History as a Nightmare: From Modernist to Metamodernist Irish Drama (James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, Frank McGuinness and Owen McCafferty)

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Abstract

James Joyce in Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties* declared that "As an artist, naturally I attach no importance to the swings and roundabout of political history". Nevertheless, political discourse in fiction has always been a complex and intricate issue. Perspectives regarding the boundaries to which political discourse should be apparent in literature vary widely among various writers. While some writers try to distance themselves from the political turmoil, others use literature as a means to convey the political problems that matter to them deeply. The present paper explores the interface between literature and politics over a span of a century, in modernist, post-modernist and metamodernist Irish drama, in particular the plays of James Joyce, Flan O'Brien, Frank McGuinness and Owen McCafferty (Exiles (1918), Faustus Kelly (1943), Observing the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme (1986) and Quietly (2012). These four English-language writers of Irish descent are all united by the concern of Irish History and Politics. A comparative study of these four authors allows to explore the variance in political discourse. Despite the similarities, the difference in the authors' position is apparent in the manner in which these issues are rendered: While Joyce and O'Brien tend to be ironic and sarcastic, McGuiness and McCafferty give a more personal outlook, which awakens some empathy towards their characters. Moreover, McGuiness and McCafferty are more deeply and openly involved in the history of Ireland.

Keywords: modernist, metamodernist, Irish, drama

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Introduction

Humanity has long been fascinated by the questions of whether political events have an impact on art and whether it is possible to avoid "the nightmare of History" (Joyce, 1986, p. 34) and live a solitary life of ideas in the Ivory Tower in the creative and intellectual pursuit of pure beauty. The question becomes more thought-provoking and intricate during times of significant political upheaval, when society becomes extremely politicized. Whether a writer should be impartial and an objective spectator or clearly state their opinions or political concerns in their works has been a subject for research over years, and the attitude of scholars and the authors towards the extent to which political discourse is permissible in the literature is heterogeneous.

The present paper explores the interface between history, politics and literature over a span of a century, in modernist, post-modernist and metamodernist Irish drama, in particular the plays of James Joyce, Flan O'Brien, Frank McGuinness and Owen McCafferty: *Exiles* (1918), *Faustus Kelly* (1943), *Observing the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (1986) and *Quietly* (2012). These four English-language writers of Irish descent are all united by the concern of Irish History and Politics. Thus, a comparative study of these four authors allows to explore the variance in political discourse.

The importance of political issues and its role in shaping modern and post-modern Irish Literature have been studied in a number of works (Gibson, 1991; Gula, 2002; Kiberd, 2005; Watson, 1987). Mostly, these studies are concerned with the treatment of Irish nationalism, the Irish Revival, WWI in the works of various writer. Moreover, they mostly are centered on James Joyce, thus fail to show what changes the attitude to political issues undergoes from a modernist writer to a post-modernist on. Besides, these studies deal with the accuracy of various political issues within the text, ignoring the importance of the literary text itself. What makes the present paper interesting is that it shows how political discourse has been shaping Irish Drama from Modernism to Meta-Post-Modernism. The paper at the same time stressed how the writer's personal experiences and background define their attitudes, which undoubted are being reflected and incorporated in their literary creations. The paper is divided into two parts: the first one is dealing with James Joyce and Flann O'Brien and the transition from modernism to post-modernism, whilst the second part show how meta post-modernist writers, such as McGuiness and McCafferty make use of political issues in their famous plays. The results of the study are outlined in the conclusion. The methodology used during the research is close reading of the literary text itself. The paper does not go at great strength to give the definitions of those terms used within the paper, such as: modernism, post-modernism, meta post-modernism, political discourse, as there are no additions to the term and they do not need to be explained. Thus, the paper is based on the textual analysis and the existing critical literature in the field.

From Joyce to O'Brien: Fleeing or Remaining in Ireland?

In Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties* James Joyce appearing as a fictional character declares that "As an artist, naturally I attach no importance to the swings and roundabout of political history" (Stoppard, 1975, p. 5). James Joyce, believed that literature should be distant from politics, or as Gabriel Conroy, one of the characters in his short stories (The Dead) puts it, "Literature is above politics" (Joyce, 1968). However, Joyce contradicts this statement within the story by showing how literature is the medium of politics, for it has the power to incite change among its audience. Gabriel himself later uses the power of words in his toast to persuade those gathered together at his aunt's dinner party to mourn the loss of the elder generation's focus on

"qualities of humanity, hospitality, of kindly humor" to the rising generation's devotion to "new ideas and new principles". Through such juxtaposition of ideas, Joyce shows us that literature is not above politics, but rather is the medium through which political ideas are best conveyed. Joyce used his skills in writing to express his disdain for English imperialism, which he saw as the main reason for the paralysis of Ireland. Joyce's belief in the importance of an individual over the society is stressed with his other character—Stephen Dedalus—who in The Portrait declares that:

> I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use - silence, exile, and cunning. (Joyce, 1964, p. 247)

Thus, Stephen embodies Joyce's own struggles with his identity and background and roots, which is why Stephen goes into exile like Joyce himself. In his 1907 lecture "Ireland, Island of Saints and Sages" Joyce argues that:

> When the Irishman is found outside of Ireland in another environment, he very often becomes a respected man. The economic and intellectual conditions that prevail in his own country do not permit the development of individuality. No one who has any self-respect stays in Ireland, but flees afar as though from a country that has undergone the visitation of an angered Jove. (Joyce, 1964, p. 163)

Although for Joyce, physical escape from Ireland equaled to spiritual one, his works suggests the opposite. In Ernest Hemingway's novel The Sun Also Rises, Jake Barnes in Chapter 2 says to Robert Cohn, when Cohn is talking about moving to South America to escape his unhappiness, which Jake dismisses as futile, "Listen, Robert, going to another country doesn't make any difference. I've tried all that. You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There's nothing to that" (Hemingway, 2006, p. 11). Joyce's characters who suffer from unhappiness, and see escape as a way out soon realize, that there is no running away from one's history and roots.

The play Exiles deals with four players and two couples, Richard Rowan, a writer and his "common-law wife" Bertha, and Robert Hand with his cousin and previous lover Beatrice, both old friends of the previous couple:

> The plot is deceptively simple: Richard, a writer, returns to Ireland from Rome with Bertha, the mother of his illegitimate son, Archie. While there, he meets his former lover and correspondent Beatrice Justice and former drinking partner and now successful journalist Robert Hand. Robert was also Beatrice's lover, and here the complications begin. Robert has started to woo Bertha again, and Richard wants to orchestrate an affair between them. The result remains uncertain, as does his motive. Robert publishes an article inspired by the experience, and Richard reads it with scorn and pain. Richard too has been writing, seemingly about Beatrice, which inspires jealousy from Bertha. Richard has arranged the entire scenario, perhaps, in order to give himself something to write about. Failing that, he seems to wish to experiment with testing the limits of Dublin bourgeois morality to emphasize his status as a cultural exile. I will now con-sider what is at stake in treating him as a failed speculator rather than a simple manipulator. (Goodwin, 2014, p. 297)

James Joyce in his only play Exiles, which as Hugh Kerner outlies should not be seen as "an apologia for Richard Rowan" explores the themes of escape through the main character Richard Rowan, who himself is a writer and an alter ego of Joyce. Richard's self-imposed exile is a reflection of Joyce's desire to flee from his past and the influences of his upbringing, particularly the teachings of his mother and the Jesuits. However, this escape is ultimately portrayed as a facade, as Richard grapples with deep-seated doubts and confusions that mirror Joyce's own turmoil. Richard Rowan, just like Joyce seeks freedom from traditional values, as well as societal expectations, as well as his own language—Gaelic, which Ireland had long lost and which bothered Joyce as a writer the most. Once a majority language, which declined in the 19th century. Therefore, Joyce runs away from his roots also from a linguistic point of view. It can be well observed in the following episode:

> All life is a conquest, the victory of human passion over the commandments of cowardice. Will you, Richard? Have you the courage? Even if it shatters to atoms the friendship between us, even it breaks up forever the last illusion in your own life? There was an eternity before we were born: another will come after we are dead. The blinding instant of passion alone-passion, free, unashamed, irresistible- that is the only gate by which we can escape from the misery of what slaves call life. Is not this the language of your own youth that I hear you in this very place where we are sitting now? Have you changed?
>
> RICHARD: (Passes his hand across his brow.) Yes. It is the language of my youth.
>
> (Joyce, 2016, p. 125)

Thus, both Joyce and his characters becomes stuck in the paradox of seeking freedom while being bound by one's heritage, highlighting the futility of his quest for total liberation. As the famous American novelist Michael Crichton in his novel Timeline "If you don't know history, you don't know anything. You are a leaf that has not yet realized that it is part of a tree," and therefore, no matter how hard one tries to detach himself/herself from the country's history and politics it still seems to be an impossible mission. Moreover, the play is not about finding one's self or place, balancing relationships or finding inner peace, it is a strong statement of how the country, background and history haunts one as a nightmare, from which there seems to be no way out.

Andrew Gibson in his book Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in Ulysses states that Exiles should be read as a political allegory in which the radical Catholic Richard Rowan and the conservative Protestant Robert Hand compete for the heart of Bertha as Ireland. Richard's ideas are more progressive than Robert's, and feature a wonderful generosity. But Bertha finally overturns the plans of both men, much as Gretta Conroy and Molly Ivors upset the plans of Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead." Gibson sees Bertha as outside the control of history and pointing to the future (Gibson, 2002, p. 234).

Andrew Gibson also suggests that "The Irish and British-Irish contexts are the principal points of reference in Joyce's works…" (Gibson, 2002, p. 2), which seem undeniable. Even in Dubliners the short story Ivy Day in the Committee Room cannot be read without all the historical and political background behind it, where various political candidates are discussing Irish Politics, Irish Nationalism and Home Rule on Ivy Day, which on its own is a commemoration of Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish Nationalist figure.

Unlike Joyce's Exiles, Flann O'Brien (Published It Under The Name Myles Na Gcopaleen, and used Brian O'Nolan as his other penname) makes a comic parodying of the Faust legend in his play Faustus Kelly, where the chairman of an Urban Council makes a pact with the devil in order to secure advancement, and thus creates the modern Faust, who has nothing to do with the one we had known previously. These newly created Faust bears resemblance with Kvarkvare Tutaberi by Polikarpe Kakabadze (a Georgian modernist playwright). The Irish Faust is only obsessed with career advancement, and like Ivy Day in the Committee Room by James Joyce the characters of the play somewhat get together while discussing world politics and rivals, but even this "unity" is a farce and shows the detachment and loss of communication between the characters. Thus, Flann O'Brien's attitude towards Irish politicians can be traced rather well in the play, and the close analysis shows how O'Brien blamed those in power for the situation in which Ireland had fallen.

History as a Nightmare – From McGuiness to McCafferty

Unlike Joyce and O'Brien Frank McGuiness in Observing the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards Somme tells us the story of WW1 and the Battle of Somme, one of the deadliest battles in all of human history. The main character Kenneth Pyper gives his nostalgic flashback from the viewpoint of the only surviving soldier of the eight. The start of the terrible Battle of the Somme on July 1st, 1916 – is at the same time the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690s. Both of these battles have a significant place in shaping Northern Ireland's unionist consciousness. Born and raised in Donegal Frank McGuinness, these events have played an important role in shaping him a playwright. Born in Buncrana, Co Donegal in 1953, Frank McGuiness had neither experienced the great war or the direct effects of Irish Nationalism, but McGuiness calls his birthplace "a place of contradiction, a place of ambiguities" (Roche & McGuiness, 2010, p. 18) and which he regards has "contributed to making me into a writer" (Roche & McGuiness, 2010, p. 18).

In an interview, while asked about Donegal, the place where he was born and raised, McGuiness replied the following:

> As you say, it's a place of contradiction, a place of ambiguities. It's an isolated place, as well. I think all of those factors contributed to making me into a writer. I am a man who doesn't really know where he stands a lot of the time. These various plays are an attempt to decipher the location of where my head's at. I never found a sense of place an easy thing to grasp and I certainly never found it an easy thing to celebrate. I'm not at ease anywhere. But I have no doubt where I absolutely belong and where I come from, and that is Donegal. And I've no doubt where I will go to, and that is Donegal. It has continued to have a very powerful hold on my imagination and it will always be so, I'm certain of that. I find that there's no escaping it, but then I don't think there's any desire to escape from it. That said, I don't think I could live in it, certainly not at this stage in my life. (Roche & McGuiness, 2010, p. 18)

Frank McGuinness' play shows how the fear that Irish identity would disappear in the trenches of the Great War, resulted into something totally different, and how in the muddy fields of the Somme, a young generation achieved a form of self-definition.

The Battle of the Somme represents a significant milestone in the history of Ulster loyalism. Over six thousand members of the Ulster Division were killed in a single day of combat. Entire streets in Belfast and small villages in Antrim were left without young men, as authorities had

intentionally grouped new recruits together, resulting in units led by officers no higher than the rank of captain. In Ulysses, while Deasy converses with Stephen and pupils play hockey outside, Stephen perceives the playground as a battlefield, suggesting that the pupils are abandoned and consequently doomed. Kenneth Pyper, the main character and sole surviving soldier of the division, reflects at the beginning of the play: “In the end, we were not led, we led ourselves.” The anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne, a date celebrated by the Irish due to William of Orange's decisive victory that secured Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, is a central issue. Notably, the date of the Battle of Boyne, July 1st, coincides with the Battle of the Somme, which resulted in devastating casualties and offers little for the Irish to commemorate. The play examines the significance of these two battles and their impact on unionist consciousness. Additionally, McGuinness addresses the topic of homosexuality, a subject considered controversial at the time. In an interview regarding Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, McGuinness refers to his “personal obsession”, namely, “the warring relationship between England and Ireland”. He elaborates, “It's like a desperately unhappy marriage which is either going to go on being desperately unhappy or something is going to happen and heal it” (Sato, 1996, p. 82). Craig, a Protestant and comrade of Pyper, asserts:

> You're trying too hard, Pyper. It’s too late to tell us what we're fighting for. We know where we are. We know what we’ve to do. And we know where we’re doing it for. We knew before we enlisted. We joined up willingly for that reason. Every one of us, except you. You’ve learned it at long last. But you can't teach us what we already know. You won't save us, you won't save yourself, imagining things. There’s nothing imaginary about this, Kenneth. This is the last battle. We’re going out to die. (McGuiness, 1986, p. 74)

The tension between Protestants and Catholics, Unionist and Nationalists, ethno-nationalist-religious struggle in Northern Ireland known as The Troubles becomes the main theme for Owen McCafferty’s play *Quietly* (2012). Called as “a play that lives up to its title in the best possible way. It is spare, unshowy and it feels utterly truthful” by The Guardian, it tells us the story of Jimmy and Ian, two Belfast men in their 50s, meeting for the first time to talk about the events of one day in 1974, when they were both 16. Owen McCafferty’s play Quietly explores the personal impact of the Troubles’ legacy and examines the significance of truth and reconciliation for individuals trying to move forward while still being affected by the past. In those days, in 1974, one was the perpetrator, and the other the victim. They both tell their story from their own perspective. It's like history is repeating itself, as if nothing changes and it's cyclical? For them “History is a nightmare”, as put by Joyce in Ulysses, from which they are trying to awake.

McCafferty’s main aim was to tell a story about two ordinary people, who struggle due to the past, but whose voices are not heard. As he said in an interview, “All I’ve ever wanted to do is tell stories about people who go unnoticed through life”. Quietly is a play that shows that catharsis or epiphany as Joyce used to call it, can only be achieved not only from emotional self-evaluation, but from listening to one another, and most importantly, from hearing each other out. As Jimmy says near the end of the play “You know nothing do you – some good did come from it – we met – we understand each other – that’s enough” (McCafferty, 2012, p. 86).

While Joyce was trying hard to run away from Irish Consciousness and History, and O’Brien parodied the situation Ireland had fallen into, both McGuiness and McCafferty try to explain the human condition and the inner struggles of being an Irishmen through history and experiences, which cannot and mustn’t be forgotten.

Conclusion

The emphasis on these four English-language writers of Irish descent is due to several factors: First of all, Ireland lost the vital tool necessary for any writer under British dominion: its language, so along with the political controversy the linguistic conflict itself became an important factor. Secondly, the plays *Exiles* (1918) *Faustus Kelly* (1943), *Observing the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (1986) and *Quietly* (2012) all written in different time periods is a great chance to observe the changes that political discourse underwent from modernist through post-modernist and meta-postmodernist eras. Unlike James Joyce and Flann O'Brien, both McGuinness and McCafferty write about true historical events, and while they were not present at that time, the impact that these events had on the country, and hence on their consciousness, is obvious. While both Joyce and O'Brien are more concerned by creating the character's psychological portrait and expressing their own concerns, Frank McGuinness and Owen McCafferty, offer a retrospective of the First World War and past events taking place in Belfast, which has a larger scale influence on the characters' development. Whilst, Joyce and O'Brien are more ironic and use parody as a main tool, McGuiness and McCafferty are more sympathetic and understanding of their characters.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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