy* by Patrick McCabe, *Reading in the Dark* by Seamus Deane, and *No Bones* by Anna Burns. To do this, I will investigate the effect of the Troubles and the events that pre-date it on Northern Ireland's identity. These specific effects can be categorized, as Bernard McKenna suggests, according to the means by which traumatized individuals come to terms with the violence of their past:

(1) Rupture occurs after initial exposure to violence; the main factors that inform identity are destroyed. (2) Masks come into play when individuals exposed to trauma make an effort to shield themselves from trauma. Victims will construct insular identities drawn from societal cues, but those identities do not fully integrate the traumatic structures into an individual's psychological character. (3) Ultimately, some individuals create a fully integrated identity. These individuals are able to integrate traumatic structures into their identity and to come to terms with subsequent contingencies. (McKenna 1)

It is the rupture and the masks of trauma-response that lend themselves so willingly to Gothic literature and the Gothic child.

In Chapter Two of my thesis, I will analyze the rupture that occurs in Francie Brady, the child narrator of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*. Francie's "main factors that inform [his] identity are destroyed" by a neighbor, Mrs. Nugent, who labels Francie and his family

as pigs. Francie embraces this identity of the pig within the community, especially in the presence of Mrs. Nugent. However, Francie attempts to retain his sense of an individual identity by clinging to his past and his family's past. Unfortunately, with a suicidal mother and an alcoholic father, Francie's idealized version of history couldn't be further from the truth. Francie's response to the "trauma" of the Nugents is contrasted with the response of his best friend Joe, who is able to "create a fully integrated identity" (McKenna 1).

In Chapter Three, I will address the haunting history present in *Reading in the Dark* by Seamus Deane. Unlike *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark* explicitly addresses the cruel birth of Northern Ireland and the consequences (Deane 215). The novel focuses on a microcosm of the tragedy: an unnamed child narrator, his family, and his family's past. This nameless narrator demonstrates the masking characteristic described in McKenna's consequences of trauma; he forms an insular identity as a reaction to the discovery of his mother's secret, isolating himself from both his mother and his father. Both *The Butcher Boy* and *Reading in the Dark* illuminate the characters' arrested development of identity in reaction to the trauma of their pasts.

In Chapter Four, I will investigate *No Bones* by Anna Burns. Unlike the two novels preceding, the child in *No Bones* is haunted by the traumas of her own childhood as a result of the Troubles in Belfast. These events, however, inhibit her ability to mature and leave her in a suspended child-like state. Her identity is entirely informed by the traumas she suffered and has repressed. Similar to Imelda in *Fools of Fortune*, Amelia suffers from a mental breakdown that causes her to relive traumatic moments from her past. Amelia, who

had previously responded to her childhood trauma by using a “masked” identity, is able to begin to fully integrate her identity into society. In the end, *No Bones* actually shows progression of the characters, and thus give hope to the future of Northern Ireland’s struggle for identity.

My goal in this thesis is to contribute to the literary commentary that exists regarding the innocent nature of the identity of Northern Ireland. The children of *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark*, and *No Bones* exist in societies that have already defined and confined their identities to their histories. Escape and development are not options, and the children must either confront their pasts or remain ensnared by the webs of history. I will use the Gothic aspect of the return of the repressed – of history coming back to haunt – in order to illuminate the confinement of the children’s identities in the cyclical nature of history.

It will also be important for me to look at the function of insanity in each of the novels. As the antithesis of a functional identity in the modern world, “in Ireland it happens sometimes that the insane are taken to be saints of a kind” (Trevor 198). Insanity in *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark*, and *No Bones* functions as a device with which to inform the characters’ identity, whether from an external source or from within the character him- or her- self.

## CHAPTER TWO: *THE BUTCHER BOY*

Taking place in small, unnamed town just south of the border, Patrick McCabe's novel *The Butcher Boy* has become regarded by critics as a "Bog Gothic" novel. As a Bog Gothic novel, *The Butcher Boy* illuminates "the inherent paradox underlying national identity: a unified nation depends on the erasure of personal identity, while individualism resists conformity, thereby evading the forward motion of cultural and national modernity" (Scheible 5). Ellen Scheible discusses in her essay "Reanimating the Nation: Patrick McCabe, Neil Jordan, and the Bog Gothic" that McCabe confronts "the dualistic components of Irish identity" to the effect that "partitioned Ireland must accept the coexistence of two nations on one geographical location" (Scheible 5-6). *The Butcher Boy* examines the distinction between Francie, the rural, Irish narrator, haunted by his family and their past, and Mrs. Nugent, the modern, English-Irish antagonist.

The focus of this chapter is to illuminate how this contrast and the conflict between Francie and Mrs. Nugent represents how failure to remedy the past arrests the development of a progressive national identity. By examining Francie's role as a monster and his relationship with his mother, I will argue that Francie represents the consequences of repressed, unaddressed traumatic history.

*The Butcher Boy* essentially revolves around the childhood events that shape Francie's identity. The story is told to us by Francie from an asylum for the criminally insane, "twenty or thirty or forty years" after the events of the novel. This disparity of time

highlights the unreliability of the narrative we are exposed to, and in turn, allows us to observe the events that determine the identity and the motives of our protagonist.

At the beginning of the novel, Francie's only interest is playing with his best friend Joe in a bunker that they built. This quickly changes, however, with the arrival of the Nugents. The first major shift in Francie's identity occurs when he overhears Mrs. Nugent confront his mother:

She said she knew the kind of us long before she went to England and she might have known not to let her son anywhere near the likes of [Francie] what else would you expect from a house where the father's never in, lying about in pubs from morning to night, he's no better than a pig. [...]

After that ma took my part and the last thing I heard was Nugent going down the lane and calling back *Pigs – sure the whole town knows that!*

(McCabe 4)

This is important to the paradox of national identity, because it serves to inform Francie's identity, who embraces his piggishness, as well as define the identity of the community by establishing what is Other. David Lloyd echoes this point as he illuminates the "implicit violence of identity formation [...] in which the formation of identity requires the negation of other possible forms of existing" (Lloyd 4). Tim Gauthier extends this to *The Butcher Boy*, claiming:

For the community, that Other is the Bradys, who must be ostracized for the new conception of the community to be established; [...] If Francie's parents

are Irish stereotypes (the drunken father, the long-suffering mother) it is because they embody truths about the community that it must face, rather than live above, as the Nugents strive to do. (Gauthier 202)

Instead of a traditional Gothic ghost, the community is haunted by Francie Brady, a reminder, and remainder, of “an Irishness that the new Ireland would rather not acknowledge” (Gauthier 202).

It is this initial rejection from the community that causes Francie to terrorize and haunt the town, and specifically Mrs. Nugent. Mrs. Nugent quickly identifies Francie in the role of the Other because of his parents’ reputations in the town; his dad is an alcoholic, likely traumatized by his childhood in a Belfast orphanage, and his mother spent some time in a madhouse. It is these distinctly rural Irish stereotypes that Mrs. Nugent and the community are separating themselves from, identifying their selfs as a “new” Irish identity, unassociated with these stereotypes.

Francie recognizes this disparity between the community and his family. His embodiment of his role as the pig fuels his hatred for the family who has labeled him as such. However, as Laura Eldred points out, “his hatred for the family is intensified by his desire to be one of them” (Eldrid 61). Francie spies on Mrs. Nugent and Phillip sleeping one night and imagines Phillip saying, almost in a taunting way, “I love my mother more than anything in the world and I’d never do anything in the world to hurt her. I love my parents and I love my happy home” (McCabe 47). Francie longs for the stability and happiness of the Nugent family.

Francie's identity is additionally shaped by the numerous "house[s] of a hundred windows" he is institutionalized in throughout the novel (McCabe 71). Though he spends a large portion of his childhood years in these institutions, first an industrial school, later a mental hospital, and finally an asylum for the criminally insane, all of them fail in fostering his growth and assimilating him into his community.

While at the industrial school, Francie is studying to receive his "*Francie Brady Not A Bastard Anymore Diploma*" so that he can return home to his Da and his best friend Joe (McCabe 79). Since the novel is narrated by Francie, we are able to see, however, that the outward appearance that Francie portrays is simply an act in order to receive his "Diploma" so that he may leave. In an attempt to create esteem for himself from the head priest, Francie feigns divine contact:

I told him I thought Our Lady was talking to me. I read that in a book about this holy Italian boy. He was out in a field looking after the sheep next thing what does he hear only this soft voice coming out of nowhere you are my chosen messenger the world is going to end and all this. One minute he's an Italian bogman with nothing on him only one of his father's coats the next he's a famous priest going round the world writing books and being carried around in a sedan chair saying the Queen of Angels chose me. Well I thought – you've had your turn Father Italian Sheep man so fuck off now about your business here comes Francie Brady hello Our Lady I said. Well Francie she says how's things. Not so bad I said. (McCabe 82)

Thus we begin to develop the Gothic notion of appearance versus reality in the identity of Francie; what other see him as is not what we, the readers, understand him to be. Francie's motives are revealed to us through the first person narration, and we are therefore able to see that he has the capability of cunning deviancy.

Not long after his "divine contact," Francie is molested by a priest whom he identifies as Father Tiddly. Father Tiddly leaves the school after his inappropriate conduct is discovered, but Francie recognizes the advantage he has now gained:

I didn't have to worry much about getting the Francie Brady Not A Bastard Anymore Diploma anymore after the Tiddly business for I knew they were going to let me go the first chance they got I was like a fungus growing on the walls they wanted them washed clean again. (McCabe 102)

So while Francie appears to have received his "diploma" after being dismissed from the school, we know that Francie hasn't changed since he arrived. He is still the child he was when he was admitted into the school, still a "bastard."

In fact, although the narrative seems to be that of a young boy, we know it to be a man decades older than that. Francie, not aware of his own lack of maturation, describes his expectations when he returns home from the industrial school:

When I came home me and Joe would just carry on the way we always had. I just hoped that Philip Nugent didn't think he was going to be hanging around with us just because Joe took a goldfish off him. Because if he did he was going to be sorely disappointed. Me and Joe had things to do. Tracking in the



mountains, huts to build. If Philip Nugent wanted to pray to the Manitou he would have to form his own blood brother gang. (McCabe 76-77).

However, when Francie does return, it is apparent to the reader that Joe has matured. While Francie is relating his stories about the 'house with a hundred windows' Joe keeps asking him "what for?" This frustrates Francie, who simply wants to tell his story, have a good laugh, and "to talk about the hide and the old days and hacking at the ice and whose turn it was to toss the marble" (McCabe 104). The questions that Joe asks him are reminiscent of the questions the adult women ask Francie in the store at the beginning of the novel: "But getting by *where*, Francie, they kept saying" (McCabe 16). Thus we are able to see that Francie's frustration is the result of Joe's maturation and Francie's remaining immaturity.

Francie's cohesive identity ultimately shatters with the abandonment of all his relationships. The death of his parents drives him to multiple institutions, the institutions he is sent to fail him, and in the end, his best friend Joe fails to admit recognition of Francie. After this point, the monster in Francie is revealed as he brutally murders Mrs. Nugent.

### **Maternal Relationships**

The country of Ireland has long been represented in literature as a maternal figure, most famously in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. I think it is then important to examine the relationship between Francie and his mother as a manifestation of the relationship between a country and her people. Francie's dysfunctional family can be seen as the

dysfunction that exists as partitioned Ireland attempts to reconcile an identity in the coexistence of two nations on one island.

The first interaction we seen between Francie and his mother, Annie, is after Mrs. Nugent has called the family pigs, prompted by a prank Francie has pulled on Philip. Francie's mother reacts by whipping Francie with a stick. However she immediately feels remorse, saying 'there was nobody in the world meant more to her than [Francie]' (McCabe 4). She then asks, "Francie – you would never let me down would you?" (McCabe 5). Francie promises her he won't and it is this promise that drives their relationship through the beginning of the novel.

However, this bliss doesn't remain long as Francie's family becomes ever-more dysfunctional and he hears his dad yell at his mother, "God's curse the fucking day I ever lay eyes on you!" (McCabe 7). After Francie comes home one day to find his mother preparing to hang herself, she is sent to an asylum, or a "garage," as Francie puts it.

When Annie returns from the garage, Francie's identity as part of the Brady family is reaffirmed. Francie describes:

She said we'd never be run down in this town again we'd show them we were as good as any of them. She looked into my eyes and said: We don't want to be like the Nugents. We don't want to be like any of them! We'll show them – won't we Francie? They'll envy us yet! We're the Bradys. Francie! The Bradys!

I said we sure were. I was proud as punch. Everything was starting again and this time it was all going to work out right. (McCabe 19)

However, this idealized state of happiness is soon brought to check after another fight between Francie's parents and then the sudden successful suicide of his mother. Gerry Smyth perceptively argues:

This leaves [Francie] stranded [...], but still fundamentally in thrall to the image of his mother. The remainder of the book becomes a search by Francie to find objects and relationships capable of replacing the replete identity he experienced with his mother; but as this was only even an imaginary relationship anyway, all such attempts are doomed. (Smyth 82)

Most immediately, Francie turns to Mrs. Nugent as a mother-figure. He imagines a scene in which Mrs. Nugent offers Francie her breast, as she would to her baby (McCabe 64). However, he suddenly remembers that she called his family pigs and the promise he made to his mom and he cries out "*Ma! It's not true!*"; his maternal affections quickly change as he describes "I thought I was going to choke on the fat, lukewarm flesh [of Mrs. Nugent's breast]" (McCabe 64). Thus we see Francie's identity begin to exist in some limbo – he longs to be accepted in his community, but he retains loyalty to his heritage.

This reflects social anxieties of Northern Ireland trying to form a sense of nationalism, yet is divided between staying loyal to Ireland while being drawn by the fascinations of England. The Gothic elements of the novel are used to represent these social anxieties, such as the aspect of appearance versus reality. Francie's longing for a functional

relationship between him, his mother, and his father is contrasted by the reality of dysfunction that exists between them.

Francie is once again torn between loyalty to his family and desire for a functional family in an episode between Francie and Tiddly, the priest at the industrial school who sexually abuses Francie. Tiddly has Francie dress up in a bonnet with white ribbon and asks Francie to tell him about his home. Francie starts describing the Nugents' house, but immediately imagines a Mrs. Nugent bragging to his mother:

Do you know what he did? He asked me to be his mother. He said he'd give anything not to be a pig. That's what he did on you Mrs Brady. That's why he came to our house! Her breast was choking me again, lukewarm in my throat.

(McCabe 97)

Francie's vision continues:

All I could see was ma smiling and saying to me over and over again don't worry Francie no matter what she says about you I'll never believe it I'll never disown you ever ever not the way I did you ma I said *no son no!* she said I said it's true ma no she says but it was and it always would be no matter what I did. (McCabe 97-98).

Throughout the novel, Francie tries to hold on to what family remains to him. The Gothic aspect of appearance versus reality is evident in Francie's interactions with his father after he returns from the industrial school. For a period of time, Francie's dad doesn't leave the house, and Francie bring his father home whiskey, cakes, and flypapers from the market.

However, we discover through the police that Francie's father has been dead for some time as the sergeant comments, "Maggots – they're right through him" (McCabe 153). The death of Francie's last remaining family member causes a mental breakdown that results in him being admitted to a mental hospital.

With his mother dead, as well as his father, and Mrs. Nugent, the community, and even Joe separating themselves from Francie, he truly becomes the Gothic abject of filthy non-existence. He ultimately lacks any identity and is cast in the role of the community's Other.

### **Francie the Monster**

More than simply an embodiment of the Other, Francie becomes a monster in his community. Critic Laura Eldred explores how Francie's monstrosity parallels Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and how this classic Gothic story provides a contextual frame through which to view the nature of monstrosity that exists in Francie. She claims:

Much as Victor Frankenstein creates a monster that is his doppelganger, the failures of Francie's community and of Irish institutions create the murderous Francie Brady. Readers must ask themselves to what degree is Francie a monster, and to what degree is he a neglected little boy who deserved better from society and its institutions? (Eldred 61)

It is this question that Eldred presents that is crucial to examining how Francie represents the antithesis to a progressive national identity for Northern Ireland. Francie is a monster because the community has made him such. With every behavior that Francie exhibits, the

town watches him closely, reacting carefully and keeping their distance. It is this isolation that leads Francie to his monstrosity, just as the rejection by Victor leads his creation to violence in *Frankenstein*. Eldred concludes that both novels imply that monsters are “created, not born, and a hostile environment bears much of the blame” (Eldred 62).

Just as the monster of Shelley’s novel is a creation of Dr. Frankenstein, the ‘monster’ of McCabe’s novel is produced by Francie’s community. In both cases, “the nature of the monster is a function of the fears and anxieties of the society or person that constructed it in the first place” (Eldred 62). The small town that Francie lives in rejects the Brady family because of the “old Irishness” that they represent. They deny Francie a place in their society, and so the resulting narrative, as Linden Peach suggests, “can be viewed as Francie’s attempt to construct a ‘place to settle’” (Peach 178).

The communal identity that the town aims to form without the Bradys is one which is separate from the Irish stereotypes they represent. It is apparent throughout the town that English qualities are highly valued, as seen through the Nugents as well as Francie’s Uncle Alo. In order for the town to adopt a progressively more English identity, they must reject the Bradys because they embody the stereotypes the community aims to leave behind them. It is in this manner that Northern Ireland strives to become more English as they attempt to leave behind the “uncivilized” history of Ireland. By rejecting Francie, the representation of the negative Irish stereotypes, the town suffers from the uncanny return of the repressed.

Alo serves to do the same within the Brady family. He reminds Benny, Francie's father, of a childhood that Benny would rather not remember. Their relationship illuminates this theme of the haunting history of a traumatized past. Although we only know what Francie reveals of their history, it is apparent that Benny and Alo were put into a Belfast orphanage as kids. Benny's traumatic experience leads to his alcoholism and bitter resentment for Alo's optimism. As Benny and Alo fight one night, Francie's ma cries out to Benny, "Don't blame it on your brother because you were put in a home! Christ Jesus Benny are you never going to come to terms with it! After all this time, is it never going to end?" (McCabe 36). Benny suppresses the memories of his childhood, and as Francie points out, "when you said [the word *home*] even when you weren't talking about the orphanage, da went pale sometimes he even got up and left the room" (McCabe 34). However, it is this inability to 'come to terms' with his past that haunts him and leads to his early death.

Even Francie is not free of the haunting history, as he is labeled a pig because of his parents' reputation. As Francie and his family represent this 'old Irish' identity, the stereotypes of the drunkard, the mad, and the violent, the community must come to terms with this representation of the identity of its past if the town is to function and progress. As Eldred points out, "Francie embodies that which the community cannot accept" (Eldred 64). By repressing the memory of this 'old Irish' identity by isolating Francie, they become responsible for Francie's violent reactions.

Robert Miles engages with this idea in "Abjection, Nationalism, and the Gothic." He claims that the nation and the gothic are inextricable in the sense that the formation of a

national identity will inevitably create a monster by excluding and denying certain traits or aspects that are not desirable. These exclusions, or 'monsters' are "an untidy reminder of what the nationalist myth of seamless origin cannot absorb" (Miles 31). However, the isolation of these monsters, such as Francie in *The Butcher Boy*, does not erase their existence. Miles continues, "that nationalist effort to construct a usable past is haunted, in the Gothic, by what has been abjected in the process" (35). As previously explicated, Francie is the haunting factor of his community's abject. Francie exists as a constant reminder to the town of the Irish stereotypes that they wish to not be associated with. Thus, *The Butcher Boy* underscores the anxiety and trauma that may be hidden, but is always present, within the formation of a national identity.



### CHAPTER THREE: *READING IN THE DARK*

In *Reading in the Dark*, Seamus Deane highlights the repetition of traumatic history through the story of a young boy in a Derry family. From the opening scene, we get a sense of a presence that overwhelms the family. We learn throughout the novel told by the narrator that the family is haunted by the murder of the narrator's paternal uncle by his maternal grandfather for informing the British police of IRA activity; however, we also come to learn that the uncle was innocent and he was wrongfully murdered. It is this history that not only haunts the family, dividing them through secrecy, but also repeats through the generations. The manifestation of this history through ghosts, violence, and the uncanny "return of the repressed," *Reading in the Dark* evokes a definite atmosphere of the Gothic.

*Reading in the Dark* is unique in that it is told through a series of vignettes by an unnamed narrator. The anonymity of the narrator is what easily lends this story to the idea that this could be any or all Irish families. While the events of the family in *Reading in the Dark* are particular, the idea of the return of the repressed exists in every Irish family, especially those of Northern Ireland.

The emphasis of the haunting history is achieved through the use of these vignettes. The period of time between episodes is indicated by month and year, and we are vaguely aware of the narrator aging as he progresses through school. Other than this, however, we know nothing of what goes on between each narrated section. Choosing to narrate the

story through these short episodes allows every section to contribute and directly relate to the history and secrets that haunt the family.

The repressed history and secrets of the family and the community are represented in the novel through the supernatural and tales of myth and folklore. One of the most prominent examples of this in the novel is in the section titled "Katie's Story." Katie, the narrator's aunt, tells the narrator a story in which Brigid McLaughlin had been hired to look after a brother and sister, Francis and Frances, respectively; Katie notes, "Even in Irish you couldn't tell the names apart, except in writing" (Deane 63). As Brigid spends more time with the children, she begins to notice a number of strange things happening – the characteristics between the two children begin to continually change: "She found the boy was not dark-haired, as his sister had been, and the girl was fair-haired as her brother had been" (Deane 65). The children's voices, sexes, skin, and even smiles switch, but only when they are alone with Brigid. Brigid reflects, "she knew either she was mad, or there was something very strange in that house and very frightening about those children" (Deane 66). Coupled with a strange green glow that emanates from the parents' graves, the children eventually vanish. The resulting trauma causes Brigid to go "completely strange in the head" (Deane 72-73).

As strange as the story is, Katie explains that the message of the story is that "some families [...] are devil-haunted" (Deane 68). Brigid's haunting and resulting madness is not unique to her, but is present throughout the generations of her family. Katie continues,

It's a curse a family can never shake off. Maybe it's something terrible in the family history, some terrible deed that was done in the past, and it just spreads and it spreads down the generations like a shout down that tunnel, the secret passage, in the walls of Grianan, that echoes and echoes and never really stops. It's held in those walls forever. (Deane 68)

In response, the narrator describes, "An instinct woke in me at the mention of Grianan. I wanted her to stop, not knowing why" (Deane 68). The mention of Grianan is not only a physical link to the old Ireland of history, but as we discover, is also a link to the narrator's family's haunting history. Katie's story exemplifies how painful family history becomes represented by the supernatural because it is the only way for the characters to acknowledge its presence.

The novel opens with a supernatural presence in the scene between the narrator and his mother. The two of them are separated by a number of stairs in their house when his mother warns, "There's something there between us. A shadow. Don't move" (Deane 3). The narrator is enthralled, but ultimately unaware of what this shadow is and what it represents for his family. We learn slowly that this "shadow" that looms over the family is related to the disappearance of the narrator's uncle Eddie. The narrator overhears conversations between his father and the remaining brothers:

They had stories of gamblers, drinkers, hard men, con men, champion bricklayers, boxing matches, footballers, policemen, priests, hauntings, exorcisms, political killings. There were great events they returned to over

and over, like the night of the big shoot-out at the distillery between the IRA and the police, when Uncle Eddie disappeared. (Deane 7-8)

Each of the brothers has his own theory of what happened to Eddie, but the narrator is disappointed that his father never comments on the subject. The boy is acutely aware that there is some trauma that lies behind this history.

### **Addressing History**

When the narrator witnesses his first trauma, we are able to see how it keeps haunting him until he is able to directly address the event. He describes:

One day the following summer I saw a boy from Blucher Street killed by a reversing lorry. He was standing at the rear wheel, ready to hump on the back when the lorry moved off. But the driver reversed suddenly, and the boy went under the wheel as then men at the street corner turned round and began shouting and running. It was too late. He lay there in the darkness under the truck, with his arm spread out and blood creeping out on all sides. (Deane 10)

The narrator is immediately distressed as he watches the policemen and the boy's mother at the lorry. He is haunted by the memory of the gory vision for months after the traumatic event. He feels pity for the police officers, with which he associated the memory of feeling vertigo, which contradicts the narrator's knowledge that "everyone hated the police" (Deane 11). It is only later, when the narrator hears that the boy was "run over by a police car which had not even stopped" that he is able to come to terms with the event:

Somehow this allayed the subtle sense of treachery I had felt from the start. As a result, I began to feel then a real sorrow for Rory's mother and for the driver who had never worked since. (Deane 11)

Robert Garratt claims that this scene "has all features of the traumatic: the shocking violent event, the nightmarish details of the scene recorded in the narrator's conscious, [and] a belated coping with an event" (Garratt 103). The trauma that is present in this scene relates to the trauma that underlies the novel.

This scene can be seen to be a microcosm for the novel as a whole. The traumatic events that the family members experience continue to surface in the consciousness of the characters and are unable to subside without being confronted. Often, these repressed memories are the explanation for the supernatural activity that is present in the novel. Multiple times the narrator addresses the need to confront the 'Eddie situation' in order for his family to move on. He expresses, "I wanted it to be over. But it couldn't be over until he [his father] told me everything" (Deane 141).

Once the narrator has pieced together the events of his family's past, he attempts to address the truth so they can all move on. He writes everything down, but in fear of someone reading it, he translates it into Irish and burns the English version. The pressing need to reveal the truth for his father spurs the narrator to read everything to him:

I read it all outright in Irish to him. It was an essay we had been assigned in school, I told him, on local history. He just nodded and smiled and said it sounded wonderful. My mother had listened carefully. I knew she knew what

I was doing. My father tapped me on the shoulder and said he liked to hear the language spoken in the house. (Deane 203)

The narrator's non-Irish speaking parents don't understand the content that he has read them, but his mother is aware of the implication that the narrator's story carried. This is significant because, formerly, the Irish language was something that all Irish citizens had in common. However, after the Great Famine, the number of people who spoke the Irish language was dramatically reduced. Thus, especially in context of this chapter, the Irish language represents a past, unified communal identity that is no longer accessible to the people of Ireland. Just as the secrets act as a barrier between the members of the family, the language acts as a barrier between a unified identity and a haunted one.

The narrator promises to his mother not to reveal her secrets, but, as he points out, "staying loyal to my mother made me disloyal to my father" (Deane 236). He continues,

I had created a distance between my parents and myself that had become my only way of loving them. So, I celebrated all the anniversaries: of the deaths, all the betrayals – for both of them – in my head, year after year, until, to my pleasure and surprise, they began to become confused and muddled, and I wondered at times had I dreamed it all.

Hauntings are, in their way, very specific. Everything has to be exact, even the vaguenesses. My family's history was like that too. It came to me in bits, from people who rarely recognized all they had told. (Deane 236)

It becomes apparent that the traumatic memory has seeped through the generations, and secrecy has culminated the traumatic effects within the narrator, now a man of 25 or 26. Thus we can see, as Linden Peach claims, *Reading in the Dark* “deals with a cultural identity, based on an ancestry marked [...] by loss that has never permitted any sense of closure” (Peach 48). The events that the narrator’s family has repressed haunts not only them, but the narrator as well.

### **Repetition of History**

Further than simply representing the formation of identity, *Reading in the Dark* develops the theme of the “return of the repressed.” Even before the narrator is aware of the events surrounding Eddie’s “disappearance,” we see the narrator involved in separate events that reflect those of his uncle. As we learn, through the narrator, the circumstances that surround his family’s past, seemingly unrelated episodes of the narrator’s childhood that we have been told begin to serve to eerily foreground the future discoveries. The Gothic is present in the uncanny atmosphere this evokes, as the resurfacing of history in the life of the narrator constitutes as frighteningly unnatural.

Grieanan fort is a significant location in the novel which links the past and the present. Functioning like a Gothic castle, the fort holds onto history like a shout that echoes endlessly within the walls (Deane 68). The Gothic castle, which is often the site of decay and long-hidden secrets, provides a link for characters between the present and the past they strive to uncover, such as in the early Gothic novel *The Old English Baron* by Clara

Reeve. Grianan fort functions as such, a crumbling reminder of the past that links past events to the present ones, allowing history to reverberate through generations.

One such instance of this in the novel is when the narrator is locked in Grianan fort by his friends:

I had been sitting there, in the wishing-chair, wondering how I could concentrate more on the emaciated ghost sounds within the passage, when [...] I heard the grunt of the stone that covered the entrance being rolled back into place to shut me in. I yelled, but they laughed and ran up the parapet steps above me. The stone could not be moved from inside the passageway; [...] So I sat and waited. (Deane 58)

This lends itself easily to the discovery the narrator makes later that, after hearing that Eddie was informing on the IRA, the narrator's grandfather and other men in the IRA "took him out of the farmhouse and they moved across the countryside to Grianan [...]. They put him in the secret passage inside the walls [and] rolled the stone across the entrance" (Deane 192). After his own entrapment, the narrator remarks, "the dark passageway felt even worse in retrospect, more chilling and enclosed" (Deane 58). In context of the novel as a whole, this observation is true especially for the retrospect of traumatic events among character's memory, and how those events affect their histories.

This relationship between events the narrator experiences and the events the narrator learns of Eddie is exemplified by the research of Robert Garratt. He claims, "The most powerful demonstration of the uncanny occurs when the narrator reenacts the



central traumatic event of the novel, the false accusation of Eddie as a police informer that leads to his murder” (Garratt 107). Garratt examines the scene in which the narrator and his Catholic friend are surrounded by a group of Protestants who are threatening to beat them. The narrator escapes and is picked up by Sergeant Burke, who gives the other boys the impression that the narrator is giving him the names of the Protestant boys. They then yell after the narrator, “Fuckin’ stooly. Just like your uncle, like the whole lot o’ ye” (Deane 100). Garratt concludes,

The community’s misunderstanding about the narrator’s confrontation with Sergeant Burke highlights the notion of recurrence in the novel. It also suggests that the traumatic act of violence, the repression and silence of guilt [...], and the silence of shame [...] all can be passed down through the generations, both in story and in attitude. It also demonstrates the extent to which Sergeant Burke and the narrator repeat the general political struggle. But it is in the reactions of the narrator’s own family that the idea of recurrence becomes fully established. (Garratt 108)

It is these instances of the narrator’s repetition of his family’s history that develops Freud’s sense of the uncanny, that strange capacity of history to repeat itself (Freud 147-48). Thus Deane seems to imply with his novel that this repetition will continue until the family and the community are able to confront the traumatic memory.

This is translated to a national level in a section of the novel titled “Political Education.” A priest in the British army is speaking to an assembly of students and,

regarding Ireland, states, “Our internal disputes are no more than family quarrels” (Deane 207). Obviously significant, as the entire novel revolves around a “family quarrel,” Deane seems to suggest that Ireland is haunted by the history of the War of Independence, and the identity of Ireland relies on confronting and accepting that past in order for progress to be made.

### **Reading in the Dark**

The narrator is able to create a cohesive history of what happened to Eddie by interpreting and unveiling many smaller stories that he collects from a number of characters in his community. The narrator reflects, “Some of the things I remember, I don’t really remember. I’ve just been told about them so now I feel I remember them” (Deane 236). This phenomenon of false memories is central to the concept of haunting history and is demonstrated through the title of the novel itself. Lindon Peach explains, “The phrase ‘reading in the dark’ refers to the creative activity that follows the literal reading – a kind of creative re-reading” (Peach 46). In the novel, the narrator experiences this when reading one of his mother’s old books from when she was a girl. The narrator is forced to turn out the lights, but he continues to lie there with the “book still open, re-imagining all I had read, the various ways the plot might unravel, the novel opening into endless possibilities in the dark” (Deane 20).

One such instance of characters “re-reading” history is contained in the story of Larry, an infamous person of the town. The narrator is familiar with Larry, a man who “never speaks [and] stands in the same place all day at a street corner and he looks up

Bligh's Lane as if he had never seen it before. [...] Larry McLaughlin, a relative of the Brigid in Katie's story" (Deane 85). Joe, the town lunatic, tells the narrator Larry's "tale," the story behind his eternal silence. Joe explains that on the night before his wedding, Larry sees the devil in the form of a fox that results in him going mad; the story is well known in the community because afterwards, Larry told everyone who would listen, until one day he stopped talking entirely (Deane 89).

Later in the novel, however, the narrator puts pieces of information together that he has collected and discovers that Larry was the one who pulled the trigger in Uncle Eddie's murder:

Larry crawled down the passageway to the space where Eddie sat on the wishing-chair, and he hunkered before Eddie and he looked at him and, maybe, said something, maybe, told him to say his prayers and then he shot him, several times or maybe just once, and the fort boomed as though it were hollow. [...] That was the night Larry met the devil-woman and stopped speaking. He had just handed the gun to Grandfather without a word and gone off down the dark path to make his way home [...] The man who had had sex with the devil. The man who had killed my father's brother. All on the same night. (Deane 192-93)

The narrator, who never explicitly receives the whole story, is able to piece together the events of that night and reveal the truth that haunts the folklore of the town. Larry's fictional encounter with the devil was a "re-reading" of the trauma of murdering Eddie.

Additionally, the narrator's discovery of the truth relies on reading in the dark, as indicated by facts that the narrator qualifies with repeated use of the word "maybe."

Peach relates this to the importance of the novel as the narrator is filling in the absent pieces of the family history to form a cohesive 'text.' This text, however, revolves "around the concept of a pain that arguably is too terrible to bear and perhaps should not be passed on, and yet should not be eschewed" (Peach 46). The narrator pieces together the family secrets in order to know what the shadow was between him and his mother on the stairs, but in doing so he isolates himself further from his family.

Peach continues that *Reading in the Dark* signifies that "secrets have to be exorcised, and the only way of doing this is to pass them on to others," but the process of doing so produces "an overwhelming sense of pain that develops throughout the text, and which is never finally exorcised" (Peach 47). By the end of the novel, we are left with the sense that this history will never be laid to rest, and it will continue to surface in the narrative of future history.

## CHAPTER FOUR: *NO BONES*

*No Bones* is a novel in which the characters are surrounded by inescapable violence and the chaos of the Troubles in Belfast. It focuses on how this violence is internalized by the children of Belfast. This is achieved through a fragmented narrative, which centers primarily on Amelia Lovett, a child of six or seven at the beginning of the novel. The third person narration allows for us to experience how a number of characters cope with death and destruction that surround them. However, the narrative isn't strictly third person. Frequently the narration takes place in the first person through Amelia. Critic Robert Garratt explains the effect of using non-traditional narration in "trauma novels":

The emphasis in the trauma novel on the traumatic voice of point of view frequently stretches conventional fictional methods toward certain stylistic innovations, especially in treatment of reality and the limitations of perspective. Part of this formal change results from the attempts by writers to represent or mimic trauma as closely or as realistically as possible in art. [...] These fictional practices are necessary to deal with events or circumstances whose very nature seems impossible to imagine and therefore to represent. (Garratt 6)

The chapters of the novel that follow Amelia in the third person are the portions which depict the direct violence she suffers, such as the molestation by her brother and his wife in "Troubles" and the rape by Bronaugh in "War Spasms." It is impossible for Amelia to

narrate these sections because it is impossible for her to translate these traumas into words. As Garratt describes,

Because they have not lived through a past event in the normal sense [...] trauma victims, [sic] have no “narrative memory.” They cannot recount in any coherent and developed way and with any sense of an ending what has happened to them. [...] To tell the story of a traumatic past, then, becomes both a task [...] and a “cure” [...], since only with the ability to tell the event does it become true memory, relegated to the past, and therefore over.

(Garratt 7-8)

Thus it only becomes possible for Amelia, as well as the other characters, to make progress and leave the past behind when they are finally able to develop their own narrative account of the traumas that they have faced.

Vincent, a character who receives a short period of narration in the novel, is important to the story because he clearly demonstrates this inability to progress past the traumas he experienced as a child. In response to the brutal murder of his father and the miscarriage of his mother, Vincent invents multiple imaginary “friends,” to whom he refers as his “Inner Circle.” Sometimes a gun dealer, sometimes a mental patient, and sometimes the boy of his childhood, Vincent copes with the violence of the world by retreating into his imagination. His inner circle, led by Mr. Hunch, is a means of self-preservation for Vincent:

Mr. Hunch ends by stressing all the dangers that exist in the world and in the afterworld and convinces the boy that only he, Hunch, can protect him from

all of them, and the boy is happy to believe this for Mr. Hunch is going to stay.

(Burns 185)

However, the presence of Mr. Hunch is threatened by another of Vincent's characters, the psychiatrist Mr. Parker. Mr. Parker actively works with Vincent to 'cure' Vincent of his psychosis. Talking to Vincent and directly addressing the motives behind his other imaginary characters, Mr. Parker is trying to help Vincent address his past so that he can finally move forward. After an episode in which Vincent relives the traumatic memory of his father's murder by drawing 153 cuts in red ink on his arm, Mr. Parker observes, "Cutting and flesh wounds might seem necessary for you to be able to identify with your father [...] To identify with how your father must have felt at that time" (Burns 187). While Vincent accredits this observation to someone other than himself, it is apparent that he is beginning to identify the source of his psychosis. During one of the therapy sessions, Mr. Parker tells Vincent, "It doesn't have to be this way. You must let yourself know how much you can depend on me, or at least be aware when you're determined you will not" (Burns 168).

Vincent is Gothic in the sense that he is haunted by violent acts which return to him in the form of his imaginary carnival. Stereotypically a place of joy and excitement, Vincent's carnival of terror consists of attractions such as How To Sit With Your Depression, Death And Half-Death!, Falling Off The Roller Coaster!, and Identify The Body (Burns 159). Each of these represents a trauma that Vincent attempts to repress and forget about. He notes that he especially avoids the Identify display, which represents the

identification of his father's mangled body. However, Mr. Parker aims to help Vincent address these traumas, or attractions, in order for him to successfully move on.

At the end of the novel when Amelia returns to visit Belfast, Vincent is the only character who does not immediately react negatively to Amelia's suggestion of a daytrip. It is this that gives us the initial sense that, like Amelia, Vincent has been successful in addressing and moving past the traumas of his childhood. He says to the rest of the (non-imaginary) group, "We could give it a go, [...] If it doesn't work, we don't have to do it again. I think we might like a daytrip. How about tomorrow? I'll bring my wife" (Burns 335). The group responds by "ignoring the wife bit, because, of course, Vincent was raving" (Burns 335-36). However, to everyone's surprise, the next day Vincent brings along his real, un-imaginary wife:

It wasn't just that Vincent was married, and to a real person, not a figment, some mysterious killer assassin from his own imagination, let's say. It wasn't even that she was Japanese. For she was. What really told Amelia things were certainly changing round here, was that here was a flesh and blood woman, and Oriental, an unusual, a non-Bonian, non-Ardoyian, dandering about the area, without people coming out their doors and demanding what religion she was of. (Burns 341)

Vincent has clearly been able to form a progressive, forward reaching identity that has allowed him to leave his childhood traumas, and imaginary Inner circle, behind.



## **Coping with Trauma**

Similar to Vincent, the other characters in the novel develop their own coping mechanisms for addressing the traumas of their childhoods. Amelia recognizes the force that sustains her older sister, Lizzie: "Lizzie and I were different in our approach to how we lived out lives. It amazed me constantly the things that never worried her. Violence in her world seemed some sort of vitamin-taking experience. It tended to be the opposite in mine" (Burns 89-90). Lizzie embraces the violence, lives to fight, and thrives on danger. However, this violence eventually drives Lizzie to commit suicide. At her wake, Amelia recognizes this same destructive force in her younger sister, Josie. Amelia is confronted by Josie's anger and in response, she has a "premonition [...] of coming back for this other sister's funeral. She looked at Josie – superfit, superhealthy, but that was on the outside. On the inside, Amelia knew, it was rage, always rage, that carried Josie along. How long could rage do that? she wondered" (Burns 272). In contrast to Vincent, these characters externalize the violence into rage against society, instead of an inward rage that Vincent experiences. Both Lizzie and Josie depend on exhibiting their violence outward, which never allows for them to address it within themselves, and while we never see what happens to Josie after Lizzie's wake, we can safely assume that her outcome is not as hopeful as Vincent's. The characters in the novel who embody this rage and violence against society eventually all lead to their own destruction.

Amelia, however, turns from the external violence and rage in reaction to the traumas surrounding her. Like Vincent, she instead inflicts violence on herself in a self-

destructive manner. The battle with herself begins with anorexia, as she began “counting calories, swallowing laxatives, shoving up suppositories, turning round mirrors, being friends with food, not being friends with food, nightmaring about clothes, being at war with her body” (Burns 149). Simply a means of control and coping for Amelia, we can see that the infamous hunger strike movement that took place during the Troubles serves as a background for Amelia’s eating disorder. Thus, as an implicit tribute to this hunger strike movement, Amelia’s anorexia functions to show that, even though the characters of the novel may not recognize it, the repression of national political violence is manifest within the society and characters themselves. This is especially uncanny because it shows that even things repressed at a national level return to haunt the characters in the novel. While anorexia and bulimia then translate to embodying national significance, the other forms of self-destruction that Amelia embraces are no less a tribute to Irish stereotypes, including most prominently alcoholism and madness.

A number of times Amelia attempts to address her drinking problem, but by focusing simply on the symptom instead of the cause, she is ultimately unsuccessful. She describes one such failure in the section titled “Battles, 1987”:

I met Jean at an AA meeting. It was my first. It was Jean’s first too. ‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Hello,’ I said. We smiled and sat together. After the meeting Jean turned to me and smiled again. ‘How about a café and a chat and a coffee?’ she said. ‘Great,’ I said. So we went and had a coffee and a chat and a café. Then I suggested, ‘Another cup of coffee Jean?’ and Jean suggested, ‘Another cup of

coffee Amelia?’ and after a bit of polite questioning back and forth, the thought struck us simultaneously – But oh! Why not go and have a drink instead? We looked at each other amazed, shrugged, then headed to the bar next door. [...]

We had a lot in common, Jean and I, mostly wine, but gin and vodka and Jameson’s too. Sometimes at the end of a night we’d want food – though this was rare. (Burns 243)

However, even when she successfully stays sober, Amelia still suffers from being a “dry drunk” and from the stomach pains of her hunger strike (Burns 251). It is not until she directly addresses what has caused her symptoms that Amelia will ever be free from the uncanny return of the repressed that haunts her.

Amelia’s self-destruction protects her from the traumas she endures. Even after she is a woman of 25 or 26, Amelia doesn’t function as an adult as a result of the repression of violence done to her. During the scene where Amelia’s childhood friend Bronagh rapes her, the narrator describes, “There was something childlike about Amelia, but not endearingly childlike; frighteningly childlike. Amelia was no child you see. Amelia was an adult” (Burns 254). She endures the trauma and receives it blankly, the same manner in which she behaved at the numerous funerals she has been to (Burns 254). The appearance of her maturity, but the reality of her child-like interaction with the world is a particular facet of the Gothic.

This, however, is the last external trauma that Amelia is to face before she, like Vincent, addresses the accumulation of traumas she harbors inside herself. This is achieved through abasement by a series of mirrors, a phenomenon that Foucault describes in his essay "The Birth of the Asylum." Foucault defines the phase of abasement as the following:

Presumptuously identified with the object of his delirium, the madman recognizes himself as in a mirror in this madness whose absurd pretensions he has denounced [...] He is now pitilessly observed by himself. And in the silence of those who represent reason, and who have done nothing but hold up the perilous mirror, he recognizes himself as objectively mad. (Foucault 264)

The first of these mirrors is presented to Amelia when she receives news of her sister's death from Johnny Lavery. Amelia invites him inside, offering tea and biscuits, but he instead asks for a drink. Startled, she says he's too young to be drinking. In response, Johnny

[...] told her to stop preaching at him, especially if they were a loser, a drunkard, an auld alcoholic themselves. [...] She felt like crying. She didn't know how to deal with this nine-year-old drunken person and this was in spite, or maybe because of, having often been a nine-year-old drunken person herself. (Burns 265)

As she begins to confront her own madness of self-inflicted violence caused by her childhood traumas, Amelia finally develops the potential to mature from her arrested child-like state.

### **A Haunting Childhood**

In the section labeled Triggers, the traumas of Amelia's childhood become manifest in an alter-ego which Amelia recognizes as "Deprived Depressed." While trying to pick between beans or cereal at the market, Deprived Depressed begins to overwhelm Amelia:

At first Amelia didn't notice anyone prominent and eye-catching, so intent was she on having this fight with herself. When she did notice, she immediately became embarrassed and hoped that, whatever else she'd been doing, she hadn't again been talking out loud. The security guard moved two steps closer and she clocked this with her left eye and was convinced it was because she had a Family Size box of Special K under her arm. She felt ashamed and guilty and was sure he was feeling angry because she was being greedy in buying Family Size all for herself. 'After all,' said Depdep, 'he can see you're giving no thought to the dead people. What about the dead people? Those killed, those murdered? What choice did they ever have?' So, to appease the guard, appease the dead, appease Deprived Depressed and all the gods who might just get jealous of her, Amelia put back the box of cereal and lifted the beans. (Burns 281)

The death, the violence, and the bodily harm that Amelia suffered throughout her childhood has followed her to London, where she fled to escape the trappings of Belfast. However, Amelia begins to suffer from the narration of Deprived Depressed as well as dual realities, in which she is both in Camden Town in London and on Crumlin Road in Belfast. She also begins to encounter ghosts of childhood friends who were killed in the violence of the Troubles. Eventually these projections of her internal war become so severe she is admitted into a mental hospital.

It is in this mental hospital that Amelia is able to confront her childhood history and the traumas that riddle it. Ghosts of her childhood continue to appear asking, "Something on your conscience Amelia Lovett? Something you're not facing up to? Something, for example, you don't want to be reminded of?" (Burns 292).

It is in the mental hospital that Amelia encounters another of Foucault's mirrors of abasement. While observing a nurse in the hospital whom Amelia identifies as "Stick," Amelia notes "she was very young, very sickly, very starving, very killing-herself. Did Amelia, Amelia wondered, ever look as ninth-tenths dead as that?" and the narrator continues, "This was the first time Amelia had pondered such a big question and it was as close as she'd ever come to getting a true image of herself" (Burns 297). It is these glances in the "mirrors" that allow Amelia to finally mature into an adult.

As her condition begins to improve in the hospital, Amelia witnesses two black women fighting. Amelia reflects, "In Ireland [...] it was all about Green and Orange. In England she had thought till now, it was all about Black and White. So What was this Black

and Black thing?” (Burns 305). Amelia is able to recognize the violence between the Protestant and Catholics in Ireland, but it is apparent that she is repressing the traumatic memories of violence done to her by people who were ‘the same’ as her – her brother, Bronaugh, Jean. It is this that Amelia’s ghosts are trying to make her face and to accept. It is only through addressing this that Amelia will be able to leave her childhood behind and become an adult.

### **Moving Forward**

In his book *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel*, Robert Garratt states:

To come to terms with one’s present circumstances, a character in old age must reenter his or her past life, usually a specific moment of violence in his or her youth [...]. Often, in the case of the traumatized mind, the results are disturbing and unclear, suggesting the difficulty of understanding one’s (or a nation’s) past when one has suffered or witnessed a horrific or catastrophic act. (Garratt 4)

In order for Amelia to enter adulthood, she necessarily had to exorcise the haunting ghosts of her past. However, once she is able to accept her traumatic history, Amelia begins to finally move forward.

After recovering in England, Amelia returns to Ireland to visit her childhood friends. Amelia suggests that they go on a daytrip, but the group is shocked by the suggestion: “Wasn’t it bad enough trying to exist in your own house, trying to do a weekend in your very own surroundings, without going off and looking for trouble someplace else?” (Burns

334). It is during this section of the novel, titled “A Peace Process, 1994” that Amelia begins to see the identity that used to consume her, an insular, wary, defensive, traumatized identity that all her childhood friends still embrace.

The group continues to resist even entertaining the idea of a daytrip, for a “fear of the unknown and the letting go of an identity that had gone on far too long” (Burns 339). Contrasting this Belfast identity, Amelia is finally free of the entrapment of this identity. She is finally successful in convincing her friends to take a daytrip. The group decides to drive to Ballycastle, a town at the very north of Northern Ireland. Their encounters with the unfriendly, unwelcoming people begin to highlight the violence of their own Belfast identities. The defensive nature of the locals highlights the defensive and vengeful nature of their own identity. They leave reflecting

What if they’d hadn’t been able to leave? Or what if they hadn’t wanted to leave? What if Rathlin Island had also been their homeland? How could they have lived there and yet constantly not be on the defensive [...]? It was a difficult, scary question and as yet, none of the daytrippers had an answer to it. But it was brave of them to ask it [...]. (Burns 359)

Thus the daytrippers begin to look into the Foucauldian mirror that Amelia has successfully looked into and accepted. While the daytrip doesn’t immediately provide change and progression of the insular identities for the group in Belfast, it does illuminate a peace process, in which these natives of Northern Ireland are beginning to form a new, progressive, hopeful identity.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In the examination of *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark*, and *No Bones*, I have highlighted how the authors use Gothic aspects in order to hold a Foucauldian mirror to society. In all three novels, the children are exposed to repeated violence and trauma. I have drawn the conclusion in all three chapters that the purpose of each respective author is to advocate for Ireland, namely Northern Ireland, to come to terms with the past that haunts them. Irish singer and songwriter Sinéad O'Connor sings in her song "Famine":

See we're like a child that's been battered  
Has to drive itself out of its head because it's frightened  
Still feels all the painful feelings  
But they lose contact with memory  
And this leads to massive self-destruction  
Alcoholism, drug addiction  
All desperate attempts at running  
And in its worst form  
Becomes actual killing  
And if there is ever gonna be healing  
There has to be remembering  
And then grieving  
So that there can be forgiving  
There has to be knowledge and understanding.

It is these lyrics and the necessity of a peace process that brings *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark*, and *No Bones* together.

All three novels center around a child protagonist that grows into an adult by the end of the novel. Francie, the narrator of *The Butcher Boy*, is retelling the story of his childhood as an adult from an asylum; however, although an adult in body, it is apparent through his narration style, that he retains a childlike mentality. Francie was ultimately unable to mature in response to the traumas of his childhood, and since he was unable to reconcile his fantasy with the truth, his identity is perpetually arrested in a childlike state. He represents O'Connor's "worst form" of losing contact with memory – he projects his traumas into external violence by brutally murdering Mrs. Nugent. Ultimately, McCabe gives Francie no chance for the "healing" that O'Connor is hopeful for.

Similarly, the narrator of *Reading in the Dark* retells the story of his childhood as a man grown. Unlike Francie, however, the narrator does mature, although it's apparent that his identity never progresses. Unable to ever address the secrets that existed within his family, the narrator continues the family pattern of silence and secrecy. During the Troubles, which take place at the very end of the novel, the house is searched twice and family members are arrested, questioned and beaten. Just as Katie indicated during her story, some families are devil-haunted, and this one is no exception. Without the forgiving, knowledge, and understanding that O'Connor sings of, future generations will continue to be haunted in the form of the supernatural, myths, and folklore.

In contrast to the narrators of the previous two novels, Amelia, who narrates short portions of *No Bones*, is able to remember, grieve, and forgive, and is thus able to move on and create a progressive identity. Like Francie, Amelia retains a child-like quality into adulthood. She responds to the violence of her childhood by responding exactly as O'Connor describes in her song: massive self-destruction, alcoholism, and drug addiction. However, with the return of the ghosts of dead children from her childhood, Amelia is finally able address her past in order to let go and move away from the traumas that confined her to immaturity. This progression is not limited to Amelia in *No Bones*; other characters, particularly Vincent, give hope to the progression of identity in Northern Ireland.

These three novels are all born from the violence that permeates the history of the birth of Northern Ireland. *The Butcher Boy*, *Reading in the Dark*, and *No Bones* can all be read as a search for a cohesive national identity. All of the novels approach this differently: *The Butcher Boy* serves as a warning, *Reading in the Dark* offers a solution, and *No Bones* presents a picture of hope for the formation of a unified Northern Irish identity that leaves behind the traumas of the past. By encapsulating the repressed traumatic history in insanity and the supernatural, all three novel use Gothic elements to force the children of the novels to face the history they are burdened with or remain haunted without hope of evolution.

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