UCLouvain
Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres – FIAL

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

Laughing about the Troubles in Northern Irish Pop-Culture

An analysis of the representation of the Troubles in *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls*

Autrice : Elisa Jardon
Promoteur : Professor Paul Arblaster
Année académique 2023-2024
Master (120) en langues et lettres modernes, orientation générale, finalité langues des affaires

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Paul Arblaster, for guiding me on a topic that resonated with my personal interests. His direction allowed me to explore beyond the boundaries of literature and engage with a wide range of my passions.

A special thank you to Léa and Camille for their meticulous proofreading and never-ending support. Their answers to my endless questions and their constant encouragement to stay on track were priceless, especially as they found themselves back in a dissertation era a year after saying farewell to university.

To Clémence, Charlotte, and the many others who offered their support throughout this journey—I would not have made it without you.

Finally, I must thank my parents for their enduring support over these many years. I say goodbye to the UCLouvain after achieving every goal I set for myself. Merci.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments *1*

Introduction *4*

1. Topic and Objectives 4
2. Conceptual Framework 5
3. Relevance 7
4. Structure of this dissertation 8

Chapter I: Historical review of the Troubles in Northern Ireland *10*

1. From the origins to the start of the Troubles (1916-1968/9) 10
2. The Troubles (1968/9-1998) 11
3. The end of the conflict (1998-) 15

Chapter II: Literature review *18*

1. The dramatic representations of the Troubles 18
2. Laughing: A natural reaction 22

Chapter III: Anna Burns's Milkman: Satire to address the personal and collective trauma of the Troubles *27*

1. An overview of *Milkman* 27
2. The personal trauma 29
3. The collective trauma 32
4. The Troubles in *Milkman* 36

Chapter IV: Michelle Gallen's Big Girl Small Town: Identity and gender roles in the post-Troubles *40*

1. An overview of *Big Girl Small Town* 40
2. Community and identity 43
3. A woman's perspective 46
4. The Troubles in *Big Girl Small Town* 49

Chapter V: Lisa McGee's Derry Girls: The normal teenage life during the Troubles *53*

1. An overview of *Derry Girls* 53
2. The point of view of the youth 55
3. A three-generation house 59
4. The Troubles in *Derry Girls* 62

Chapter VI: Reframing the Troubles through humour *65*

1. A certain representation of the Troubles 65
2. Humour and the representation of violence 67
3. *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, *Derry Girls* and the memory of the Troubles 72

Conclusion *75*
Bibliography *78*
Appendix 1 ..... *85*
Appendix 2 ..... *86*
Appendix 3 ..... *88*

Introduction

1. Topic and Objectives

During the second half of the 20th century, Northern Ireland has been, over the course of 30 years, the stage of a sectarian conflict that has profoundly shaped the region's identity. The Troubles, a period marked by violence that claimed over 3,500 lives and left nearly 50,000 injured, have had a lasting impact on the culture produced in the region.[1] Traditionally represented through the lens of its most violent episodes, recent years have witnessed a shift in portrayal, introducing humour and satire into the narrative. This shift is particularly evident in three key works: Anna Burns' *Milkman*,[2] Michelle Gallen's *Big Girl Small Town*,[3] and Lisa McGee's television show *Derry Girls*.[4] These works share multiple thematic and narrative elements, telling the lives of Northern Irish Catholic girls whose life experiences are deeply affected by the Troubles.

These works are set at different points during the conflict. *Milkman* takes place during the early and most violent period and uses satire to underscore the absurdities of the situation in a fictional city while telling the story of a young woman harassed by a paramilitary figure. Set twenty years later, *Derry Girls* employs situational humour to depict the daily lives of teenagers in Derry at the tail end of the conflict, illustrating how, even in violent times, there is always room to laugh at life's absurdities. *Big Girl Small Town*, is contrarily to the others set post-conflict but still deeply influenced by it, uses dark humour to narrate a week in the life of Majella, a young woman whose grandmother was murdered and whose father is among the Disappeared of the Troubles. The varied use of humour to address a common subject, along with the similitudes between the protagonists, supports the choice of these works as primary texts for analysis.

These portrayals challenge the typical genre (dark historical drama or thriller)[5] commonly used to depict the Northern Irish conflict. Departing from the conventional narratives centred on male characters facing decisive moments of the Troubles and often involving the British

---

[1] I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 190-243.
[2] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018.
[3] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020.
[4] L. McGee, *Derry Girls*, United Kingdom, Channel 4, 2018- 2022.
[5] I. Hill, *Op. Cit*.

Army or paramilitary groups,[6] these works focus on young women navigating their daily lives amidst the same conflict. This shift in style and its implications for the portrayal of this historical period form the core objective of this paper. By offering a more nuanced and multifaceted view of a complex situation, this research seeks to highlight the role of popular culture in shaping conversations about the conflict, with the aim of understanding how humour reshapes the representation of the Northern Irish Troubles.

2. Conceptual Framework

To understand the impact of these works on the representation of the Troubles, several concepts must be defined. These include the challenging notion of humour, the idea of representation, as the one of popular culture. This section aims to provide the framework necessary for the research.

The first element is the complex study of humour, particularly in literature and literary studies. The difficulty lies in dissecting humour without diminishing its effect, as humour is often subjective, what one person finds funny may be lost on another.[7] In literature, humour refers to the comical elements found in fiction or narratives and manifests through various techniques such as exaggeration and satire.[8] *Milkman* and *Big Girl Small* Town are filled with dark humour and satire, though these do not classify them strictly as comedy fiction. However, since the humour employed is a deliberate choice by the authors, studying it provides a more comprehensive understanding of these works. Both Anna Burns and Michelle Gallen have addressed their use of humour in interviews, with one noting that humour serves as a coping mechanism,[9] and the other observing that humour can emerge even in the worst situations, thus making it an integral part of these dramatic stories.[10] In contrast, *Derry Girls* belongs to the

---

[6] K. Rockett, L. Gibbons, J. Hill, "Images of Violence" in *Cinema and Ireland*, London, Routledge, 1988, pp.152-160.
[7] A. Nilsen, D. Nilsen, "Literature and Humour" in V. Raskin (ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2008, pp. 243-250.
[8] K.E. Triezenberg, "Humour in Literature" in V. Raskin (ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2008, pp. 523-534.
[9] L. Allardice, "'It's nice to feel I'm solvent. That's a huge gift': Anna Burns on her life-changing Booker win" on *The Guardian* (online), 17 October 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/17/anna-burns-booker-prize-winner-life-changing-interview (accessed 10 August 2024).
[10] T. Beer, "The Long Road to Big Girl Small Town" on Kirkus Reviews, 30 November 2020, https://www.kirkusreviews.com/news-and-features/articles/michelle-gallen-big-girl-small-town-interview/ (accessed 10 August 2024).

sitcom genre, where humour is central to the narrative,[11] representing a different approach from the other works, which extract humour from traumatic elements.

Understanding humour, especially in the context of cultural nuances, is challenging, particularly when crafted by and for a specific audience.[12] When addressing the complex topic of the Troubles, these works demand a deep understanding of the historical context to fully appreciate the comedic elements. The characters play a crucial role in shaping this humour. While Erin, the protagonist of *Derry Girls*, is a typical teenager whose experiences lead to more universally accessible humour, the characters of middle sister and Majella in the novels are socially challenged which results in a more niche and particular form of humour. Because humour often hinges on shared experiences and social dynamics, much of the humour in these works may be difficult for those outside this demographic to fully grasp.[13] To mitigate this, the paper will explain relevant elements and their context to ensure a broader understanding.[14]

The second element to consider is the representation of historical periods or events. Scholars today generally agree that dramatic films can provide a certain understanding of historical topics.[15] Moreover, a group of films based on the same subject can contribute to a deeper and more nuanced representation of the same events, offering broader insight into history.[16] This is due to the idea that multiple perspectives are key to highlighting different aspects of what is considered the same event. However, it is important to acknowledge that to condense a complex historical moment into a film (or, presumably, a book or TV series) the past must be altered to some extent.[17] These films then offer their public a (re)constructed view of history, shaped by the popular culture surrounding it.

Adapting this theory to the representation of the Troubles involves several considerations. Applying the same logic to other fictional works addressing historical moments, this paper seeks to explore how the new perspectives introduced by the selected primary texts contribute to an even more nuanced representation of the Troubles. By moving away from the narratives

---

[11] "Sitcom" on The Britannica Dictionary (online), https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/sitcom (accessed 10 August 2024).
[12] A. Nilsen, D. Nilsen, "Literature and Humour" in V. Raskin (ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2008, pp. 243-250.
[13] M. Parekh, *Humor Perception in Men and Women: Effect of Joke Type and Gender of Joke Target*, College Station, Texas A&M University, 1999.
[14] This paragraph, along with several others, has been modified by ChatGPT to enhance clarity and flow. The original text is available for comparison in the first appendix.
[15] R. A. Rosenstone, *History on Film Film on History*, 3rd ed, New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 151-172.
[16] *Ibid*.
[17] *Ibid*.

centred on fighting groups, the objective is to examine what insights can be gained by focusing on other elements of a well-known and often-represented subject. It is also crucial to note that most previous analyses have questioned representations made by the genre of historical drama, while the selected works do not belong to this genre. Comparing the depiction of the Troubles in historical drama with those seen in *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls* will help understand how new genres can bring fresh perspectives.

Bringing all these elements together leads to the consideration of popular culture, defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as "music, TV, cinema, books, etc. that are popular and enjoyed by ordinary people, rather than experts or very educated people".[18] The term of pop-culture made sense as all the selected works fall into this category as they depict everyday life for ordinary people. This means that the representations they create of the Troubles, whether complementing or opposing previous portrayals, can find a wide audience and thus have a significant impact on the collective memory of the conflict.

Building on the exploration of humour and representation through the lens of popular culture, this research aims to investigate how the selected works (*Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls*) contribute to a nuanced representation of the Troubles that goes beyond the one created by traditional historical dramas. By examining how dark humour and satire function in these works, particularly through characters who embody the complexities of everyday life during this period, the study aims to reveal the unique perspectives these narratives offer. The overarching question, therefore, is: How do these pop-culture works utilise humour to provide new insights into the representation of the Troubles?

3. Relevance

The arrival of *Derry Girls* on Netflix after its Channel 4 broadcast in 2018 brought the subject of the Troubles back into public discourse. That same year, *Milkman* won the Booker Prize, reflecting a growing interest in new perspectives on a conflict that shaped the UK and Europe at the end of the 20th century. The notion of a civil war, close in both time and space and so closely linked to religion, seems almost anachronistic, as though it belongs to a distant past rather than a reality with ongoing consequences. The study of culture's role in addressing

[18] "Pop Culture" on Cambridge Dictionary (online), https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/pop-culture (accessed 10 August 2024).

and processing the long-term effects of such a conflict is therefore timely and relevant, particularly in an era when similar conflicts are producing similar or even worse consequences.

Thus, the choice of *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls* is justified by the fresh insights and perspectives they offer on a well-known situation. Primarily, they address the conflict outside the conventional norms of historical drama, providing a new perspective on trauma and its impact on humour. Additionally, by addressing the collective memory of dramatic events, this paper seeks to understand the significance of these new viewpoints on the Troubles as presented by these works. Positioned at the intersection of literature and history, this topic has an important role in discussions about the memory of a conflict and the potential role of humour in shaping another narrative of it.

4. Structure of this dissertation

The dissertation begins with a brief review of the historical context of the Troubles, providing a foundation for understanding the complex history of the conflict. The second chapter offers a literature review on the representation of the Troubles and the use of humour as a method for addressing traumatic events. The objective is to establish a solid foundation for the analyses presented in the subsequent chapters. By analysing previous representations of the Troubles, this dissertation will better contextualise the differences in the selected works. The discussion of humour in representation will demonstrate its educational role and its potential to shift the focus of history in popular culture.

The next three chapters will each explore the representation of the Troubles and their consequences in *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls*. Focusing on different aspects in each work, the aim is not to analyse how each work brings a new perspective on the subject, but rather to construct a composite representation across the three works that can be compared with previous portrayals. *Milkman* will offer a perspective on trauma, as seen in both personal lives and collective experiences, through dark humour. *Big Girl Small Town* will examine the social and psychological consequences of the conflict by focusing on the absence of the dead and the missing. Lastly, *Derry Girls* will analyse how the younger generation approaches the end of the conflict with humour and hope for the future.

Finally, the conclusion will summarise the primary insights gained from the analyses. It will argue that the representation of the Troubles in the primary works constitutes a major shift in the representation of the conflict. It will discuss how these works, through their use of dark

humour and satire, offer new perspectives on a well-known historical event, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and multifaceted representation of the Troubles in popular culture while also impacting the memory of the conflict.

Chapter I: Historical review of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

This chapter aims to provide a broad historical backdrop for the analysis of the books and series featured in following chapters. While these works are fictional, they are situated within the context of the Northern Ireland Troubles or their immediate aftermath, a nuanced understanding of this period is then essential for interpreting their themes and narratives. To achieve this, the chapter will delve into the roots of the conflict, significant historical events, and the eventual resolution, focusing particularly on the socio-political landscape during the 1970s, period of the setting of *Milkman,*[19] and then during the 1990s, as depicted in *Big Girl Small Town* and *Derry Girls*.[20] [21] By examining everyday life during these periods, this chapter aims to contextualise the fictional portrayals and themes explored in the subsequent analysis, highlighting the impact of historical events on personal and communal experiences portrayed in literature and television.

1. From the origins to the start of the Troubles (1916-1968/9)

The origins of the Troubles in Northern Ireland can be traced back to the 17th century, rooted in King James I's policy of settling English and colonists Scottish Protestant in the predominantly Catholic Gaelic-speaking regions of Ulster.[22] This implantation of Protestant settlers, decided to unify the regions, created immediate cultural, linguistic, and religious tensions with the native Catholic population. Over time, these communities coexisted in Northern Ireland but remained largely segregated, even in urban areas where Catholics and Protestants lived in distinct neighbourhoods.[23]

While the Troubles are often simplified as a conflict between Catholics and Protestants, it fundamentally comes from deeper historical and political dynamics involving English colonialism on the Irish island. This complex reality has led to multiple interpretations and impacts, leading to the names of “Protestants” to refer to the descendants of English and Scottish settlers while the native Irish population is named "Catholics" in this context.[24]

---

[19] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018.
[20] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020.
[21] L. McGee, *Derry Girls*, United Kingdom, Channel 4, 2018- 2022.
[22] R. Gillespie, “After the Flight: The Plantation of Ulster” in *History Ireland*, vol. 14, n°4, 2007, pp.40-45.
[23] M. Mulholland, *Northern Ireland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp.4-29.
[24] B. O’Leary, “The Shackles of the State & Hereditary Animosities: Colonialism in the Interpretation of Irish History” in *Field Day Review*, vol. 10, 2014, pp.148-185.

Tensions escalated over centuries, fuelled by aspirations for independence among the Irish population. In 1916, during Easter week, militant Irish nationalists seized key locations in Dublin and proclaimed Irish independence, which was rapidly suppressed by the British Army with leaders executed and participants imprisoned. This event, known as the Easter Rising, created support for the Irish independence movement.[25] In 1920, the British government passed a legislation dividing Ireland into two self-governing entities: Northern Ireland, consisting of predominantly Protestant counties, and Southern Ireland with an overwhelming majority of Catholics.[26] The subsequent Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 established the Irish Free State but allowed Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, leading to a distinct political entity dominated by Protestant unionists who installed discriminatory laws against the nationalist Catholic minority, particularly in employment and other sectors.[27]

These discriminatory policies intensified tensions, culminating in the eruption of violence in the 1960s. Civil rights movements emerged among Catholics in Northern Ireland to challenge systemic discrimination. A pivotal moment occurred in 1968 when a peaceful march organised by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in Derry was violently suppressed by the Royal Ulster Constabulary using batons and water cannons. The following year, the Battle of the Bogside in Derry saw Catholics barricading their neighbourhoods against police intervention, prompting the deployment of the British Army. This marked the beginning of what would become known as the Troubles, a prolonged period of conflict and violence that deeply scarred Northern Ireland for decades to come.[28]

2. The Troubles (1968/9-1998)

a. General overview

The Troubles in Northern Ireland began during a surge of violence that soon spiralled, as both Catholics aligned with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Protestants associated with the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) engaged in bombings, shootings, and assassinations. This period of intense political violence was exacerbated in 1971 with the introduction of the

[25] M. Buckley, "Irish Easter Rising of 1916" in *Social Science*, vol. 31, n°1, Jan. 1956, pp.49-55.
[26] J.D. Fair, "The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921: Unionist Aspects of the Peace" in *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 12, n°1, 1972, pp. 132-149.
[27] G. Gudgin, "Discrimination in Housing and Employment under the Stormont Administration" in P.J. Roche (ed.), B. Bardon (ed.) *The Northern Ireland Question: Nationalism, unionism and partition*, London, Routledge, 1999, pp. 97-121.
[28] R. Munck, "The Making of the Troubles in Northern Ireland" in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 27, n°2, April 1992, pp. 211-229.

internment without trial by the Northern Ireland government, supported by the British government. This controversial measure allowed for the imprisonment without judicial process of individuals suspected of being part of paramilitary groups, leading to mass arrests that disproportionately targeted republicans, predominantly Catholics. This injustice fuelled further violence, culminating in 1972, the deadliest year of the conflict with over 500 deaths, half of them civilians. The erection of barricades in cities like Derry and Belfast further the divisions, cutting any social ties between Catholic and Protestant communities.[29]

One of the most infamous events of the Troubles occurred in 1972 on Bloody Sunday, when thirteen unarmed civilians were fatally shot by the British Army during a peaceful protest organised by the NICRA in Derry's Bogside.[30] This tragic incident, alongside the indiscriminate use of internment, reinforced support among the Catholic and republican population for the IRA, intensifying the cycle of violence. Subsequently, the suspension of Northern Ireland's government led to a direct rule from the British parliament, adding to the political instability and deep-seated divisions within the region.[31]

Throughout the remainder of the 1970s, Northern Ireland experienced continued violence with numerous bombings and killings, both within the region and extending into the Republic of Ireland and Britain. Efforts at peace, such as the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, aimed to establish a power-sharing government and strengthen cooperation with the Republic of Ireland. However, this faltered due to lack of support from Unionists, resulting in a return to a direct rule from London. By the decade's end, both communities called for an end to paramilitary violence, reflecting a weariness with the enduring conflict.[32]

The 1980s witnessed ongoing violence punctuated by political developments that paved the way for eventual peace. Sinn Féin, the political arm of the IRA, gained electoral recognition, creating republican visibility and garnering international attention. Additionally, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 granted the Republic of Ireland a greater role in Northern

---

[29] M. O'Doherty, *The Year of Chaos. Northern Ireland on the Brink of Civil War, 1971-1972*, London, Atlantic Books, 2021, pp. 270-279.
[30] G. Dawson, "Trauma, Place and the Politics of Memory: Bloody Sunday, Derry, 1972-2004" in *History Workshop Journal*, n°59, Spring 2005, pp.151-178.
[31] R.J. Spjut, "Internment and Detention without Trial in Northern Ireland 1971-1975: Ministerial Policy and Practice" in *The Modern Law Review*, vol. 49, n°6, November 1986, pp. 712-740.
[32] D. McKitten, D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The story of the conflict in Northern Ireland*, London, Penguin, 2012, pp.107-142.

Ireland's affairs, signalling a shift towards political solutions. By the decade's close, it became increasingly evident that a purely military resolution was unattainable.[33]

The final decade of the Troubles saw a transition towards political negotiations amid sporadic violence, including tragic events like the 1998 Omagh Bombing, where dissident IRA members killed 29 people and injured 200.[34] Ceasefires in 1994 and 1997, initially by the IRA and then followed by loyalist groups, paved the way for conversations leading to the landmark Good Friday Agreement. Signed in 1998, this agreement established a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, ushering in a new era of cooperation and reconciliation.[35]

In the three decades of conflict, the Troubles claimed over 3,500 lives, half of them civilians, while 30,000 were injured. Beyond its human toll, the violence precipitated profound socio-economic challenges including mass unemployment, housing shortages, and homelessness. These hardships prompted tens of thousands to emigrate, seeking refuge from the pervasive violence and societal strains. Ultimately, the Troubles left an indelible mark on Northern Ireland, reshaping its demographics and socio-political landscape while catalysing a concerted international effort towards peace and stability.[36]

b. Everyday life in the 70s

From the beginning of the Troubles, the main element that changed the lives of Northern Irish people was the military presence. People living in urban areas had to quickly get used to military checkpoints and patrols; certain areas were also under curfews, and some "no-go" areas were created in rebellion against this, falling under paramilitary control. The overall presence of the army was paired with house searches, making it hard for people to feel secure, even inside their own homes.[37] This, as mentioned earlier, was in parallel with the regular bombings and shootings in public spaces.

---

[33] J. Tonge, *Northern Ireland: Conflict and Change,* London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 127-139.
[34] M. Melaugh, "The Omagh Bomb – Main Events" on *Cain* (web service), Ulster University, 14 May 2024, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/omagh/events.htm (accessed on 25 June 2024).
[35] S. Wolff, "The Road to Peace? The Good Friday Agreement and the Conflict in Northern Ireland" in *World Affairs*, vol.163, n°4, Spring 2001, pp. 163-180.
[36] J. Wallenfeldt, "the Troubles" on *Britannica*, Britannica, 7 June 2024, https://www.britannica.com/event/The-Troubles-Northern-Ireland-history (accessed on 25 June 2024).
[37] J.B. Garrett, "Ten Years of British Troops in Northern Ireland" in *International Security*, vol.4, n°3, Winter 1979-80, pp. 80-104.

Moreover, the Troubles deepened segregation in the country. Catholics and Protestants had separate neighbourhoods, schools, and sometimes jobs, and attended different social events. Physical proof of this separation exists and can be seen in the barricades that were erected in major cities to prevent inter-communal violence.[38]

The political situation also had a significant economic impact, causing business disruptions that quickly escalated into a lack of activity, creating unemployment and thus poverty. As negative as this was, it also allowed for community organisation: churches and local organisations played the role of intermediaries between those who could help and those needing help.[39] Despite the turmoil, the country did not stop living. On the contrary, music and sports remained very important at the time, giving people a chance to express themselves and maintain a sense of normalcy.[40]

The last important element of everyday life in Northern Ireland during the Troubles was the political environment created by the early conflict. The civil rights movement was at its peak, often holding protests and marches that, even though they sought to peacefully demand more civil rights for Catholics, frequently ended in violent confrontations. This, combined with the segregation of the population, led to a deep radicalisation: positions became more extreme on both sides as they no longer interacted with each other.[41]

c. Everyday life from the mid-90s

By the end of the Troubles, everyday life had changed significantly. Although violence from paramilitary groups and the army was still present, it had become much less frequent. The nineties were also marked by ceasefires, creating moments of peace in the country and its surroundings. These ceasefires, in turn, helped reduce the military presence and saw the first police reforms aimed at creating a force more representative of the two communities in the country.[42] Additionally, efforts were made to reconcile and integrate the communities. The

---

[38] P. Doherty, M.A. Poole, "Ethnic Residential Segregation in Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1971-1991" in *Geographical Review*, vol.87, n°4, October 1997, pp. 520-536.
[39] S. Campbell, "'We are the people': Protestant Identity and Collective Action in Northern Ireland, 1968-1985" in D.D. Fazio (ed.), *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2017, pp. 129-146.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] P. Doherty, M.A. Poole, *Op. Cit.*
[42] S. White, *Policing Reforms in the Aftermath of Conflict: Justice and Security Sector Reform Lessons From Northern Ireland for Peacebuilding and Countering Violent Extremism - A Practitioner's Perspective*, Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2018.

youth of the country were seen as key to changing the situation, and programs of cooperation were implemented to break down historical divisions.[43]

The movement towards peace also allowed for a gradual economic recovery, with investments and economic initiatives creating jobs.[44] These changes in society created a sense of cautious optimism among the population, despite the history of setbacks. Nonetheless, community support remained steady throughout the 30 years of conflict, and the sense of solidarity and resilience it fostered were key reasons people continued to look forward. This period also saw a cultural renaissance, with a lot of works focusing on the Troubles and the ongoing peace process.[45] Numerous cultural events were held outside the communities, providing spaces for people to meet and interact regardless of their religious or political backgrounds.

By the end of the conflict, the Troubles and people's perceptions of them had completely changed. From a period of separation and radicalisation based on opposing beliefs, there emerged a general (especially among the youth) belief in reconciliation and peace as the only solutions for the country.[46] Political negotiation within a stable government became the norm, leading to peace in politics, between communities, and in people's minds.

3. The end of the conflict (1998-)

a. The Good Friday Agreement

The end of the Troubles is usually placed on 10 April 1998, the date when the Good Friday Agreement was signed by the British and Irish governments as well as the political parties of the republicans and loyalists. The creation of this text was possible thanks to the diplomatic efforts of the involved parties and the support of the United State. The discussions started in 1996 and focused mainly on the status of Northern Ireland, on how the power could be shared among the two groups and how to demilitarise the country.[47]

---

[43] S. McEvoy, "Communities and Peace: Catholic Youth in Northern Ireland" in *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.37, n°1, January 2000, pp.85-103.
[44] R. Breen, "Class Inequality and Social Mobility in Northern Ireland, 1973 to 1996" in *American Sociological Review*, vol.65, n°3, June 2000, pp.392-406.
[45] I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 1-6.
[46] T. White, "Generational Change and Redefining Identities: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland" in *Peace Research*, vol.45, n°2, 2013, pp. 95-117.
[47] P. McDonagh, "The Good Friday Agreement: 1998", *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol.31, n°1, Summer 2004, pp.12-22.

The final text created the Northern Ireland Assembly, made of members elected by the proportional representation, and guaranteed equal rights (and human rights and protections) to Catholics/nationalists and Protestants/unionists. Besides, the power sharing committee was created to make sure both were represented in the government. It also agreed on the principle of consent, saying that all change to the constitution can only be made with the support of the majority of the population. In addition, the Northern Ireland police was reformed; to face all the problems of accountability and transparency but also of representation, Catholics could finally enter the police service. The question of the paramilitary prisoners was negotiated as well, allowing the release of those belonging to groups that observed the ceasefire.[48]

After it was signed, the agreement was subjected to a referendum that was held on May 22 to see if the general population agreed with the terms of the agreement. The results were a 74% vote in favour of it in Northen Ireland. The text was submitted to a referendum in the Republic of Ireland as well, as their constitution named the whole island as their territory, but the agreement gives the choice to Northern Irish to choose the country they are attached to.[49]

b. Everyday life after the Troubles

The end of the Troubles marked a time of peace and significantly reduced violence in the country. The ceasefires held, and after the Good Friday Agreement, a real demilitarisation process could begin. The British army's presence diminished, with checkpoints and watchtowers being dismantled, making it easier to move past the conflict of the last 30 years. A new police force was established to be more focused and representative of the population, while the justice system emphasised restoration, helping to address the remnants of the Troubles.[50]

International and domestic investments aimed at moving the country away from conflict also benefited the population by improving infrastructure and creating businesses that alleviated unemployment and poverty. Schools and community groups continued working on

[48] P. McDonagh, "The Good Friday Agreement: 1998", *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol.31, n°1, Summer 2004, pp.12-22.
[49] *Ibid*.
[50] L. Burke, *Lessons from Northern Ireland: Policing, Polarization and Moving Forward*, German Marshall Fund of the United State, 2020.

reconciliation, fostering connections between Catholics and Protestants.[51] The cultural sector also played a crucial role as a meeting place for communities and a space where people could express their trauma.

Despite the positive efforts and the widespread desire for peace and reconciliation, many remained cautious about the situation. It took time for the population to trust the peace process, and the older generation still feared setbacks and a return of violence.[52] It also took time for new political institutions to be established, leading to a sense of instability.

[51] M. Power "Providing a Prophetic Voice? Churches and Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, 1968-2005" in M. Power, *Building Peace in Northern Ireland*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2011, pp.53-72.
[52] E. Cairns, J. Darby, "The Conflict in Northern Ireland: Cause, consequences, and controls" in *American* Psychologist, vol.53, n°7, 1998, pp. 754-760.

Chapter II: Literature review

The objective of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive background of two main aspects required to understand this dissertation: first, how the Troubles have been represented in culture, focusing on books and films of fiction, and second, how humour is often used to address traumatic moments. For this, we have a first look at references about the films and books made about the Troubles to gain a general idea of the representation given to them in the culture when genres like drama and/or thriller are used.

Afterward, the aim will be to understand the logic behind the use of humour after traumatic moments in history. By analysing its use as a coping mechanism and way to provide a better understanding of complex events, we will explore how humour can be a tool of social cohesion and resilience, which are key elements for achieving peace after such conflicts. A brief review of these elements in comedic fictions created after the American Civil Rights movement will help illustrate their utility.

1. The dramatic representations of the Troubles

According to the Wikipedia page "Category: Works about the Troubles (Northern Ireland)",[53] 16 books and 83 films have been made about the Northern Ireland Troubles (fiction or not). This list is not perfect or complete as it is and misses works like *Big Girl Small Town* since it is not happening during the Troubles (though the story is surrounded by it), or even *Factory Girls* for no obvious reason. It does though show that, through the years, many artists have taken up the subject to give their point of view on that moment of history.[54] From that list, many of the writers, directors or producers are from Northern Ireland or have a link to it, which makes sense; there was an expectation from the public to hear about the Troubles from Northern Irish artists.[55] This list also shows that the fictional pieces tend to be of the dramatic genres and to tell the stories of soldiers from both military and paramilitary groups, or to focus on the stories of the victims of the Troubles. The goal here is to understand the reason of those dramatic representations and the general image they gave of this historic period.

---

[53] Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.), 'Category: Works about The Troubles (Northern Ireland)', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Works_about_The_Troubles_(Northern_Ireland) (accessed 30 June 2024).
[54] M. Gallen, *Factory Girls*, London, John Murray, 2022.
[55] I. Hill, « Staging the Troubles » in *Theatre Ireland*, vol.31, Summer 1993, pp. 42-46

a. A tone with its purpose

Creating art has many goals, one of the main ones being to allow those looking at it to understand a broader picture of what it represents and of the world. In the beginning of the Northern Irish Troubles, and especially during their most violent parts, the daily life conditions did not allow for art creation, or at least never to the scale of a film. Dangerous spaces and constant fear made finding a space to shoot difficult, but moreover, made it impossible to tell a story opening on a broader reflection on the events or the people involved.[56] With the eighties and a decrease in violence, art creation got back on the agenda, but bigger productions had to wait for the nineties and early two-thousands for ceasefires and international investments to be made. At that time, the peace process had started but as explained earlier, the Northern Irish people had a hard time trusting it would last and was still traumatised by the previous thirty years. As a result, the art industry took its time to be an element of the political arena and had to wait a long time to be able to tell its own story to a large and international public.[57]

The choice of the dramatic voices during and right after a traumatic event of that scale makes sense. The population was seeing or saw their friends and family die, victims of bombings or killings; the barricades were still present, and the country needed to be rebuilt. It seemed impossible to tell a story happening in Northern Ireland without addressing the Troubles. Art also needed to take its role as a place where people could deal with and heal from the past.[58] Authors and productors were conscious of their role in the creation of a national identity, the work they made thus always represented a certain point of view on the Troubles.[59]

Thus, the dramatic representation of the Troubles made and makes sense. When working on the question of trauma, Freud already talked about how the past shapes the present but especially on how traumas are ongoing conflict that can never be resolved.[60] Historical trauma, like psychological one, are so important that they demand acknowledgement but are thus difficult to integrate in a narrative, often asking to be remembered in a more intensive way or forgotten in order to move forward.[61] As explained, the situation during and after the Troubles made it impossible for Northern Irish artists not to acknowledge the events, but

---

[56] I. Hill, « Staging the Troubles » in *Theatre Ireland*, vol.31, Summer 1993, pp. 42-46
[57] I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 1-6.
[58] M. Richtarik, *Getting to Good Friday*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 18-33.
[59] H. O'Brien, « Review » in *Cinéaste*, vol. 25, n°4, 2000, pp. 54-57.
[60] M.S. Roth, *Trauma*, *Representation and Historical Consciousness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 114-123.
[61] *Ibid*.

talking about such traumatic episodes always comes with the risk of banalising the events.[62] To face the challenge, the choice of addressing them through the lens of soldiers or direct victims of the conflict is the easiest and most logical choice to find the right balance in addressing it without making it seem banal and unimportant.[63]

b. The typical Troubles representation

The dramatic tone was the typical voice used to address the trauma that people were living or had lived through, for the reasons expressed previously, multiple authors have also noted that these movies often share recurring settings and narratives. Even before the end of the conflict, in 1988, it was observed that the typical film about the Troubles was:

> Combining tragic narration with expressionist stylistics (indebted to both French poetic realism and film noir), the film may be seen to have cultivated a particular view of the 'troubles' based upon metaphysics (the pessimistic workings of fate) rather than politics, a conflict between public and private spheres and a tension between different forms of male 'hero'.[64]

And this did not stop with the conflict, in the following years, many films still followed that narrative. To this, another recurring element can be added, the idea of a fight between good and bad men that end up showing that they can all do wrongful acts in the name of the cause they are defending.[65]

The fictional books written about the Troubles at the same period also have recurring themes. They are mostly 'Troubles thrillers' meaning melodramas that use voyeuristic violence to address the plot. These books are also filled with stock characters, more often than not male characters, such as the conscientious gunman or the reluctant agent. The idea being that their personal history is at the centre of the plot and impacted by the Troubles.[66]

Furthermore, the most important and interesting element found in the drama and thriller fictions made about the Troubles, is this focus on the personal drama: the sectarian division

---

[62] M.S. Roth, *Trauma*, *Representation and Historical Consciousness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 114-123.
[63] G. Smyth, "The Novel and the North" in *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction*, London, Pluto Press, 1997, pp. 113-117.
[64] K. Rockett, L. Gibbons, J. Hill, "Images of Violence" in *Cinema and Ireland*, London, Routledge, 1988, pp.152-160.
[65] I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 190-243.
[66] *Ibid*.

being the excuse to talk about the characters' individual desires. If this method is used to give a sense of universality to the stories (going broader than this particular conflict), it unfortunately takes away from the social criticism and creates a shortcut to the idea that the situation has little to no impact on the fate of the characters.[67]

Thus, the typical Northern Irish Troubles-addressing piece of work focuses on a male character, that is an actor of the conflict and used to offer a consensual, liberal and humanist comment on events, this while often happening during and picturing a precise dramatic historical moment of the said conflict.

c. Not just drama: Humour

If the stories from the end of the Troubles to now mostly use a dramatic voice to address a dramatic moment, showing the importance of the conflict happening at the time, it does not mean that comedies (or at least humour) have not been made before the 2010s. Around the end of the conflict (as it is delicate to laugh about an ongoing matter), multiple books and films (some books being adapted into films) that are comedies or have comedic elements have been made using the Troubles in their plots while never making them the central focus. Though these works have different plots and focus on various aspects of life during the conflict, there are numerous similarities between them and the drama/thriller works of the same period.

These books and movies rely on the same stock characters and usual situations. Even when treated with humour and with the goal of making people laugh, they show how difficult it can be to break free from the conventions of the "about/during the Troubles" genre. Thus, the moral ambiguity and the split between the public and private spheres of life are still present no matter the story being told, as there is no way around it while avoiding directly addressing the causes and consequences of the conflict. A film like *An Everlasting Piece* is a perfect example, telling the story of two Irish men, one Catholic and one Protestant, and their wig-selling business in Belfast during the 80s.[68] The humour relies on two stock characters and their private sphere and how they navigate the conflict and their morals to sell wigs to both camps, including the IRA. While the film tries to build reconciliation via its plot, it is clear that at the time,

[67] I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 190-243.
[68] I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp.210-218.

treating such subjects made it difficult to render it appropriate to laugh about sectarianism or paramilitary groups.[69]

2. Laughing: A natural reaction

The analysis of the literature on the representation of the Troubles in cinema and literature has shown an overrepresentation of a dramatic tone. While this choice of genre makes sense when discussing how to portray a conflict, it is also evident that a happier and more joyful tone has been used previously and could provide a new perspective on the events. The objective now is to analyse the literature around the use of humour when dealing with and especially telling traumatic events. Humour is often used as a coping mechanism when facing difficult moments, but it also serves other purposes such as creating social cohesion and helping to build resilience in the aftermath.

As the first marches organised in 1966 were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, a quick look at their humorous representations in similar contexts to those that will be analysed further will help to understand the value of focusing on telling a dramatic story while making jokes about it.

Before delving deeper into the subject of humour, it is important to have a clear understanding of what is considered humour when discussing it as an aesthetic choice in creating a piece of art. Based on the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, humour can be defined as a multifaceted phenomenon found in art and everyday life. It is the capacity to elicit amusement through incongruity, superiority, and relief from tension, often manifesting as spontaneous wit or carefully constructed jokes. Humour is thus used to achieve multiple goals.[70]

a. Laughing to cope and understand

When discussing the importance of humour in traumatic situations, the most frequent element to justify its use is the way it can be used to deal successfully with these experiences. The most complicated moments in history force people who live through them to deal with a range of new emotions and situations that are often overwhelming for the brain. Humour then

[69] I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp.210-218.
[70] T. Cohen, "Humour" in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetic*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 425-431.

becomes an efficient way to gain distance and manage what is happening.[71] Indeed, there is no need to wait for humour to appear; even during genocides, humour is found as a mean to escape reality.[72] Later, when remembering the events, humour provides a way to navigate the trauma that occurred. This is possible because humour allows for new perspectives on a situation, offering distance from negative emotions. Moreover, for those making the jokes, humour provides a sense of control over situations that people often have no command over, and for the audience to feel more at ease with the situation.[73] In the end, coping through humour is an efficient way to gain relief from a complicated moment.

The questions of being too close in time from a conflict to make jokes or wondering if laughing cheapens the memory could be asked, but most would agree that it does not. Comedy plays a role in the array of tools that can help in dealing with traumatic moments and is also an efficient way to remember them. Humour highlights contradictions, ironies, and complexities, bringing nuance to the situation. It is important to acknowledge that fiction can never fully portray the exact horror of what happened; as comedies do not pretend to do so, they open the door to a distancing from the events, allowing for a more nuanced approach.[74] This method can then bring about a greater understanding of what happened.[75]

Comedy as the most accessible genre, can facilitate the general public's comprehension of a situation. Humour is an easy entry point to highlight all the contradictory aspects of a situation, serving as a tool to expose and explicitly express these elements before guiding the general public on how to deal with them. This alternation between seriousness and absurdity brings relatability and engagement with what is portrayed. This deeper understanding, enabled by a humorous treatment, can be important or even necessary when recounting a traumatic moment in history. By serving as a lens to analyse and criticise, humour sheds new light that can help those who lived through these events to cope with them.[76]

---

[71] U. Ümit Üngör, V.A. Verkerke, "Funny as Hell: The function of humour during and after genocide" in *European Journal of Humour Research*, vol. 3, n°2/3, August 2015, pp. 80-101.
[72] *Ibid*.
[73] *Ibid.*
[74] R. Mihaughany, *Who's Laughing Now? Comedy as Coping Mechanism and Critique in Paul Beatty's* The Sellout, Virginia, University of Mary Washington, 2014.
[75] U. Ümit Üngör, V.A. Verkerke, *Op. cit*.
[76] D. Slucki, "Too soon? The case for Holocaust humour" on *The Conversation* [online], 1 October 2012, https://theconversation.com/too-soon-the-case-for-holocaust-humour-9894 (accessed 10 July 2024).

b. Laughing to move on

When dealing with trauma and traumatic moments, the necessity to cope and understand comes with the goal of eventually being able to move on. It seems obvious that humour can aid in this process as a tool for moving forward. The main reason is that humour can facilitate the healing process by allowing people to communicate in a light-hearted manner, creating a space where they feel validated in their trauma.[77] Moreover, being able to laugh is a first step toward closure and acceptance, as it signifies letting go of negative emotions. Humour can thus be a key element in the healing process of victims, creating a healthy distance between them and their trauma. Additionally, this extends beyond those directly affected by the events; depicting historical trauma using humour can help foster social acceptance and break the ice between the affected individuals and the general population, encouraging a new outlook on what happened.[78]

Here, humour goes beyond mere jokes or representations; it serves as a social element that helps people bond over shared experiences. Being able to laugh alleviates tension, which can then help create a support network and empathy among people. This is especially important in the aftermath of a conflict that divided people within the same population. Laughing at the same joke or humorous situation, even when coming from opposing camps, can be a first step toward rebuilding connections by highlighting their shared experiences of the events.[79] Bonding also gives individuals a sense of control, empowering them and creating a virtuous circle for moving forward.

c. Laughing about the racism in the USA

From coping to moving on, the power and necessity of humour in the culture, especially after traumatic moments, has been proven. When talking about the use of humour in the representation of those, it is important to go a step further and wonder how it is used to shape the story being told. The goal of this dissertation will be to understand how humour is used in our primary sources to shape a vision of the Troubles that differ from the one painted in the drama or thriller books and film made previously. Only a very limited number of publications have been made about the humour in the representation of the Northern Irish conflict; to

---

[77] U. Ümit Üngör, V.A. Verkerke, "Funny as Hell: The function of humour during and after genocide" in *European Journal of Humour Research*, vol. 3, n°2/3, August 2015, pp. 80-101.
[78] M. Admana Furqon As'Ari, *Racism as Reflected Through Entropic Comedy in Blakkklansman movie (a Structuralism Approach)*, Surakarta, Raden Mas Said, 2023.
[79] A. Ziv, "The Social Function of Humor in Interpersonal Relationships" in *Society*, vol. 47, pp. 11-18.

understand how the vision could be different, a quick comparison with the case of the representation of the Civil Rights movement in the US will here be presented. This moment of history has been chosen as it inspired the movement that led to the Troubles, these are then close in date and in causes, allowing a good parallel.[80]

When representing the Civil Rights movement, drama and thrillers also seem to be the 'go-to' genre as, not unlike the Troubles, this is a complicated moment of history. These representations then focus on providing a realistic depiction of intense historical events; the goal here is to show the struggle, the violence and the oppression.[81] For that, they focus on an important historical figure of the movement, like with the film *Malcolm X*,[82] or on key moment, like in *Selma* (telling the story of the march in Selma, Alabama in 1965).[83] Showing these has the goal to teach the audience the historical importance of the events depicted and their consequences.[84]

There are, nonetheless, multiple examples of comedies addressing the subject of the movement for the Civil Rights. These have the same will to educate their audience, but for that they focus mostly on the use of satire allowing to highlight the absurdity of the racist ideologies.[85] The humour is then rarely set in a specific historical moment, neither does it try to be historically correct. The focus is on the everyday life and humour-driven situations created via exaggerate and absurd moments that provoke thoughts and reflections in the audience, like in the TV-show *Dear White People* following the life of students in a mostly black university.[86] The objective is shifting from teaching about history to questioning the norms.[87]

This comparison shows the importance of also creating comedies when portraying an important moment of history. The focus they make on everyday life and people is the key for a deeper understanding via a new perspective on the events. When addressing the Civil Rights movement, humour has been the key to have people question their beliefs, involving themselves in the history told to them. The goal of this dissertation is to do a similar analysis

---

[80] R. Munck, "The Making of the Troubles in Northern Ireland." in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 27, n°2, April 1992, pp. 211-229.
[81] R. Mihaughany, *Who's Laughing Now? Comedy as Coping Mechanism and Critique in Paul Beatty's* The Sellout, Virginia, University of Mary Washington, 2014.
[82] S. Lee, *Malcolm X*, Largo International, 1992.
[83] A. DuVernay, *Selma*, 20th Century Fox, 2014.
[84] M.S. Roth, *Trauma*, *Representation and Historical Consciousness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 114-123.
[85] R. Mihaughany, *Op. Cit*.
[86] J. Siemien, *Dear White People*, United State, Netflix, 2017-2021.
[87] L.E. Mintz, "Humour and Popular Culture" in V. Raskin, *The Primer of Humour Research*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2008, pp. 281-201.

based on the representation of the Troubles to see what story is told when shifting away from representing the violent and melodramatic story of a male character as his life is impacted by the Troubles.

Chapter III: Anna Burns's *Milkman*[88]: Satire to address the personal and collective trauma of the Troubles

1. An overview of *Milkman*

a. Literary reviews of *Milkman*

Milkman by the Northern Irish author Anna Burns is a historical phycological fiction novel that was published in 2018 and that was praised for its narration that creates a complex atmosphere, the humour it uses and its portrayal of the sociopolitics of the early Troubles (the book and its author have received prices for it among those the Booker Prize in 2018). Similar to the two other primary works that will be analysed in this dissertation, its author was born and raised in Northen Ireland, Belfast in this case, in a catholic family, which has an impact on the different stories that will be analysed in this paper. Moreover, Burns wrote *Milkman* based on her experience on growing in Belfast but did not name the city so that it could represent any society existing in oppressive conditions.[89]

b. Plot

Milkman is the story of an unnamed 18-year-old girl, known (among other names) as 'the middle sister', in an unnamed mainly Catholic city of Northern Ireland in the 70s, at the peak of the violence of the Troubles. There, a paramilitary officer named Milkman starts to stalk her and offers her car rides leading to the rumour that she is having an affair with this married man. This creates tension with her mother, sisters and the rest of the community, but also with her boyfriend (or maybe-boyfriend as he is referred to in the book) creating more issues in their complicated relationship.

Later, Milkman's stalking becomes more intense and when a girl who tries to poison the middle sister is found murdered, rumours worsen as it is assumed that he did it as revenge

[88] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018.
[89] A. McKinty, "Milkman by Anna Burns review: Impressive, wordy and often funny" in *The Irish Times* (online), 12 May 2018, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/milkman-review-impressive-wordy-and-often-funny-1.3484139 (accessed on 25 June 2024).

for his mistress. In the meantime, the middle sister also finds out that her maybe boyfriend is actually in a homosexual relationship with his best friend.

The book ends as the middle sister finally resigns and accepts a car ride from Milkman and a date for the next day. However, he gets killed the morning of the date by the British army, and, as he is no longer bothering the middle sister, her life goes back to normal or at least to the situation it was back before the stalking.

c. Satire and humour analysis

To tell what sounds as a dramatic story, Anna Burns decided to use a satiric tone to convey humour in her work. That tone is the most commonly used when addressing dramatic events in literature or in the cinema and can sometimes be difficult to apprehend, especially when used all over a piece of work instead of in very clearly and obvious moments.[90] Thus, before any analysis, it seems important to settle on a clear definition of it. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, in literature, satire is "a humorous way of criticising people or ideas to show that they have faults or are wrong, or a piece of writing or a play that uses this style".[91] The encyclopaedia *Britannica* is more precise, explaining that the vices are created by "ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature or other methods." It also highlights explicitly how satire is "chiefly literary and dramatic".[92]

In *Milkman*, Anna Burns uses satire to reveal and criticise the contradictions and absurdities within the community and how the Troubles affect it. The middle sister, as the protagonist speaking in the first person, uses a satiric tone as she observes and analyses the social and political dynamics of her time. It is made obvious by the exaggeration in the behaviour and beliefs of the characters and their lives, here centred around gossips and suspicion. It is also used to present the rigid norms of a society focused on pervasive surveillance, this while entertaining the reader and allowing it to reflect on the deeper implications of living under constant surveillance.

---

[90] R. Kishor Singh, "Humour, Irony and Satire in Literature" in *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 3, n°4, pp.65-72.
[91] "Satire" in *Cambridge Dictionary* (online), https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/satire (accessed 24 June 2024).
[92] R.C. Elliott, "Satire" in *Britannica* (online), https://www.britannica.com/art/satire (accessed 24 June 2024).

All throughout the book, humour and the everyday life during the Troubles are constant, but analysing every aspect of these would require a statistical analysis and a work of its own, it would also serve another goal than the one of this dissertation. As the objective here is to question the impact of humour on the Troubles representation, this chapter (and the following ones) will only focus on some key moments and extracts of the book, chosen as they are good examples of the general tone of the story, using humour to address the Troubles or their consequences and thus, useful to analyse how these elements interact.

As explained in the summary, *Milkman* is a personal story impacted by a global situation. The life of the middle sister is impacted by the rumours which are the results of a constant surveillance by the community, coming from the impact of the Troubles on the general population. Milkman (the character) being part of a paramilitary group only aggravates the situation. As the objective of this chapter, and of this dissertation, is to discuss the representation of the Troubles, this analysis will go from micro, to meso to macro, from the life of the middle sister to her community and finally discussing explicitly the Troubles while showing the links between all. The chosen extracts have been analysed focusing on how they convey satirical humour (using ridicule, irony, or other techniques) and analysing the goal that tone serves, what image it creates. Focusing on the personal and collective trauma of the Troubles, this chapter will end on a general comment on their representations in *Milkman*.

As this analysis will be based on the humorous representation of the trauma, a definition is required. Trauma will be understood here as "a disordered psychic or behavioural state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury".[93] Here, the trauma is caused by the Troubles but also by their consequences; as they affected the entire population and impacted their lives for several decades, the stress extended beyond the fear of a bomb exploding; everyday life was stressful enough to cause trauma.

2. The personal trauma

a. Self-policing

From the beginning of the story, it is obvious that the protagonist, the middle sister, is hyperaware of her own behaviour, leaving nothing to chance. Her story is one of a girl who

[93] J.R. Kurtz, "Introduction" in *Trauma and Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 1-17.

navigates the oppressive social environment surrounding her. Thus, knowing that each and every one of her actions could have consequences on her life, she self-monitors her behaviour to be as normal and conforming as possible. Even before meeting Milkman and before any rumours about them, she makes some remarks showing a contrast between the way she behaves (meaning as she thinks she should) and the way she really feels. When talking about her first brother-in-law and the way he behaved with her while she was twelve, she says back-to-back that she was not scared of him physically but that his predatory nature pushed her into frozenness. These elements being together lack coherence and seem to imply that she is trying to reassure herself. In the same manner, at numerous moments of the story, she opposed the way she says she is feeling and acting and the reality behind it, making it obvious for the reader that her way of being is her expected behaviour, the one for the people watching her.

When she meets Milkman and after he made clear that he knew all about her, she shows that same opposition again, not knowing how to refuse the lift while being nice and acting as she should. As this scene ends, it seems that nothing important is happening, but her oldest sister saw her and warns her of the rumours that this could create. From this discussion, it is made obvious that the self-policing of the middle sister is justified: the community is observing her, but she keeps on justifying it by convicting herself that it is on her own accord. This can be observed at the beginning of the second chapter as she changes her habits to avoid Milkman and thus, rumours about them:

> The morning after that run session, and earlier than usual, and without telling myself why, I walked out of my way to the other side of the district to catch a different bus into town. Also I got that same bus home. For the first time ever I did not do my reading-while-walking. I did not do my walking. Again I did not tell myself why. Another thing was I missed my next run session. Had to, in case he reappeared in the parks & reservoirs.[94]

As in previous dissociated moments, the humour is found in a detached explanation and a matter-of-fact narration that contrast with the situation behind it. The satire is in the balance between what seem to be an exaggerated reaction facing the situation, while actually the reaction in proportionated and it is the surveillance that is in the exaggeration or that seems exaggerated. She admits that she is policing herself by changing her habits so that she won't

[94] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 11.

see Milkman but still tries to convince herself that she is just acting that way "without telling [herself] why".

The objective of these scenes is to balance humour and criticism, the humour of the absurdity to her self-contradicting to criticise the way she is forced to act due to the constant surveillance. This also highlights the absurdity of everyday life during the Troubles and the constant fear that the people live through. The humour in the detached tone and ridicule situation shows how humour can be used as a coping mechanism for the trauma of what happened or what is currently happening.

b. Politics in the everyday life

The way the middle sister behaves is deeply impacted by the socio-political situation during the Northen Ireland Troubles. If this may not be obvious in the beginning of the book, political aspects seem to appear as the scene go by, especially in her relation to the people around her. Seemingly, her satiric dry tone and self-policing are the direct consequences of the conflict on her life. Though never explicitly found in the book, multiple moments attest of it, especially those addressing her relationship with the maybe-boyfriend.

> What I meant were my living options, for maybe-boyfriend had asked recently if I wanted to move in with him. [...] My second objection was the possible destruction that moving in might pose to my and maybe-boyfriend's already delicate, easily to be shattered maybe-relationship. And the third objection was, how could I move in, given the state of this place?[95]

Here, talking about her reasons not to move in with him, two of her reasons create a parallel with the political situation of the country (the first reason being she would not want to leave her mother with her siblings while never taking care of them, referring more to her place in the community). As the story is happening in the early 70s, thus at the beginning of a conflict that broke the "delicate and easily to be shattered maybe-relationship" between Catholics and Protestants. Also, her third reason not to move with her maybe-boyfriend can be seen as more in reference to the political situation of the moment; is the "place" being referred to his appartement or Northern Ireland?

---

[95] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 37.

The humour and especially the satire is mainly fount in the ridicule terms used to refer to her boyfriend, their relation and the irony to be as focus on the idea and the consequences of moving with him and breaking their stability, when their relationship is as fragile as the politics of the country. This is highlighted by her detached voice and dry commentary she makes of the situation; the middle sister seems stuck having to decide for herself while seeming detached from her life.

From this, and from other scenes in the book addressing the Troubles to make parallels with her relation to others, it is easy to see the link between her behaviour and the socio-politic environment around her. Starting from an encounter that only indirectly references the conflict in a note that Milkman has a personal car when most do not as they are scared to see it explode, the book and the story it tells make the reader understands the fear and paranoiac atmosphere of the time. Then, as we see the middle sister in her relationships with others, it is made obvious that the political situation is impacting more than those who took weapons, it is present even in the more private aspects of life. When being asked to move in with him, it seems impossible for her to see it any other way than through the lens of the conflict. This shows the psychic and behavioural consequences of the Troubles on the narrator, her personal trauma.

3. The collective trauma

a. Surveillance

As previously explained, the middle sister keeps on justifying and policing her own behaviour as she is scared of the consequences of her actions. As extreme as it sounds, it is justified by the actions of the community towards her. For example, as she is going home after her first encounter with Milkman (barely talking to him and refusing his ride), she meets her eldest sister who already knows about them talking and warns her that if it keeps on going, people will talk and start rumours. Doing so her sister is the first of many to talk and speculate about a supposed affair and she does it based on nothing. Plus, as the encounter with Milkman and the discussion with the sister directly follow each other, it is made obvious that nothing can be hidden there and stated than there is an “intense nosiness about everybody had always

existed in the area".[96] The speed of which this happens show that things have evolved, the nosiness that has always existed as turn into surveillance.

> These were knife-edge times, primal times, with everybody suspicious of everybody. [...] It was that people were quick to point fingers, to judge, to add on even in peaceful times, so it would be hard to fathom fingers not getting pointed and words not being added, also being judged in these turbulent times, resulting too, not in having your feelings hurt upon discovering others were talking about you, as in having individuals in balaclavas and Halloween masks, guns at the ready, turning up in the middle of the night at your door.[97]

As in the previous extracts, the satiric tone is present, here it is found in the exaggeration used to express the real fear of the middle sister and of the population at that time. The idea that during the conflict a simple meaningless conversation could bring paramilitary troops to your door seems ridicule but is coherent when looking at it through the eyes of a girl whose life is getting ruined because barely talking to a man who stalks her stated rumours that she was having an affair with him and ruined her life. The satirical tone even goes further: by saying "not in having your feelings hurt upon discovering others were talking about you" the narrator shows a shift in the situation, as surveilling is the new normal, the victims of rumours are to blame for their reaction.

This extract as other moments in the book show that the middle sister's self-policing is not her being paranoid but her building a defence mechanism facing the community actions towards individual. By constantly having an eye on the others, it is adding to the collective trauma, creating a vicious circle where people act suspicious and watch each other, this adds to the paranoia and then makes people even more suspicious. It can be observed in this extract:

> On the other hand, being up on, having awareness, clocking everything – both of rumour and of actuality – didn't prevent things from happening or allow for intervention on, or reversal of things that had already happened. Knowledge didn't guarantee power, safety or relief and often for some it meant the opposite of power, safety and relief – leaving no outlet for dispersal either, of all the heightened stimuli that had been built by being up on in the first place.[98]

---

[96] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 5.
[97] *Op. Cit*., p. 28.
[98] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 65.

It shows the irony of the situation, how surveillance only creating a false sense of security. People are surveilling each other as they want to avoid the fate of the middle sister or any random miscommunication that could lead up to armed people at their door; but this does not work. Worse, it creates a paranoia that only make people watch out more and keep on seeing further into things that do not deserve it. This ironic circle going even further as the trauma lived by the population is creating a defence mechanism that ends up creating more trauma for that same population.

b. Conformity

To avoid that situation, another important defence mechanism found, conformity, as people are trying to be as accepted by the other and invisible as possible. This is even more true in a population that is split in two by a violent conflict, making it impossible not to be on one side or the other and being part of a group means following its norms. *Milkman* happens in an unnamed city, seemingly inspired by Belfast and thus largely Catholic but where the two groups live close, seeing each other every day without ever mixing. In the book, the middle sister often refers to this situation when talking about those "over the road" or explicitly making a difference between "our" and "their" something. The use of these pronouns shows the importance of the groups that people then need to conform to. Everything is codified in the society portrayed, belonging to a group or the other:

> The names not allowed were not allowed for the reason they were too much of the country 'over the water', with it no matter that some of those names hadn't originated in that country but instead had been appropriated and put to use by the people of that land. The banned names were understood to have become infused with the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict, enjoinments and resisted impositions as laid down long ago in this country by that country, with the original nationality of the name now not in the running at all.[99]

As ridicule as this passage seem, it shows an accurate representation of the measures that were took in the name of nationalistic purity. The description is here exaggerated by the hyperbole of saying the names are "infused with the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict", but this does not make the reality of the action it describes less of a fact. It highlights the

[99] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 23.

community dynamics expressing how from the creation of one's identity they are made part of a group that they won't be able to leave. Nonetheless, by saying that the origin of the name does not matter, it is also implied that the narrator criticise this ridiculous situation; the names only being "appropriate and put to use" to reinforce the limits in place.

Being part of a community then also means following its rule and adhering to its symbols. As the Troubles where about a group feeling British and another Irish, an important symbol for each community, was the flag they relate to. In this passage, the maybe-boyfriend has a piece of the British flag on his car that his neighbour saw, as the neighbour comes to ask him about it, the narrator explains that:

> [The neighbour]'d homed in on that flag issue, the flags-and-emblems issue, instinctive and emotional because flags were invented to be instinctive and emotional – often pathologically, narcissistically emotional – and he meant that flag of the country from 'over the water' which was also the same flag of the community from 'over the road'. [...] To come from this side of the road – our side – and to bring that flag in then, was divisive, indicative too, of a traitorous kowtowing and a betrayal most monstrous over which even informers and those who marry-out would be held in higher esteem.[100]

This scene plays once again on the fine line between the reality of the time and an exaggeration of it. Saying that flags where invented to be "instinctive and emotional" sounds like a fact, so that only the use of the adjective "monstrous" seems to serve the goal of creating satire. This passage mocks the irrational elements following the deep belonging to a group, where a simple flag on a car being worthy enough to have a conversation with your neighbour and his friends.

This moment in the story is also used to go on a tangent explaining how deep the division goes: TV programs, food and drinks, shops, etc.[101] The goal of these longs paragraphs is to highlight how there was no element of the people's lives that was not impacted by the conflict, even their choice of butter. As often in the book, this plays on the exaggeration, but it conveys the idea that nothing could be left to the hazard. As a result, it was normal for people to watch each other out (as not acting like the one from one community meant acting against it) and for people to watch themselves and adapt their behaviour.

This analysis of the behaviour of the community the middle sister is part of shows that her personal trauma echoes with the collective trauma of that group. In Northern Ireland at the

---

[100] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 26.
[101] The whole passage can be found in appendix n°2, pp. 86-87.

beginning of the Troubles it seemed impossible not to live in a way dictated by the community you were part of. This creates a social pressure, where everyone is watching out making sure the others are following, but also analysing their own behaviour as people knew they were being watched. The book never explicitly links the self-policing and the surveilling with the Troubles, but the links are made obvious in the more ironic moments, among which those addressing the need to conform to the group. The conflict goes beyond the politics or violent actions, it stained all parts of people's lives.

4. The Troubles in *Milkman*

a. Everyone's story

When writing *Milkman*, Anna Burns made the choice not to name any people or places.

> You're one of the who's-it girls, aren't you? So-and-so was your father, wasn't he? Your brothers, thingy, thingy, thingy and thingy, used to play in the hurley team, didn't they? Hop in. I'll give you a lift.[102]

Here Milkman talks to the middle sister, he knows much information about her, like the names of her brothers here redacted to "thingy", but he still never names her directly, the same way he is only ever referred to as "Milkman". From this choice, it can easily be deduced that the goal of this is to create universality, Northern Ireland is not the only country that saw violent confrontations among its population. Nonetheless, the semi explicit reference to the Northern Irish conflict forces to analyse further into this refusal to give any names. The objective is probably to make of the middle sister every young girl that was living there at the time. The events being precise enough to relate to it without being too precise that a victim of the Troubles (directly or indirectly) could not identify with her. Thus, *Milkman* can be seen as the story of the everyday life during the Troubles.

Yet, if there are the numerous references to the conflict, they never make the plot switch to being a story about it. When addressing it directly, the narrator uses the terms "political problems" but make it seem like an outside situation, far from her. She even refuses to address it, saying it is something that "[...] I, for one, didn't like to get into.". This is used to create a distance between her and the Troubles, as if it were possible to dissociate her life for it, or at

[102] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p.61: "I said, 'but about the political problems. Have you heard about the political problems?' 'What political problems?' he said. 'Are you referring to the sorrows, the losses, the troubles, the sadnesses?'"

least trying to. Yet, as analysed here, the Troubles have a deep impact on her life and on the lives of those around her, among which self-policing, surveilling and conforming.

b. *Milkman* and the Troubles

If the narrator never seems to admit or see that the Troubles have an impact on her life, she acknowledges the fact the Milkman has. He is omnipresent, as if his presence is felt even when he is not there, he surveils her, intimidates and controls her, creating fear and paranoia. The presence Milkman has on the middle sister's life is the one the Troubles have, allowing the reader to see Milkman as a metaphor. `

After the first encounter between the characters that seemed to happen by chance, Milkman starts to appear over and over again in the middle sister's life, and if the meetings always feel unplanned, there are too many of those not to acknowledge he is stalking her:

> He'd infiltrated my psyche and now it was clear those first three meetings had never been the accidental encounters I'd tried to pretend to myself they had been. And now he was appearing, stopping me, standing in the way of me or falling into step beside me, all in the manner of some ordinary meeting up.[103]

From then on, the middle sister sees him everywhere as an omnipresence in her life. As she starts to fear meeting him any time she leaves her house, it is made obvious that he has infiltered her whole life but also that he is controlling her. As he keeps on 'running into' her, more and more insistent about driving her home, his stalking shifts into intimidation, making it harder and harder for her to tell him no. Similar to the surveillance among the population that was creating a vicious circle, the middle sister analysing her life to avoid him only gives him more power on her psyche, making her more paranoid and so, more worried to meet him. As the pages keeps on going, he is taking over her life.

Later, when she finally climbs in his car, there is no tumult, and she realises that she never really had a choice about going in and accepting a ride. Her fate was inevitable, there was no escaping him no matter how long she tried to. From there, he takes over her life, telling her that they will go on a date later and ordering her to wear a dress for it. She does not talk, accepts or refuses as she realises, she "was Milkman's *fait accompli* all along".[104]

---

[103] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p.166.
[104] *Op. Cit*. p. 299.

Shortly after, one of her sisters comes to inform her that Milkman was killed. For that, she states that she is not happy, only relieved as her life can go back to normal and she won't have to fear seeing him again. Yet, her sister seems uneased with her lack of reaction, which is a clear sign of the trauma she lived through. As his presence was omnipresent and made her paranoiac, she cannot manage to get rid of this feelings. And later, as a man put a gun to her face, she is factual explaining how she feels nothing facing the idea of dying. These are all signs of trauma, and as she lived with it for so long, it takes time for her to be able to move away from it and to "feel safe again to run on [her] own".[105]

Once again, the similarities between Milkman and the Troubles can be observed, avoiding him and resisting his impact of her life was a lost game form the start. Like the conflict, his omnipresence made it impossible for her to avoid him. Then, the trauma he made her feel was too important, as after his death it seems impossible to move on even as life goes back to normal, which was how the Northern Irish people felt at the end of the conflict, things just going back to the way there were before it.

Nonetheless, there are changes in the community after his death and there are also interesting to note. The pressure seems to lessen, allowing people to gain back some freedom and privacy, they also start to question their allegiance, opening the door to communication with those who had different beliefs. As these show the possibility of a change after the death of Milkman, they also create a clear echo with the socio-political situation in the country at the end of the Troubles. If the switch for "intense noisiness" to surveillance was, in the book, seen as due to the Milkman stalking situation, they make echo with the same phenomenon that happens due to the Troubles; and as the conflict ended, people in Northern Ireland had to start living as a unique community at the time and move away from the paranoia cause by the conflict, showing again another parallel.

c. Conclusion

To end this chapter, it is now important to address the portrayal of the Troubles in *Milkman.* The story is never about soldiers in the army or in paramilitaries groups, it is about the everyday life of the normal people living in Northern Ireland at the time. As Milkman, the character, can be seen as the direct representation of the Troubles in people's life, the main

[105] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 343.

characteristics of them are that they created an oppressive atmosphere with huge psychological impact, even for those that were not fighting in them. They involved the whole population by the atmosphere of surveillance they nourished, building fear and restricting personal freedom.

These elements are here as obvious due to the satirical tone of the whole book that highlights and puts focus on the absurdities and contradiction of the time. Using lots of exaggerations and colourful examples, Anna Burns via the narration of the middle sister also allows a social critique of the time and of the conformity of it, exposing the irony of many situations that were usual at the beginning of the conflict.

It is finally to tell the impact of the conflict on the daily life that the humour was the most important. As analysed here, it is always using satirical elements that the reality of the implications of the Troubles is felt. Mocking the symbols (like the flag), the traditions of each community (the choice of butter) while using diminishing names like “the other side” for them, or even using amusing exaggerations to address the paranoia and vigilance (the fear of seeing people with Halloween masks at your door), Burns uses humour to create a complex image of the conflict, allowing the reader to have a deeper understanding of it.

Chapter IV: Michelle Gallen's *Big Girl Small Town*[106]: Identity and gender roles in the post-Troubles

Milkman was happening in the early 70s, at the beginning of the Troubles; for this second primary sources, we will focus on a story happening after the end of the Troubles or at least after the *Good Friday Agreement* was signed. Even if not happening during it, *Big Girl Small Town* is deeply impacted by the conflict, showing how, even if a large majority of the population agreed it needed to end, a referendum was not enough to make 30 years of constant fear and separation disappear.

In terms of the Troubles chronology, putting *Big Girl Small Town* before *Derry Girls* will force us to go back in time with the next chapter. This choice is justified by the type of document and humour found in the different sources; *Milkman* and *Big Girl Small Town* are both books using humour in its satiric and dark humour capacities. Thus, the specific case of the series *Derry Girls* and its comedy aspects made more sense after the two others.

1. An overview of *Big Girl Small Town*

a. Literature review

There is, to this day no scientific literature about *Big Girl Small Town*, moreover, the general reviews of the book are rarely analysing the content of it. Fortunately, Michelle Gallen, its author, did explain her reasons to write that story in this specific way. Born in the mid 70s, she grew up during the Troubles in a small town close to the controversial border between the Republic of Ireland and the UK, it was known for the highest unemployment rate in the developed world and for the being the most bomb small town in the world. Due to this particular situation, she explains that she grew up in such way that can only be described as being a "Child of the Troubles".

At the end of the Troubles like many she did not have trust in the ceasefires, and she noted how important sectarianism and violence were still present in the country, only weak enough to never make the news. This made her want to address the long-lasting effects of the conflict. Her objective of making her protagonist a women was to shift the focus to something different from the books and films about the Troubles that she sax during her childhood, but

[106] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020.

also to explore "explore how the Troubles—and "peace"—were experienced by girls and women, and to reveal their humour, grief, and resilience".[107]

The book is set in the early 2000s, and Michelle Gallen was roughly the same age as her main character at the time, furthermore they both are neuroatypical. Thus, if the story is fictional, the observations in the book are probably those made by the author at that time, making *Big Girl Small Town* an accurate representation of the everyday life in the years following the official end of the Troubles.

b. Plot

Set around 5 years after the official end of the Troubles and happening over a week, *Big Girl Small Town* is the story of Majella, a 20-something women working in a chip shop in the fictional village of Aghybogey. Living in a deep routine, she sees her life change when her Granny is murdered.

c. Dark humour and Majella's point of view

As in *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town* uses satire in its narration, especially when describing the life surrounding the narrator. Nonetheless, *Big Girl Small Town* use a slightly different humour, describing life in darker way, thus using a darker humour. Defined in the *Britannica* as being a "writing that juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life" black humour is often used to highlight how people are only the victim of their fate.[108] This theme is rather central in this work, Majella is living in a town split in two by religious beliefs, were 90% of Catholics are unemployed, she also lost her father who "disappeared" during the Troubles and is living with a depressed and alcoholic mother. She did not choose this life for herself and had/has little opportunity to ran away from it.

---

[107] M. Gallen, "Child of the Troubles" in *Book Club Kit*, via michellegallen.com, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f79b0ce8523ab39c875bd10/t/5fc7f512bc205d67881cabc0/1606939941337/gallen_bgst_bookclubkit_final.pdf (accessed 28 July 2024).
[108] J.E. Lubering, "Dark Humour" in *Britannica* (online), https://www.britannica.com/topic/black-humor (accessed 27 June 2024).

Majella's dark humour and satire when narrating her life are impacted by her neurodivergence. As an undiagnosed autistic person, her analysis of the socio-political situation and of the resulting social relationships is due to her feeling as a perpetual outsider of the group. Her issues to understand social norms and her need for stability create in her a disinterest for the events that makes it easy for her to look into the oddities and hypocrisies of her small town.[109]

As for *Milkman*, the humorous atmosphere and moments of the book will be the starting point of the analysis to understand the representation of the Troubles. As they are officially over in *Big Girl Small Town*, the focus will be centred on the consequences of a 30-year conflict and what can be understood from the reality of it. Starting with the community dynamic, which is ultra-present in a village where Catholics and Protestants live on either side of a bridge, we will then focus on her women's perspective. As the three main characters in the chosen primary works are women and because, in the previous works about the Troubles, the focus was (always) on men, it is central to look into it. To finish, we will look at what is directly said of the Troubles in *Big Girl Small Town*.

Another important element to note is that the two books talk about the same situation at different point in times, thus, they share a number of similar themes. As the objective of this dissertation is to get a broader general image of the Troubles, we will focus on different element for this second analysis rather than going over the similarities. Nonetheless, the personal trauma (found in the self-policing and the politics in every aspects of life) and the collective trauma (in the surveilling and the conformity of the group) are still present in *Big Girl Small Town*, showing how the situation barely changed in the 30-year gap since *Milkman*. Some of these elements will be related to those in this chapter; however, for a clearer parallel of the themes, passages addressing the same elements in each of the primary sources can be found in the third appendix.

---

[109] M. Gallen, "Child of the Troubles" in *Book Club Kit*, via michellegallen.com, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f79b0ce8523ab39c875bd10/t/5fc7f512bc205d67881cabc0/1606939941337/gallen_bgst_bookclubkit_final.pdf (accessed 28 July 2024).

2. Community and identity

a. Religion and sectarian division

If by the end of the conflict, a majority of the population voted to put an end to it and for peace resolution, it did not put an end to the religious division that were existing in Northern Ireland. The population still worked in two extremely separated groups, Catholics on one side, Protestants in another. In *Big Girl Small Town*, Majella calls them by their Irish nicknames, Taigs and Prods. She is a Taig, working in Taig chip shop where the clients are Taigs because on the other side of the town, there is another chip shop owned by Prods where the clients are Prods.

> It was the town's only practice, so the Prods from the bottom of the town and the Taigs from the top had to wait together. The Taigs kept to the left, the Prods to the right. [...] It was one of those unwritten rules that everyone just seemed to know, like which pub to drink in, which streets to avoid walking down, which pharmacy to get your pills from, what religion to marry.[110]

This scene comes in direct echo with the one from *Milkman* analysing the conformity. As the years passed, the conformity became less important, people could be different inside of each group, but it was still part of one's identity to be Catholic or Protestant (no matter the religious beliefs, depending on what side one was born into). Even in Aghybogey, which is described as a village, the two groups do not mix, except at the doctor's practice, described here in the first sentence. The satire in this passage is the same used in *Milkman*, playing on what could be as an exaggeration to represent the reality of a time. Even in the early 2000s and after the situation had been settled politically, the absurd social divisions are still holding. The reference to the religion to marry into also echoes to the moment in *Milkman* when the middle sister says that bringing a flag on the other side is even more monstruous than "those who marry out".[111] This shows how the situation barely changed since the beginning, or the end, if the Troubles.

Moreover, if there no longer are bombs and the years have passed, the conflict is still found in the little things, like the bags where they put the chips in the chip shop:

> The bags were a new thing. Cunter had provided only the cheapest plain white plastic bags until their Prod rivals on the other side of the bridge started using branded bags.[112]

---

[110] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, p. 38.
[111] A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 26.
[112] M. Gallen, *Op. Cit.*, p. 75.

The new bags have no marketing values as Catholics and Protestants do not shop in the same places anyway. They only changed the bags so the other side is no better, this is an ego fight.

This unfortunately does not mean that the violence is over. It is, in the book, mainly present when talking about the past but the description of the everyday life still gives the impression a situation on the fence that could go back to the armed conflict easily. Majella talks multiple time about brothers on her side of the bridge, the Daly Boys, who are seen as dangerous and always down to fight with Protestants (but it would make sense for Protestant to also have people ready to start a fight with Catholics):

> From time to time she'd even seen the odd Prod sneak in during daylight hours to order one of their superior giant battered sausages and some onion rings. Prods never risked a visit after dark, however, in case the Daly boys were feeling frisky.[113]

This scene, as humorous as it is around the idea that someone would risk a beat up for good chips, shows how people are still not mixing mainly for safety reasons. Even the most mundane activity can be dangerous, and this will be proven as later in the book the same Daly boys start a fight against one British man and multiple Protestants. *Big Girl Small Town* clearly shows how years after the start and the end of the Troubles, the religious separation is still very present of in the country, how the peace is fragile, and how violence is still central to the life.

After this long separation, another observation needs to be made, the two groups do not know each other. After more than 30 years without acknowledging the presence of the other, never meeting in any shop or street, these people living in the same town and sharing mostly the same lifestyle, see each other as being very different. For example, Majella explains how she can recognise a Prods from "their necks and ears" which makes little sense.[114] However, she is also capable of understanding how her problem with the Protestants only relies on "a list of stereotypes and clichés".[115] Showing how they highlight their differences due the ignorance, when then both share the will to put an end to this situation. To fight against these clichés and reunite the Northen Irish population, many initiatives were created to 'build bridges' between Catholics and Protestants. These are also addressed in the book, as discussed in the next point.

---

[113] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, p. 76.
[114] *Op. Cit.,* p. 98.
[115] *Op. Cit.,* p. 171.

b. Building bridges

"Building bridges" has been the name of many of the initiatives created in Northern Ireland to promote new relations between the two communities. In school, via sport promotion or any other ideas, these were central in the period around the end of the Troubles as they were seen as the solution to building a long-lasting peace in the region.[116] It is probably not by chance that Aghybogey is a village split in two by the water, where each community lives on their side. This fictional village is the physical representation of the Troubles in the country, creating a parallel and expressing the importance of bridge building.

> Agnes told everyone she spoke to that she was back to build bridges. Marty had explained to Majella that the bridges were not literal bridges—Agnes wanted to build bridges across community divisions. This struck Majella as a much more difficult engineering project, one complicated by the fact that although most people could see the need for rebuilding the literal bridges, no one had an eye for invisible bridges.[117]

Here, the wordplay is used to express the real difficulties that go with building bridges among these two communities. Due to the configuration of the village, when Majella imagines real bridges being build, she is not wrong: in Aghybogey, physical bridges would help to create links and maybe force people to mix. She also states the irony of how physical bridges would be easier to build, when any engineer could explain how building a bridge is complicated. The fact being that, as for the referendum on the *Good Friday Agreement*, a unified community is the goal for all, but none is ready to put the efforts in.

This passage, coming right after those showing the division in the population highlights the complicated situation that is the heritage from the Troubles. As much as people want to build bridges, the distrust and will to conform to the norms of a group created to come in opposition to another, makes it overly complicated. *Big Girl Small Town* shows how even multiple years after the ceasefires have been signed, separation is still at the basis of functioning in Northern Ireland and the importance presence of memories from the past, analysed in the next point, makes it even more complicated to move forward.

---

[116] One of the many examples of "Building Bridges" initiatives: https://buildingbridgesforpeace.org/our-work/our-work-in-northern-ireland/.
[117] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, pp. 56-57.

Fortunately, and still in a deeply satirical situation, once in a while, the whole population of Aghybogey can agree on something:

> When the town was handed a grant to restore the castle, the archaeologists achieved what US diplomats and millions of pounds of peace funding couldn't, temporarily uniting both Taigs and Prods against their mission to rescue "original stonework" from the tumble-down walls in the fields around the ruin. Oul wans from both sides of the divide had stood about at street corners or in the shops complaining, wondering whether the archaeologists would be coming into their houses next, to rob the stones from around their heads?[118]

Without even looking at the comic element from this passage, it highlights how similar the two communities actually are. If they have the same shops on each side and can agree to disagree with the town founding, it is a fact that the opposition is due to the habit of it more than to actual differences. The seed for lasting peace is there.

3. A woman's perspective

As the three primary sources are led by women characters, it also important to question the role of girls and women in the Troubles life and its afterwards. The choice to analyse it in *Big Girl Small Town* instead of the two other works comes from the relation that Majella has with the group around her. For her autism and thus issues with the social norms, she comes across as a rather lonely character. Her comment on the situation she lives in and her rebellion from it as it makes little sense to her, allows her to be the perfect key to understand the women's perspective on the Troubles.

a. The gender expectations

In the early 2000s the feminist revolution had touched most of the Western World, women wanted to break free from their usual roles. In Northern Ireland, mainly due to the presence of a conflict and a more than complicate economic situation during and after it, it still seems logical, at the time of the story, for women to be caregiver. This is extremely present in Majella's life via her role to take care of her mentally ill and alcoholic mother; she feeds her, cleans the house, helps her when she hurts herself, etc. Majella took the role of mother to her

[118] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, pp. 41.

own mother since the disappearance of her father. But being a caregiver will not pay her bills, explaining her job in the chip shop.

Unfortunately, in a village where 90% of Catholics were out of jobs at the end of the Troubles, it seems inconceivable for women not to work or not to want a job at least, yet the number of jobs that seem available for a Northern Irish girl are limited:

> Majella sensed that her careers teacher was disappointed by the fact that most of the girls in her class hoped and dreamed of being hairdressers. A couple of the more capable cuddies had nursing ambitions, and the two dolls with brains to burn wanted to be teachers.[119]

The ultimate dream was to be a hairdresser. The dark humour is here used to show the lack of prospect, out of a class of girls only three jobs seem accessible. Moreover, by focusing on the idea that they hoped and dream for it, talking about their ambitions in the past, gives the impression that most did not even get to that point; for example, Majella did not finish her exams explaining how she did end up working in the chip shop.

Theses dreams that the girls have are also opposed to the aspirations of boys. They wanted to get "visas to Australia or America" or "join relatives in England", in short, they wanted to leave the country. These two sentences coming in opposition show how men could dream bigger and how women were stuck. Moreover, the book also highlights one of the main reason to be stuck in life in an overly religious country, being a single mother. Majella focuses at multiple moments on the case of a certain Rose Murphy, but it is understood that she must be far from the only one:

> Majella didn't understand how Rose became the town hoor but, according to Marty, at least Rose was honest about her trade: if you asked him (and you didn't usually have to ask) he'd tell you that half the single mothers in Aghybogey were on the game—screwing the British government for a flat and benefits. Marty said that in Rose's defense, at least she made a few oul fuckers happy in the course of her day.[120]

The juxtaposition of a serious social issue with a casual tone, creating a mismatch between the subject and the way it is addressed, create a humorous moment over a dramatic subject. Single mothers do not have a better choice for them and their children to become prostitute to have a roof over their head, as welfare often being the only way to survive when unemployment rate is that high.

---

[119] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, p. 74.
[120] *Ibid*.

Taking care of the others and finding way to survive while being stuck seem, in the book, the only possible ways to live as a woman in the post-Troubles Northern Ireland. This is no surprise as men are more often those who live their home country to try to start a better life somewhere else and because women are also more easily victim of unemployment or left to be single parent.

b. Majella's resistance to the norms

Majella's autism and her external point of view when facing the group allow her to note and question the norms of being a women, but she goes further, breaking the norms and diverting from the life that should have been hers. This can be seen directly from her relation to her mother, it is obvious that she is expected to take care of her, but it feels way more like an obligation that coming from any instinct:

> Majella considered throwing a blanket over her ma. But she knew there'd be a risk of waking her and having to hoosh her up the stairs to her bed, so she left her to it.[121]

These sentences have no humour to them, they are just stating a fact of Majella's life, the less she can take care of her mother, the best she feels. This is linked to the main characteristic of the character, being isolated and independent, she even seems to have chosen this (up to a certain point).

In her job she can also been seen as breaking the norms. The other girls in her classes had dreams and hopes, she did not. Her job at the chip shop has no prospect, she does not do it for any ambition, moreover, she thrives for its repetitiveness even if it requires her to face many things that go in the list of things she dislikes, like gossip, bright lights or her boss Cunter. Thus, her job is pictured as the way to her independence, and so even if only from her real life during the time she works. Her independence comes in opposition with the caregiver role, but also with the community lifestyle of being an integral part of a group required by the time and place.

The only connection she seems to create with other people is with the men she has sex with throughout the book. This is an interesting fact about her, as explain previously, the feminist revolution never really hit Northern Ireland, women are still expected the same role as they had in the beginning of the conflict. Thus, listing on the nineth place of the things she

---

[121] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, p. 31.

likes "sex" shows how that norm does not apply to her.[122] Furthermore, even the way she has sex breaks the norm:

> She never said no to a shag. She liked the way that they sometimes had sex just because they both happened to be there. She didn't fancy Marty, not really.[123]

The lack interest she has in her own sex-life is interesting here, creating dark humour via the lack of emotions talking about this deeply intimate subject, giving the impression that Majella do not like it. She does though, it is made obvious when she later explains how she has sex with strangers from the pub, focusing on the idea that she is the one looking for it, for her own pleasure. The norms are broken to a level of being hard to understand for the reader, there is no justification (outside of her wanting to) explaining why she has sex, showing once again how outside of usual social interaction she is.

Majella being outside of the norm of "being a woman" in the early 2000s in Northern Ireland is a deliberate choice made by Michelle Gallen. As she decided to use a female protagonist for her story, Majella serves to goal to explain how women were never just part of the decor and how they were the actress of their own lives. As it could be impossible to do so in a country with very little prospect, the only way for Majella to break free was to break from the norm. Furthermore, she is the 'big girl' in the 'small town', her size and weight being a central point of her description of herself, showing how literally outside of the norm (women that should be thin, especially as her mother almost only feed from protein shakes) she is.[124]

4. The Troubles in *Big Girl Small Town*

a. The difficult case of "The Disappeared"

One of the main character of the book is Majella's father, that she refers to as "da". He is important to her being number four on the list of things that she likes. However, it is made clear from the start that her dad disappeared during the Troubles, Majella and her mother having no idea of what happen to him. From the start, she implies that he must be dead but seems to only start to believe in this information when he does not show up for her granny (his mother) funeral.

---

[122] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020., p. 2.
[123] *Op. Cit.,* p. 28.
[124] *Op. Cit.*, p. 28 and 32.

The case of Majella's father is inspired by the fate of 17 people who disappeared during the Troubles, it is believed that they were killed by republican paramilitaries even if the republican movement never admit to it. To this day, thirteen bodies have been found and given back to their family for a proper burial. Majella's lack of hope to find him or what happened can be explain by the fact that most of them were found after the events of *Big Girls Small Town*.[125]

The Disappeared are a key element to understand why the Troubles are as present in the book while being technically an event of the past. Living in the same house she grew up in, Majella lives every day in the remembrance of her father, she has many questions and need to live with the idea that they probably won't ever be answered. This situation makes it impossible for her to move forward. Her dad being as present in the story serves as the lingering ghost of the past, showing the impact of the conflict on the life after it. This element echoes to the personal and collective traumas seen in *Milkman*, their reality being too present to be able to live without it.

> But she wondered what he told other people about her. About her ma. Her da. She'd sometimes wondered if he knew where her da had gone. For all she knew, the whole town knew where he was, and it was just her and her ma who didn't. That was often the way of it.[126]

Majella ends up being rather cynical about this whole situation. Opposing the exceptional situation she is in and the everyday gossip of the town, she seems to have accepted that this could be the reality, never knowing while the rest of the village has the answers. The irony lays here in the reality of the situation, the whole village knows what happened because they have accepted that he died, which Majella and her mother did not.

b. The Troubles of the past

The Troubles are also present in *Big Girl Small Town* via the numerous moments when Majella remembers periods of her youth that were impacted by it. In this scenes, the violence is often present, addressing subjects like murders or bombing. This is the expression of the

---

[125] Independent Commission For The Location Of Victims Remains, *The Disappeared* via http://www.iclvr.ie/en/ICLVR/Pages/TheDisappeared (Accessed 5 August 2024).
[126] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, pp. 109-110.

haunting of the past in present life, showing how it is impossible to move away from it, here a difficult moment makes her start to think about her father and the last time she saw him:

> Majella remembered the coverage that day. The IRA had hit the media jackpot with a tactic they called proxy bombing. Reporters described how earlier that morning three families had been taken hostage in Derry, Armagh and Tyrone. The women and children were held at gunpoint in their homes while the man of the house was driven off by the IRA. They'd strapped the men into vehicles loaded with explosives and told them to drive to specific targets. All three bombs were remotely detonated at each destination. Two exploded, killing seven men.[127]

There is no humour in this scene, which an interesting fact as dramatic moments never prevent the narrator to create a darkly humorous situation. The choice of this depiction is made to show how some moments are too sad and horrible to make joke about it, but people can get used to this reality. As explain when addressing the role of humour, it can serve as a coping mechanism, which can sometimes lead to desensitisation, often leading to dark humour, like the one found in the book.

> While she was at school there were only the riots around the Orange marches to look forward to in the run up to summer, or the odd bomb or gun attack for a bit of excitement.[128]

The first extract tells a story that happened when Majella was eleven, here she is already a teenager. The change of tone is probably due to the different thoughts she has when facing these two situations. It was shocking and sad when she was young, it became usual and entertaining with time. She made it entertaining as she was using humour to cope with it. Here, talking about something casual like the time she was in school, she explains how riots and gun attach were a source of excitement.

This difference shows the evolution of the Troubles through time, as they became less violent, or at least as the violence was least frequent, it became the background of the life of the people in Northern Ireland. As riots, bombs and gun attacks become the daily life, people that were not directly involved in it got used to it, making their vision of it evolve to something that could be "a bit of excitement".

---

[127] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, p. 109-110.
[128] *Op. Cit.*, p. 42.

c. The Troubles after the Troubles

Living in the aftermath of the Troubles, Majella is also the witness of the first interests for the conflict and the specific situation she has always lived in:

> Every now and then an American newspaper or TV crew would come and stand on the bridge where Majella was now, the tossed castle in the background, one foot on the Prod side, one foot on the Taig side, an ironic symbol of a town divided, giving a monologue on the Troubles while people restrained the likes of Francie Kingh from diving into the shot to give the fingers.[129]

Firstly, this extract shows how, since the Troubles, Northern Ireland has the international interest, even Americans reporter come to Majella's small town to address the subject. That place is then chosen as being on a bridge and talking about the Catholics living on one side and Protestants, making a nice metaphor for the conflict. Of course, Majella noting that do it to express the absurdity of this action, as her simple existence is the proof that the question of the Troubles is more complicated than that. Yet, the idea that it became an entertainment is there again, the population is not content of the interest, it is more the occasion to give the finger on live TV. The reporters are not the only one showing interest in the aftermath in the events:

> Aghybogey had to make do with hosting the PhD students who'd come and spend days trying to get to know the "post-conflict" community, trying to dig up the sort of memories that most people knew were best left buried.[130]

In the opposite of the complain about the American reportages, that lessened the impact of the Troubles, the scientific research, wanting to go to the roots of it, are not welcomed either. The fragile balance that is the peace in the country at that moment, could break at any point (as explained previously) thus discovering new elements or secrets, could be the last straw to go back to an armed fight.

In these two extracts, that follow each other in the book, show the complexity of the life for Northen Irish people after the Troubles: being impacted by a conflict that ended, still seeing its cause in the everyday life, wanting to move on from it while addressing the impact in the last 30 years while also refusing to analyse it deeply. It is in the end Majella who does the best summary of the population's point of view on this. In the list of things she hates, we find "Item 40: The political situation".[131]

---

[129] M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, p. 42.
[130] *Ibid*.
[131] *Op. Cit.,* p. 38.

Chapter V: Lisa McGee's *Derry Girls*[132]: The normal teenage life during the Troubles

1. An overview of *Derry Girls*

a. General information about *Derry Girls*

Derry Girls is a Northern Irish TV series created by Lisa McGee, which aired on *Channel 4* from 2018 to 2022. The show is inspired by Lisa McGee's own adolescence, as she was born and raised in Derry and was approximately the same age as the characters during the events depicted.[133] Although fictional, the show is deeply anchored in the reality of life during the Troubles, incorporating real television footage from the 90s to contextualise the conflict.

The sitcom received tremendous reviews and became one of *Channel 4*'s most-watched shows. *Derry Girls* also garnered numerous good critics in the UK and abroad but has been particularly praised by Northern Irish audiences for its realistic portrayal of the Troubles in the 90s. This authenticity stems from Lisa McGee's real-life experiences and her intention to focus on people's everyday lives and aspirations, with the conflict serving as a backdrop. She explained that while addressing the conflict was never the primary objective, it was impossible to discuss the Northern Ireland's youth without acknowledging it. The decision to present the story as a comedy was then made to use humour as a coping mechanism, going a step further than *Milkman* and *Big Girl Small Town*.[134]

b. The plot

Derry Girls follows the lives of Erin Quinn, her cousin Ola, her friends Clare and Michelle, and the latter's cousin, James—a wee English fella—as they navigate their teenage years in Derry during the mid to late 90s. As a sitcom, each episode presents a different story, sometimes focusing on their all-girls school (which James attends, as it would be too dangerous for an

---

[132] L. McGee, *Derry Girls*, United Kingdom, Channel 4, 2018- 2022.
[133] A. Russel, "How the Creator of "Derry Girls" Found Humor in a Troubled Time" in *The New Yorker* (online), 2 June 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/how-the-creator-of-derry-girls-found-humor-in-a-troubled-time (accessed 3 August 2024).
[134] B. Kelly, "How Derry Girls tells the true story of a city where laughter conquers all" in *The Independent* (online), 5 March 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/derry-girls-season-two-mural-troubles-northern-ireland-watch-netflix-a8797261.html (accessed 3 August 2024).

English boy to be in a Northern Irish Catholic boys' school), their family life, or other aspects of adolescence, whether or not they are related to the political situation.

c. Situational humour and the risk of diminishing the reality

Derry Girls belong to the comedy genre, unlike *Milkman* or *Big Girl Small Town*, which only use humour as a tool within narrative of a different genre. As humour is at the base of the concept, it influences the way it is employed and portrayed in the show, especially in comparison to its use in the two books. While dark humour and satire are present in the series, they appear less frequently, with the show focusing more on situational humour. This approach aligns with the genre of comedy, which, according to *Britannica*, relies on "situations, manners, or characters" to create comic elements.[135] *Derry Girls* embodies this concept of comedy as a work of art designed to amuse while holding a mirror up to the society.[136] The situational humour is used to add depth to the story and characters by linking them through humorous circumstances. *Britannica* defines it as "[revealing] the absurd in the familiar" in a harmless manner.[137]

In this chapter, we will examine how situational humour in *Derry Girls* relates to the themes of the Troubles in order to understand the representation it creates of the conflict. Unlike *Milkman* and *Big Girl Small Town*, where dark humour and satire make the traumatic reality more bearable for both characters and readers, *Derry Girls,* as a comedy, risks downplaying the traumatic nature of the events it depicts. Nevertheless, Lisa McGee successfully strikes a balance that allows for a multifaced representation of the conflict, without ever imposing a certain point of view on the Troubles. Humour serves as a key tool for navigating this tumultuous environment, while showing characters with a deep sense of identity, whose selves go beyond simply being victims of violence and trauma. As a result, the series challenges the traditional narrative of the Troubles, offering a more nuanced portrayal that extends beyond mere sectarianism and bombings. By juxtaposing the harsh reality of the Troubles with comedic

[135] A. Koestler, "Situational humour" in *Britannica* (online), https://www.britannica.com/topic/humor/Situational-humor (accessed 3 August 2024).
[136] C. H. Hoy, "Comedy" in *Britannica* (online), https://www.britannica.com/art/comedy (accessed 3 August 2024).
[137] A. Koestler, *Op Cit*.

elements of everyday life, the show provides a coping mechanism and a basis for deeper reflexion, setting itself apart from the other two primary works.[138]

2. The point of view of the youth

As *Derry Girls* represents Lisa McGee's own teenage experience during the Troubles, it becomes evident that the two elements cannot be separated from one another. Every facet of the main characters' lives unfolds with the Troubles in the background, with many aspects being either direct or indirect consequences of the conflict. This perspective echoes Michelle Gallen's point of view in "Child of the Troubles", where she describes how the reality of the conflict seemed so normalised to her that she only realised in her late teens that violence was not a common experience for most adolescents.[139] The aim of this first section is to demonstrate the extent to which the conflict seems normal to the people of Derry and its impact on the lives of teenagers.

a. The normalcy of living in a conflict

The main female characters in *Derry Girls* are teenagers, with Erin being 16 in the first episode set around 1994, indicating that they were born and raised during the conflict. For them, bombs and violence are normal occurrences, as they have never known anything else. This is immediately apparent to viewers from the opening of the first episode, when Orla reads from Erin's journal: "I come from a place called Derry or Londonderry depending on your persuasion, a troubled little corner in the northwest of Ireland".[140] This sentence reveals several aspects of Erin's character; the reference to her town, Derry, and its location in Ireland suggests she comes from a Catholic and republican family. However, by describing Derry as a 'troubled corner', as if it were an everlasting fact, the journal entry highlights how used she is to the conflict being on her doorstep.

The next scene further illustrates this normalisation of life during the Troubles. As Erin and Orla get ready for school, the television reports a bomb on the main bridge in Derry.

---

[138] V. Membrive, "Banalising Evil?: Humour in Lisa McGee's Derry Girls" in D. Tüysüz (ed.), *International Perspectives on Rethinking Evil in Film and Television*, Hersey PA, IGI Global, 2021, pp. 164-175.
[139] M. Gallen, "Child of the Troubles" in *Book Club Kit*, via michellegallen.com, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f79b0ce8523ab39c875bd10/t/5fc7f512bc205d67881cabc0/1606939941337/gallen_bgst_bookclubkit_final.pdf (accessed 28 July 2024).
[140] "Episode 1" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 1, Channel 4, 2018.

Faced with this news, different reactions can be observed in the room, but none expresses concern about personal safety or the political implications. Erin's mother is worried that the school bus may not be able to reach the school, which would force the girls to stay home for another day, while her father uses the news as an opportunity to mock his son-in-law. Surprisingly, it is Aunt Sarah, typically depicted as being disconnected from reality, who provides the most insightful comment: "This is what they want. They want ordinary people to suffer.". However, Erin corrects her, explaining that her sunbeds are not part of any "political agenda", thereby showing that the bomb can be associated to the most trivial elements.[141] This scene, and the dialogue that follows, are made comical by the disconnect they show between the conflict's harsh reality and the character's everyday life, with the implications of a bomb on a bridge on the way to school seemingly passing over everyone's head. Moreover, neither Erin nor Orla show any visible reaction to the news, highlighting how normalised the situation has become for them.

Another important element is the use of transitional shots between scenes, where images of Derry are shown over music to convey a general impression of the town and its atmosphere. These kinds of views are frequent in movies and series, as they help audiences recognise or gain a general sense of a city. In *Derry Girls*, these shots often portray Troubles-related elements—such as a tank and young men tagging the Londonderry sign to transform it to Derry—yet they are never explicitly addressed or contextualised. These shots serve, as they would in any other show, to provide more information on the background of the story, while the lack of contextual explanation illustrates how normal these images are in Derry.

Nonetheless, Lisa McGuee uses the character of James to highlight the inherent abnormality of the situation. James, Michelle's cousin, arrive in Derry in the first episode after being born and raised in London. Being British, he is sent to the girls' school as it would be too dangerous for him to attend a Catholic boys' school in Northern Ireland. As he is new to the area, all elements related to the Troubles are new to him. After he is introduced, the group boards the school bus, which is soon stopped by the British army for a passenger check, with soldiers visibly carrying their weapons. While Clare and Orla do not react, Erin yaws and Michelle makes sex jokes, James is panicked, wondering what is happening.[142] The focus on James' face in that moment, along with the deliberate choice to have him question the situation,

---

[141] "Episode 1" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 1, Channel 4, 2018.
[142] *Ibid.*

serves to challenge the viewer's perception. While the previous scenes have conveyed the normalisation of the conflict and the ease with which it can be joked about, this scene counterbalances it by showing how disturbing it should be for 16-years-olds to see soldiers on their way to school every day.

James's confusion about the situation also prompts reflection on the lack of awareness regarding the conflict outside Northern Ireland. At this point in the episode, the viewer has been introduced to Clare's plan to go on a fast to raise money for an Ethiopian boy named Kamal. This brings on a conversation leading to Clare saying "Imagine being born there and not here. We don't know how lucky we are.".[143] This sentence is purely satirical and made to be laughed at, as the viewer already understands the unique reality of living through a conflict, this is further emphasised by the soldiers entering the bus immediately afterward. It also expresses once again the disconnection from the reality of violence experienced by those who have been subjected to it for nearly 30 years. James' reaction is particularly telling; despite being English and facing British soldiers, he does not seem to understand what is happening. This reaction resonates with Michelle Gallen's discourse about the limited understanding of the conflict outside Northern Ireland. James, coming from a country involved in the conflict, still seems to ignore most of the elements surrounding it, illustrating how a reality of violence can be experienced by some people while remaining largely ignored by others who live right next door.[144]

b. Teenage life during the conflict

While it is impossible to separate *Derry Girls* from the Troubles, the series stays first and foremost a portrait of teenage life. Like many other sitcoms before and after it, each episode centres on a new plot, frequently addressing typical adolescent experiences such as falling in love, self-discovery, going to parties, etc. The idea of it being a teenagers' life show is present in every episode; for instance, one of the primary plots on the first episode revolves around Erin wanting to go to a 'gig' because a boy she likes plays there.

---

[143] "Episode 1" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 1, Channel 4, 2018

[144] M. Gallen, "Child of the Troubles" in *Book Club Kit*, via michellegallen.com, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f79b0ce8523ab39c875bd10/t/5fc7f512bc205d67881cabc0/1606939941337/gallen_bgst_bookclubkit_final.pdf (accessed 28 July 2024).

In the second episode, the announcement of the school's annual international trip starts the episode. Due to the price of £375 and the fact that they do not have a trust found to draw on to be able to go, the friends embarked on a mission to find a job. The situation is portrayed humorously through Michelle's exaggerated reactions, such as stealing posters of people searching for help, leading to them having to clean the chip shop to avoid being banned, ultimately cumulating in a fire and thus a ban from the chip shop for Erin's family. As this episode plays, it can appear as a typical teenage sitcom plot, however, this plot can hardly be split from the Troubles and their repercussions. This situation makes them realise for the first time that they are rather poor, which is probably the direct consequence of the conflict's impact on the region's economic conditions, exacerbated by their Catholic background. The link is even made clearer when Orla suggests they could sell their organs for the money before having Clare replicate that they should try a logical solution first, finding a job. To this, Michelle answers "There are no jobs in Derry. That's all you ever hear anybody say.".[145] The humour in this exchange comes from the implied idea that selling organs would be easier than finding a job, and although the reason for the shortage of job is not explicitly addressed, it is implicitly understood to be a result of the ongoing conflict.

This episode exemplifies the inseparability of the character's teenage lives from the Troubles. Although the connection between the two is rarely explicit (with only 4 out of 19 episodes featuring plots directly related to the Troubles), the constant reminders of the conflict happening gives the spectator a key to understand it. Despite the apparent normalcy of their teenage lives, these must always be understood within the broader framework of the Troubles.

This link works in both ways, as it is also impossible for the characters to navigate teenage experiences separate from the context of the Troubles and their consequences. As an example, the second season opens with an episode named "Across the Barricades" where the group is going on a weekend to build metaphorical bridges with a Protestant boys' school. Such events are direct consequences of the conflict, yet the motivation for the group's participation is rooted in typical teenage interests—specifically, the girls' desire to meet and flirt with boys. Erin and Michelle only participate to it as it is the chance to meet new boys and to flirt with them. This whole situation is then used to comment on the conflict with multiple discussions in group showing how it seems impossible for Catholics and Protestant teens to find similarities between them. The episode concludes with a fight stemming from a misunderstanding,

[145] "Episode 2" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 2, Channel 4, 2018.

prompting the parents to intervene and reprimand all the teens, leading to Erin finding the first similarity between them and writing "parents" on the board thus highlighting a shared experience amidst the broader context of the conflict.[146]

By depicting teenage life and addressing the question of the Troubles, *Derry Girls* portrays the reality of the teens of Derry (and of Northern Ireland) during the 90s, highlighting the interplay between these aspects. Nonetheless, all episodes also show moments in Erin's house, making her parents and her grandfather other main characters of the series.

3. A three-generation house

Through its portrayal of Erin's living situation, *Derry Girls* emphasised the significance of her relationship with her family. As central as it is to see the Troubles in her and her friends' life, the show also opens questioning about the broader impact of the conflict on the wider population. The show contrasts the experiences of the younger generation, who have always lived with the Troubles, with those of the older generation. Erin's parents were teenagers on the onset of the conflict, and the grandfather, Joe, was already an adult and a parent when it began. As previously explained, although the Troubles are rarely directly discussed in the series, their impact is conveyed through various elements, allowing viewers to grasp their significance and influence on both the individual and collective experiences depicted.

a. The point of view of the parents

Erin's parents and her aunt are discreet when addressing the subject of the Troubles, like the girls they seem to have accepted them as a constant element of their life. Even in the fifth episode of the third (and last) season, titled "The Reunion", which includes a flashback to their youth, the subject is barely addressed. The episode indicated that the conflict during their youth was different from the present situation.[147] Between the moment in the present of the narration and the past, multiple images of Derry are shown, similar to those seen in other episodes, with the exception of being real images of riots and other violent acts of the 70s. While these images provide background information and contribute to the atmosphere of the

[146] "Across the Barricades" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 2, episode 1, Channel 4, 2019.
[147] "The Reunion" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 3, episode 5, Channel 4, 2022.

show, they are mainly used there to highlight how the level of violence has decreased over the years, thereby offering a historical perspective on the ongoing narrative.

In that same episode, the mothers of the original Derry girls (along with Deirdre, Michelle's mother Canadian cousin) decide to break the law by getting tattoos to signify their act of rebellion. The decision to do so is made as an IRA roadblock interrupts the party, preventing them from meeting any boys. Motivated by thus disruption, Mary, Erin's mother makes that speech:

> Our whole life we've been told what we can do, what we can wear, where we can go, who we can talk to. We're told who we are and what we believe in. It's all curfews and barricades and roadblocks and rosaries.[148]

This speech is important as it shows how their lives, 20 years before those of their daughters at the same place and age, were already deeply impacted by the Troubles. This speech is made to be ridicule by its exaggeration when comparing the idea of getting a tattoo and the bomb exploding, yet it reflects the intense perspective of an 18-years-old. The plot of this episode underscores the similarities between the generations, going so far as to exaggerate Deirdre's obligation to go everywhere with her cousin, while also highlighting their differences. As for the images of the riots, this speech references a level of violence that exceed the reality faced by the girls, the curfews and barricades being already over by the time of the series.

However, as this speech comes by the end of the series, it allows for a reflection on the adaptation to the Troubles, moving from the will to rebel to the implementation of the same rules they were rebelling against. In her speech, Mary, Erin's mother, talk about the things they were told do to and not do, and all these things have yet been repeated to Erin by Mary herself. From the very first episode, when viewers are introduced to her character, Mary learns that a friend of Erin might be 'divorcing his parents' and forbids Erin to ever talk to him again, then when it is time for Erin to leave for school, she forbids her to wear her denim jacket instead of her blazer. By this, she tells her who to talk to and what to wear. Although these rules might seem minor and similar to what many parents, even far from any conflict, enforce, they highlight how such restrictions shape teenagers to adopt and continue the same values and norms as their parents.

---

[148] "The Reunion" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 3, episode 5, Channel 4, 2022.

Moreover, Lisa McGuee gives further clues that the Troubles have a deeper impact on the parents' generation than on the teenage generation. At two separates moments in the show, the girls are shown having fun while the parents are watching conflict-related news on television: the bombing that killed 12 people at the end of season one, and the announcement of the ceasefire on the second to last episode of the second season.[149] These scenes create a parallel, suggesting that while the Troubles remain a persistent and significant part of the parent's lives, the girls are able to experience their youth relatively distanced from the conflict. Additionally, these moments are used to show the duality of the life during the conflict, with the images of the girls' humorous and carefree moments counterbalanced by those of the parents' shock at the news.

b. Joe's point of view

It is more complicated to get Erin and Orla's grandfather Joe's perspective on the Troubles, as he only ever addresses them for a quick scene on the last episode of the show. The only clues are to be found in his behaviour, marked by 30 years of constant conflict, and the years that preceded it. Joe is depicted as loyal and protector regarding his family, having as a main objective to mock and criticise his son-in-law, Jerry. There is no valid reason for him to do so, but it seems that Joe still sees him as an outsider to his family, even after 17 years of marriage to his daughter. One possible reason for this is the parallel with the political situation. Joe has issue trusting Jerry and seems to suspect him of always being ready to betray his family, like he would with any Protestant he meets. Nonetheless, he has no choice but to live with him, finding compromises along the way to achieve a semblance of peace within the family.

Joe's behaviour as a protector to his family would then be the consequences of a life spent in a region build on instabilities and violence. He has always been part of the Catholic minority and has been forged by it. This can be seen in the episode focusing on the Orange Marches, as they set off to avoid the riots in Derry, Joe takes the map from Jerry's hands, despite Jerry telling him he would guide him according to the situations on the roads that day. To which Joe replies:

---

[149] "Episode 6" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 6, Channel 4, 2018. And "The Prom" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 2, episode 5, Channel 4, 2019.

> You know what age I am boy? You know how many of these parades I've lived through? You think I don't realise how quickly a situation can turn? Do you think I'll do anything to put my family at risk?[150]

These questions are at the roots of his character, but also show the impact of the conflict on his life: he is used to the fear of the Marches, used to seeing events turn violent, and ready to do whatever's necessary to keep his family out of danger.

Joe is a funny character, his exaggerated reactions and constant quarrels with Jerry always serving the purpose of making the viewer laugh. Nonetheless, as with the parents, his direct addressal to the political situation is never laughing matter. In the last episode, he is seen multiple time analysing the 30-page document addressing the agreement, seemingly to decide what decision to make, but when Erin finally asks him what he is going to do, he tells her that what he thinks does not matter as it is a decision for the youth. Then facing her questions, he adds: "What if no one else has to die? What if all this becomes a ghost story you'll tell your wains one day? A ghost story they'll hardly believe."[151] He chooses to hope for a peace that only few believe in, as a way to once again protect his family. Without trying to be humorous, this scene shows how people were tired of the conflict but how some never doubted that peace would be the solution.

4. The Troubles in *Derry Girls*

a. The Troubles as a secondary plot

As explained in this chapter, there are many examples of the Troubles being addressed directly in the series. Some of these moment, particularly those focusing on crucial event that changed the course of the conflict, have been stripped of their humour to emphasise the seriousness of the subject. However, as the show is first and foremost a comedy, there are many instances where the humour relies on a situation made comical because of the consequences of the Troubles. These moments are designed to make recognise the violent reality of the situation while finding humour in it, often by highlighting the absurdity of the circumstances and the underlying truth they convey.

---

[150] "Episode 5" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 5, Channel 4, 2018.
[151] "The Agreement" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 3, episode 7, Channel 4, 2022.

A relevant example can be found in the fourth episode of the first season, where a group of Chernobyl students comes to spend a week in Derry. The premise of this plot is already comical as, like for Kamal in the first episode, it relies on the idea that the life in Derry is better and therefore advanced, which is funny for the spectators who cannot ignore the violence of Northern Ireland at the time, yet it seems to go over the head of the main girls. In this group of students, Michelle falls for a boy named Artem, who turns out to be Clive, a Protestant from Belfast who got on the wrong bus on his way home from holidays.[152]

This storyline is amusing as Artem is extremely weird and seem to hide something from the beginning of the episode, making it a good plot twist to find out that he was Irish all along and scared to be on the 'enemies' side. It seems ridiculous to imagine that one would rather spend a week in silence an hour from home than admit to being Protestant in Catholic land, but it actually tells on the seriousness of the conflict. As comical as it is, the objective of this plot line is to make the viewer realise the violence of the Troubles without showing it, focusing instead on a humorous representation of the fear it arouses, where it is more logical and safer for Clive to lie for a week than risk being attacked or killed if he admitted that he was a Protestant.

b. The Troubles as the main plot

As mentioned above, there are four episodes (out of 19) that directly addresses the question of the Troubles in their main storyline. Out of these four, two addresses a more general reality and two a precise moment in the history of the conflict, serving two different representational purposes. The first two give a general idea of the atmosphere at the time, from confidence in the peace process in "Across the Barricades" to fear of Protestant demonstrations in the episode about the Orange Marches.

The latter has for main plot the departure of the whole Quinn family, plus Erin and Orla's friends, from their home because it is the day of the Orange Marches (Protestant society parades, often the scene of violence during the Troubles).[153] Most of the jokes and comical moments from that episode rely on this situation and are funny and light-hearted. Nevertheless, laughing about it needs to open the door to questioning the seriousness of the moment; every

[152] "Episode 4" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 4, Channel 4, 2018.
[153] "Episode 5" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 5, Channel 4, 2018.

year, this family leaves their house because they fear for their safety. The humorous tone is then used to make this reality more acceptable and less traumatic for the viewer. It is also one of the episodes that makes the most use of dark humour, as a man tries to hide in their car so that he can leave Northern Ireland due to violent actions for which he is responsible, creating jokes about this situation and laughing at the fact that Erin is being scared for her life.

In contrast, the two episodes that focus on key historical events—the visit of the President of the United-State Bill Clinton and the vote on the Agreement—offer a different perspective.[154] These two episodes include significant subplots, such as the return of James' mother, who asks him to accompany her during Clinton's visits, and Erin and Orla's preparations for a party during the Agreement vote. While these storylines are connected to the historical events, they highlight that life goes on and that the Troubles, though ever-present, aren't the most important thing in the girls' lives. At the end of the second season, the humour in the Clinton episode comes from moments like trying to buy a flag with the correct number of stars, skipping school, and finding the best spot to see the President. Nonetheless, the episode ends on more emotional note when the girls miss Clinton's speech because James decides to stay in Derry rather than leave with his mother. This illustrates that while the Troubles are a constant backdrop, the girls' personal lives and relationships often take centre stage, just as they do in the series as a whole.

[154] "The President" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 2, episode 6, Channel 4, 2019. And "The Agreement" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 3, episode 7 Channel 4, 2022.

Chapter VI: Reframing the Troubles through humour

Having analysed the three primary sources, this chapter will draw conclusions on the impact of humour in representing the Troubles, as depicted in *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls*. Given that these works were selected for their thematic and tonal similarities, the first step will be to synthesis the analyses from the previous chapters to form a comprehensive overview. This overview will then be compared with the more traditional representation of the Troubles discussed in Chapter Two. Additionally, as this chapter seeks to examine the direct influence of humour on these representations, its effects will be assessed in a dedicated section. Finally, the connection between humour and the memory of the Troubles will be investigated, considering how a shift in perspective might offer new insights into the subject.

1. A certain representation of the Troubles

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, numerous works of fiction have drawn inspiration from the Northern Ireland Troubles.[155] These works often focus on men involved in military or paramilitary groups and are typically dramas or thrillers centred on the traumatic events of the conflict. Likely due to the proximity of the conflict, these representations had to be dramatic, yet, given the delicate situation in Northern Ireland, they could not be overtly political. This absence of explicit politics resulted in male protagonists who were portrayed as solely responsible for their fates, with plots revolving around their personal beliefs and actions. Due to the prevalence of such works, it is still possible today to assert that a typical Troubles drama is the story of a soldier who must determine his own fate, with significant implications for dramatic events. This representation appears to be in stark contrast to the one observed in the primary works analysed in this dissertation.

In *Milkman*, the Troubles have deeply impacted people's sense of identity, creating a society where it is impossible to dissociate any action from the ongoing conflict.[156] The novel centres around a female protagonist and deliberately refrains from naming its characters,

[155] I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 190-243.
[156] See pp. 24-35.

emphasising that this is not the story of one girl in one town, but the story of all the girls, women, and even people who lived in Northern Ireland during the 1970s, the most violent period of the Troubles. Through dark humour and satirical elements, the story critiques the absurdity of the time, from rigid social norms to the arbitrary rules created by and for the community. *Milkman* makes it impossible to ignore the Troubles, highlighting the power of silence and the internalised social policing that characters adopt as a survival mechanism during this traumatic period. By addressing both personal and collective trauma, the novel illustrates how rumours and gossip create pressures that lead to alienation. Even without directly witnessing acts of violence related to the civil war, the characters are left with psychological scars that shape their behaviour.

Similarly, *Big Girl Small Town* uses dark humour to highlight the lingering trauma associated with the unresolved nature of the conflict, emphasising how this lack of closure makes it impossible to move on from the civil war. By focusing even more on daily life, the novel illustrates the influence of the conflict on social interactions and family dynamics.[157] The dark humour employed by Majella acts as a shield against the violence of everyday life, serving as a coping mechanism to deal with the harsh realities she faces, such as her mother's alcoholism, which stems from the unresolved trauma of her father's disappearance. The unspoken rules of the community, much like those depicted in *Milkman*, suggest a continuity of unresolved issues, indicating that the underlying causes of the conflict persist. The novel demonstrates, through the implications of the Troubles in the present, that it is impossible to remain unaffected by the conflict, regardless of one's level of direct involvement.

Finally, *Derry Girls* provides another example of how the Troubles serve as a constant backdrop to life for the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, showing the inescapable nature of their consequences.[158] By normalising an otherwise abnormal situation, the series illustrates the population's adaptation to violence and division, using humour to ridicule these conditions. Similar to the other works discussed, the series uses parody to critique authority, highlighting its absurdity and irrationality. The youthful perspective also shows that, despite the pervasive nature of the Troubles, teenagers remain concerned with their personal issues, which often take precedence over broader societal problems.

---

[157] See pp. 36-49.
[158] See pp. 50-60.

The model for representing the Troubles, as observed in these works, is one that centres on a female protagonist whose life within a community is indirectly shaped by the conflict. This approach contrasts with the earlier representations, where the protagonist is of a different gender, uninvolved in violent movements, and concerned with everyday life rather than specific events. Moreover, the message conveyed in these works is that the Troubles have a profound impact on life, a sentiment that was not as prominently emphasised in earlier representations.

Since these works do not focus on the violent episodes of the conflict, bombings and shootings are only briefly mentioned, relegating the physical aspects of the Troubles to the background. This shift in narrative focus, away from explicit depictions of a violent civil war that lasted 30 years and claimed over 3,500 lives, might initially suggest a diminished representation of the actual violence of the time. However, the plots are constructed to ensure that the reality and consequences of the Troubles remain undeniable, the violence manifests in insidious elements rather than through explicit images. This narrative approach mirrors the focus on everyday life, representing the violence that most people had to confront daily, thereby revealing the true complexity of the events.

2. Humour and the representation of violence

Humour is often employed by trauma victims as a coping mechanism, both during and after the traumatic event, and it later contributes to building resilience. In the primary works analysed in this paper, the protagonists use humour, in various forms, to navigate the trauma of the conflict they are enduring. Once these works are published or broadcast, they serve as valuable tools for victims who engage with them, helping them to move forward and create connections—an especially crucial function in a society as divided as Northern Ireland. Additionally, humour allows for the portrayal of a more nuanced reality, emphasising the individuality of victims within a larger group, as opposed to the focus typically found in traditional dramas. On multiple levels, humour is central to the shift in the representation of the Troubles brought about by *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls*.

a. Humour as a coping mechanism

The Troubles had a lasting impact, deeply affecting nearly every aspect of life in Northern Ireland. In navigating this complex reality, humour emerges as a powerful tool,

offering a lens through which individuals can reinterpret and manage the events they experienced. The middle sister, for example, uses humour not only as a means to critique the situation but also to create a psychological distance from it. When rumours about her begin to spread, drawing the entire town's attention to her, it is her satirical perspective that helps her to cope with and manage the situation. Additionally, as the rumours seem to dominate her life, she uses humour to challenge the oppressive atmosphere surrounding her. Similarly, Majella employs humour to reframe her mundane life, making it more bearable.

Humour also provides a fresh perspective on a narrative that otherwise seems static. The middle sister was born into a region marked by tension and likely witnessed its violence from a young age. The thematic and representational links between *Milkman* and the other two works demonstrate how little the situation has evolved over the years that separate them. As Erin, her friends, and Majella were all born during the Troubles, and Majella lived through their aftermath, it is evident that their experiences are strikingly similar. The persistent presence of deep societal fractures and the violence that stems from them are made more tolerable through the new perspective that humour provides. Humour, then, becomes a means to avoid falling into despair by focusing on the lighter side of things.

This aspect of trauma likely played a significant role in inspiring the writing of these books and the creation of the show. Lisa McGee explained in an interview that after living through the Troubles during her entire youth, it was primarily the funny moments and remarks that remained with her. The unique nature of the conflict made such humour possible; it was ever-present, even though most days were uneventful. Nevertheless, she also acknowledged that there are still layers of trauma that the population has not yet fully addressed, as tensions remain in Derry and elsewhere in the country. Artistic expressions like these may be opening doors to confronting these unresolved issues and thus creating new connections, potentially contributing to the process of truly moving on from the Troubles.[159]

b. Humour to create cohesion

Derry Girls has been widely acclaimed since its first season for its amusing teenage humour and its accurate portrayal of conflict. As the most reviewed work among the primary

[159] A. Russel, "How the Creator of "Derry Girls" Found Humor in a Troubled Time" on *The New Yorker* (online), 2 June 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/how-the-creator-of-derry-girls-found-humor-in-a-troubled-time (accessed 6 August 2024).

sources, numerous articles and reviews highlight the profound impact the series has had on the Northern Irish population. During its first season, nearly half of all television viewers were tuned in to Derry Girls, and the show helped many reconnect with their heritage. While it is challenging to measure the full extent of the show's impact, Long's work demonstrates how cultural productions like this create spaces for people to express emotions and reflect on their experiences in a less traumatic manner. Moreover, by transcending the societal fractures between Catholics and Protestants, Derry Girls fostered a space for discussion, built a sense of community, and promoted resilience. It is also likely that, on a smaller scale, *Milkman* and *Big Girl Small Town* will have a similar effect, contributing to cohesion in a society still deeply affected by the legacy of the Troubles.

c. Humour for a nuanced representation

When discussing the role of humour in dealing with the aftermath of dramatic events or moments in history, the analysis of the Civil Rights Movement's representation reveals various aspects that explain its use. Comedic elements play a crucial role in educating audiences by engaging them more deeply with the narrative. Satire, along with the creation of absurdities and exaggerations, prompts deep reflection on the subject matter. The emphasis on everyday life is also significant—comedies or works employing dark humour rarely focus on a single individual or moment; instead, they depict an atmosphere that helps convey what reality was like for the majority.

Many of these elements are present in the works analysed here. None of the plots focus on major events or prominent figures; rather, they convey the reality of the Troubles as experienced by the broader population. Satire and exaggeration, which often play with the complex truths behind the conflict, are central to provoking meaningful reflections on the causes and consequences of the 30-year conflict. These representations also avoid reducing the conflict to a simple good-versus-bad narrative. By steering clear of the typical Catholics versus Protestants dichotomy, and by humanising both sides, these works draw meaningful parallels between the two groups (as seen in the Derry Girls episode “Across the Barricades”).[160] By

[160] “Across the Barricades” in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 2, episode 1, Channel 4, 2019.

constructing a complex reality, these works allow for a more nuanced understanding of the conflict. [161]

However, this does not imply that they shy away from the harsh realities of the Troubles. The middle sister in *Milkman* fears for her safety and is eventually threatened by a man with a gun; Majella in *Big Girl, Small Town* grapples with the disappearance of her father, one of the many who went missing during the Troubles; and *Derry Girls* frequently incorporates real footage from the conflict. Yet, these events are not central to the plots, reflecting the idea that traumatic events were not the norm in daily life during the conflict. As Lisa McGee explains, while the civil war was a constant backdrop, most days passed without incident. Consequently, the books and the series focus on a different aspect of reality: the difficulties of everyday life. They illustrate how the constant threat of bombings or shootings created fear and paranoia within an already fractured community.

This emotional burden is particularly emphasised in the books. The fear of becoming the subject of gossip, the pressure to conform to social expectations and align with the right side, and the challenge of coping with traumatic events while still living in the midst of conflict are all vividly portrayed. Majella, for instance, cannot escape the haunting memory of her father's disappearance, which taints every other aspect of her life. The Troubles function in much the same way—perpetually present and impossible to move beyond. This persistent influence is also evident in other aspects of daily life. For example, the pervasive gossip in the books and series is a direct consequence of the paranoia fostered by the conflict. While Derry Girls presents this as a humorous aspect through the characters of the parents, Majella struggles with the reality of living in a community where everyone knows each other's business, and the middle sister's life is similarly devastated by the spread of unfounded rumours about her relationship with a man she wants nothing to do with.

Despite this, humour is most prominently featured not in the traumatic moments but in the relatable situations. This distinction likely explains why *Derry Girls* is considered a comedy while the books are classified as general fiction. What resonates with the audience are the humorous depictions of situations that they can relate to or understand closely. For those who have not experienced the trauma of the Troubles, this connection is primarily forged during moments that are not direct consequences of the conflict. However, these moments still serve

---

[161] V. Membrive, "Banalising Evil?: Humour in Lisa McGee's Derry Girls" in D. Tüysüz, *International Perspectives on Rethinking Evil in Film and Television*, Hersey PA, IGI Global, 2021, pp. 164-175.

to educate and provoke reflection, as viewers find it easier to empathise with protagonists facing traumatic events when they can first relate to their everyday experiences.

d. A humour that shapes the Troubles it represents

The primary goal of using humour to address traumatic events is to foster a sense of shared experience that transcends stereotypical and reductive representations. In *Milkman*, *Big Girl, Small Town*, and *Derry Girls*, humour is employed to move beyond a binary depiction of the Troubles as a battle between good and evil. These works portray Northern Ireland as a place marked by pervasive everyday violence, affecting people on all sides, while also highlighting resilience and determination to move forward with life. In these stories, the characters are all victims of the Troubles, but they are also depicted as multifaceted individuals, beyond their trauma.

By placing both groups on the same level, these works underscore the absurdity of the situation. The humour surrounding the sectarian divide serves to critique it, exposing the futility of such prolonged violence. Rather than portraying their protagonists as heroes fighting for their beliefs, these works depict ordinary people coping in the best way they can, while subtly challenging existing power structures. Laughter becomes a powerful tool for revealing the cracks in the system, and from *Milkman* to *Derry Girls*, humour is used to emphasise the similarities between the groups, ultimately conveying the senselessness of the conflict.

In balancing tragedy and humour, these representations of the Troubles achieve a greater sense of realism. By capturing both dimensions, the works analysed in this paper avoid the oversimplified notion that the Troubles were solely the monolithic experience of a few men, whether in the army or paramilitary groups, who were entirely accountable for their own fate in a 30-year political conflict. Instead, they reflect the complexity of the Troubles, which influenced every aspect of life without reducing individuals to living solely through the prism of tragedy. By neither shying away from the worst nor ignoring resilience in the face of it, these works acknowledge the full spectrum of human experience during the Troubles.

3. *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, *Derry Girls* and the memory of the Troubles

More than 25 years after the official end of the conflict, the study of memory has become an increasingly significant field of research. In this context, examining the role of representations of the Troubles is crucial. Today, the consequences of the civil war are still felt, particularly in light of Brexit, and while the situation differs from that depicted in *Big Girl, Small Town*, the country remains fractured.[162] Culture, especially pop culture, plays a pivotal role in shaping memory by reaching a broad audience and crafting a shared reality.

Pop culture, through the mechanism of cultural memory, helps to develop a sense of unity and distinctiveness within a group. It enables the reconstruction of past experiences within a contemporary context, thereby influencing the group's self-image and, consequently, their identity.[163] Through this process, group identity can be sustained over time, which, in a society as divided as Northern Ireland, could be pivotal in unifying the country. Cultural memory may be the key to moving forward, fostering a new identity that transcends existing communities. Therefore, this chapter aims to understand the role these books and series could play in shaping the collective memory of the Troubles.

a. Memory in Northern Ireland

As Northern Ireland continues to deal with the aftermath of the Troubles, creating a shared narrative to move beyond this period remains challenging. The taboo surrounding the conflict persists, with political efforts to address the subject often resulting in each side emphasising their own memories in opposition to those of the other group.[164] In any conflict, the concept of truth is inherently relative, but this relativity is particularly pronounced in the case of the Troubles, where the two versions of truth rarely coexist harmoniously. However, as

---

[162] C. Landow, J. McBride, "Moving Past the Troubles: The Future of Northern Ireland Peace" on *Council of Foreign Relations* (online), 16 February 2024, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/moving-past-troubles-future-northern-ireland-peace (accessed 7 August 2024).
[163] J. Assman, J. Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" in *New German Critique*, vol. 65, Spring-Summer 1995, pp. 125-133.
[164] J.M. McAuley, "Through a single lens? Understanding the Troubles of the past, present and future" in J.M. McAuley (ed.), *Troubles of the Past? History, Identity and Collective Memory in Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2023, pp. 1-13.

the focus shifts from justice and retribution to personal memories, culture plays a significant role in shaping the memory of the conflict.[165]

Memory extends beyond historical boundaries, encompassing both individual experiences and communal expectations. The memory of the Troubles is often framed through a religious lens, with narratives aligning with the perceived "good" side. This specific representation of memory influences public perception by constructing, deconstructing, or reconstructing a version of the period's reality. Fiction plays a crucial role in this process, as it represents a simplified reality that is easily understandable and can shape a lasting version of the past.

Thus, the issue of the memory of the Troubles can be examined though three interrelated aspects: the construction of a past, the acceptance of it as reality within each group, and the outcomes arising from this collective memory.[166] This complexity is compounded by the current political reconciliation process. While the goal is to find a balance that prevents further conflict, the accepted version of the truth risks silencing alternative discourses.[167]

Nonetheless, as the silence surrounding the conflict continues to impede progress in Northern Ireland, engaging in discussions about this historical period and its impact is essential for breaking free from entrenched narratives and move through reconciliation.[168] It is crucial to shift focus towards current identities, outside of community divisions, in order to create a more complex understanding of the events.[169] The personal yet universal representation found in the works analysed in this paper could significantly influence the shaping of the collective memory of the conflict.

b. What impact on memory?

If moving forward from the same biased representation of the Troubles is essential for shaping a new collective memory of the events, *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry*

---

[165] J.M. McAuley, "Through a single lens? Understanding the Troubles of the past, present and future" in J.M. McAuley (ed.), *Troubles of the Past? History, Identity and Collective Memory in Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2023, pp. 1-13.
[166] *Ibid*
[167] *Ibid*.
[168] *Ibid*.
[169] G. Spencer, "The problem of legacy and remembering the past in Northern Ireland" in J.M. McAuley, *Troubles of the Past? History, Identity and Collective Memory in Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2023, pp. 222-242.

Girls have a significant role to play in this process through their unique portrayal of the conflict. By focusing on women, these works open the memory of the Troubles to a segment of the population that has historically been marginalised in articulating its experiences. In doing so, they broaden the scope of collective memory, encompassing not only women but also all those who were not active participants in the conflict. This shift creates a more nuanced perspective of the Troubles, acknowledging that most people were aligned with a side without necessarily being prepared to die for their beliefs.

Although the protagonists of these works are all Catholics, religion and political ideologies are rarely emphasised. This approach fosters a sense of shared cultural memory. These characters are Catholic and, by extension, Unionist, having been born into that side of their community. However, their experiences are presented in a way that allows for identification and empathy across sectarian divides. In this way, these works contribute to a collective memory that transcends division, focusing instead on the shared reality and legacy of the conflict. This is where their role is most impactful: shifting attention from differences to the similarities between opposing camps.

By avoiding the overly simplistic "good versus evil" narrative, these books and series encourage a more nuanced discussion about the pervasive impacts of the conflict. This perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of the Troubles than previous popular culture representations have provided. Addressing the three key issues surrounding the memory of the Troubles, *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls* engage with all three main aspects of memory listed earlier: they construct a nuanced past, encourage debate, and centre on the experiences of ordinary people. By presenting a reality as detached from religious and political beliefs as possible, these works promote broader acceptance from both sides and ultimately contribute to a more complex and inclusive memory of the era.[170]

[170] G. Spencer, "The problem of legacy and remembering the past in Northern Ireland" in J.M. McAuley, *Troubles of the Past? History, Identity and Collective Memory in Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2023, pp. 222-242.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the shift in the representation of the Troubles as depicted in three primary works: *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls*. By focusing on various elements, we aimed to understand the role of humour in reinterpreting this complex historical period. The nuanced depiction of everyday life in these works opens up new historical reflections that resonate with a broader audience through their respective genres. Additionally, our findings shed light on the role of media in shaping collective memory.

Beginning with the historical context of the Troubles and their representation in numerous films, and by association, literature, this dissertation concentrated on two recent novels and a television series that depart from traditional historical drama to address the conflict through humour. Satire, dark humour, and simple jokes provide a fresh perspective on life during the civil war, focusing on ordinary people rather than the men fighting for their communities or serving in the military. Historical dramas often focus on significant events and prominent figures of the Troubles. However, this portrayal is far removed from the reality experienced by most people in Northern Ireland at the time. In the midst of traumatic events, such as bombings or riots, there is little time to note the irony or make light of the situation. Yet, when trauma becomes a part of daily life for 30 years, people inevitably turn to humour as a coping mechanism.

This is the narrative presented by the three primary works; humour was a vital tool for coping, employed daily by people during the conflict. While it is important to highlight the most violent episodes to illustrate the worst moments, the Troubles were more than just these events. The lingering impact of the Troubles remains significant today, as the population of Northern Ireland continues to live in the direct aftermath of the conflict.[171] Addressing this trauma is crucial for moving forward. Popular culture, with its ability to reach a wide audience, plays a pivotal role in this process. However, focusing solely on events like Bloody Sunday may not be the most effective approach to ensuring everyone feels acknowledged.

Portraying the conflict as a daily trauma that fostered surveillance and hatred among the population, emphasising the ongoing impact of missing persons, and highlighting the

---

[171] *Jamie opens up about her own childhood in Derry*, Channel 4 Documentaries (YouTube), 6 February 2023, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/44fsWkHRIeQ (accessed 11 August 2024).

subtle, insidious effects could help people recognise that, even if they were not direct victims of the conflict, their trauma is still valid. Moreover, showing the absurdity and lack of sense of the situations, and allowing individuals from opposing sides to realise that their lives were not so different, may foster new dialogue in a fractured society.

Nonetheless, this dissertation has a limited scope. While humour offers a new representation of the Troubles, the aim here was not to measure the impact of the series or books on the Northern Irish population. The selection of primary works is also limited and contrasts with a stereotypical previous representation of events. A large body of work contributes to creating a more nuanced view of historical realities; *Milkman*, *Big Girl Small Town*, and *Derry Girls* may not revolutionise the representation of the Troubles, but they do contribute to a more subtle and accurate portrayal of the period.

This dissertation also focused on representations of the Troubles created by, and primarily for, the people of Northern Ireland. Given the conflict's history, both the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain were deeply involved, and the trauma experienced by their populations—whether through exposure to bombings and shootings or concern for soldiers stationed in Northern Ireland—remains significant. The qualitative analysis conducted here complicates the examination of how these experiences are represented in popular culture or any shifts that may have occurred.

Another element to consider is the bias inherent in the selected works. Anna Burns, Michelle Gallen, and Lisa McGee were not neutral in their writing. All three works feature young Catholic women as protagonists and were written by Catholic women. While these works focus on their characters and rarely explore the Protestant perspective, this does not diminish the presence of bias. Additionally, since no comparison is made with similar pop culture elements written by Protestants, all conclusions must account for this bias.

Nevertheless, this opens up new avenues for research, particularly from a feminist perspective. Michelle Gallen has noted the relationship between Milkman and her own novel:

> [...]but I feel both books are part of a conversation female writers are having about the experience of being identified as "female" during and after the conflict in Northern Ireland, and how that dictates how you are expected to live your life.[172]

[172] J. Gordon, “The PEN Ten: An Interview with Michelle Gallen” on *Pen America* (online), 3 December 2020, https://pen.org/the-pen-ten-michelle-gallen/ (accessed 11 August 2024).

These books, through their representation of the Troubles and their impact on the lives of girls and women during and after the conflict, warrant further study. It is also evident that a significant factor in the shift in representation is that women are now telling their stories. The subversive portrayal of girls and women in *Derry Girls* would be an interesting point of comparison. While the middle sister and Majella still seem to fall into the role of victims of their circumstances, as is often the case with women in Irish cultural representation, this is not true for the *Derry Girls*, who are portrayed as confident and strong.[173]

Another area for future research is the contemporary portrayal of the Troubles in popular culture. With the success of *Derry Girls*, a new focus has emerged on the reality of Northern Ireland. *Big Girl Small Town* is likely to reach a wider audience as it is adapted for television.[174] Lisa McGee's upcoming production, *How To Get To Heaven From Belfast*, will likely also touch on the consequences of the Troubles, as it is set in the present but addresses the secrets in the pasts of a group of Irish women.[175] I must also mention the Belfast-based hip-hop band *Kneecap*, who sing in a mix of Irish and English. Their satirical, humour-filled songs reflect the reality of life in Belfast, where they never experienced the Troubles firsthand but live with their consequences, having been raised by parents who lived through them for much of their lives.[176]

In conclusion, while this dissertation has explored the evolving representation of the Troubles through humour in recent works, it only scratches the surface of a much broader and more complex subject. The impact of these narratives on contemporary Northern Irish society remains an open question, but they undeniably contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this painful period. As new voices continue to emerge, especially from those who lived through the conflict or its aftermath, there is hope that these stories will help foster dialogue, healing, and perhaps a deeper sense of shared experience among those still living in its shadow.

---

[173] R. Thompson, "'Derry Girls' portrayal of Northern Irish women is a breath of fresh air" on *Mashable* (online), 25 February 2019, https://mashable.com/article/derry-girls-northern-irish-women-portrayal (accessed 11 August 2024).
[174] J. Creamer, "Lookout Point to adapt Michelle Gallen's Big Girl Small Town" on *Televisual* (online), 21 October 2020, https://www.televisual.com/news/lookout-point-to-adapt-michelle-gallens-big-girl-small-town/ (accessed 11 August 2024).
[175] C. Ross, "How To Get To Heaven From Belfast sees Derry Girls creator explore female friendship in your 30s" on *Glamour* (online), 18 July 2024, https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/how-to-get-to-heaven-from-belfast-tv-series (accessed 11 August 2024).
[176] U. Mullally, "Kneecap: 'Low-life scum' of west Belfast rap whose day has come" on *The Irish Times* (online), 12 April 2019, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/kneecap-low-life-scum-of-west-belfast-rap-whose-day-has-come-1.3854738 (accessed 11 August 2024).

Bibliography

1. Primary works

A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018.

L. McGee, *Derry Girls*, United Kingdom, Channel 4, 2018- 2022.

M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020.

2. Secondary works

Scientific literature: Books

B. Barton (ed.), P.J. Roche (ed.), *The Northern Ireland Question: Nationalism, Unionism and Partition,* London, Routledge, 1999.

D. McKitten, D. McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The story of the conflict in Northern Ireland*, London, Penguin, 2012.

I. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland. Film, Culture and Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

J. Aumont, M. Marié, L'analyse des Films, Paris, Fernand Nathan, 1997.

J. Tonge, *Northern Ireland: Conflict and Change,* London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 127-139.

J.M. McAuley (ed.), *Troubles of the Past? History, Identity and Collective Memory in Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2023.

J.R. Kurtz, *Trauma and Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

J.W. McAuley (ed.), M. Braniff (ed.), G. Spencer (ed.), *Troubles of the Past? History, Identity and Collective Memory in Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2023.

M. Mulholland, *Northern Ireland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020.

M. O'Doherty, *The Year of Chaos. Northern Ireland on the Brink of Civil War, 1971-1972*, London, Atlantic Books, 2021.

M. Power, *Building Peace in Northern Ireland*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2011, pp.53-72.

M. Richtarik, *Getting to Good Friday*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 18-33.

M.S. Roth, *Trauma*, *Representation and Historical Consciousness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011.

R. A. Rosenstone, *History on Film Film on History*, 3rd ed, New York, Routledge, 2018.

R. Bourke, *Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas*, Random House, 2003.

R. Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, London, Routledge, 1996.

T.P. Coogan, *The Troubles*, London, Head of Zeus, 2002.

V. Raskin (ed.), *The Primer of Humor Research*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2008.

Scientific literature: Book chapters

G. Gudgin, “Discrimination in Housing and Employment under the Stormont Administration” in P.J. Roche (ed.), B. Bardon (ed.) *The Northern Ireland Question: Nationalism, unionism and partition*, London, Routledge, 1999, pp. 97-121.

G. Smyth, “The Novel and the North” in *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction*, London, Pluto Press, 1997, pp. 113-117.

J.R. Kurtz, “Introduction” in *Trauma and Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 1-17.

K. Rockett, L. Gibbons, J. Hill, “Images of Violence” in *Cinema and Ireland*, London, Routledge, 1988, pp.152-160.

S. Campbell, “’We are the people’: Protestant Identity and Collective Action in Northern Ireland, 1968-1985” in D.D. Fazio (ed.), *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2017, pp. 129-146.

T. Cohen, “Humour” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetic*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 425-431.

V. Membrive, “Banalising Evil?: Humour in Lisa McGee's Derry Girls” in D. Tüysüz (ed.), *International Perspectives on Rethinking Evil in Film and Television*, Hersey PA, IGI Global, 2021, pp. 164-175.

Journal articles

A. Ziv, “The Social Function of Humor in Interpersonal Relationships” in *Society*, vol. 47, pp. 11-18.

B. O’Leary, “The Shackles of the State & Hereditary Animosities: Colonialism in the Interpretation of Irish History” in *Field Day Review*, vol. 10, 2014, pp.148-185.

E. Cairns, J. Darby, “The Conflict in Northern Ireland: Cause, consequences, and controls” in *American* Psychologist, vol.53, n°7, 1998, pp. 754-760

F.S. Danaci, “Surviving the Oppression in the Time of the Troubles: Anna Burns’s Milkman” in *Litera*, vol.30, n°2, 2020, pp. 289-305.

G. Dawson, “Trauma, Place and the Politics of Memory: Bloody Sunday, Derry, 1972-2004” in *History Workshop Journal*, n°59, Spring 2005, pp.151-178.

H. O’Brien, « Review » in *Cinéaste*, vol. 25, n°4, 2000, pp. 54-57.

I. Hill, « Staging the Troubles » in *Theatre Ireland*, vol.31, Summer 1993, pp. 42-46

J. Assman, J. Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity” in *New German Critique*, vol. 65, Spring-Summer 1995, pp. 125-133.

J.B. Garrett, “Ten Years of British Troops in Northern Ireland” in *International Security*, vol.4, n°3, Winter 1979-80, pp. 80-104.

J.D. Fair, “The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921: Unionist Aspects of the Peace” in *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 12, n°1, 1972, pp. 132-149.

L.E. Mintz, “Humour and Popular Culture” in V. Raskin, *The Primer of Humour Research*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2008, pp. 281-201.

M. Buckley, “Irish Easter Rising of 1916” in *Social Science*, vol. 31, n°1, Jan. 1956, pp.49-55.

M. Morales-Ladron, “On docile bodies: silence, control and surveillance as self-imposed disciplines in Anna Burns’ Milkman” in *Irish Studies Review*, vol.31, 2023, pp. 265-279.

M.A. Deiana, “Feel the Trouble(s) Around You: Sensing the Everyday Politics of Conflict through Anna Burns' Milkman” in PARISS, vol.3, 2022, pp. 29-39.

O. Muldoon, “Children of the Troubles: The Impact of Political Violence in Northern Ireland” in *Journal of Societal Issues*, vol.60, n°3, September 2004, pp. 453-459.

P. Beata, “The ‘Unspeakableness’ of life in Northern Ireland: Anna Burns's ‘Milkman’” in *Litteraria Copernicana*, vol.3, n°3, 2020, pp. 105-44.

P. Doherty, M.A. Poole, “Ethnic Residential Segregation in Belfast, Northern Ireland, 1971-1991” in *Geographical Review*, vol.87, n°4, October 1997, pp. 520-536.

P. McDonagh, “The Good Friday Agreement: 1998” in *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol.31, n°1, Summer 2004, pp.12-22.

R. Breen, “Class Inequality and Social Mobility in Northern Ireland, 1973 to 1996” in *American Sociological Review*, vol.65, n°3, June 2000, pp.392-406.

R. Gillespie, “After the Flight: The Plantation of Ulster” in *History Ireland*, vol. 14, n°4, 2007, pp.40-45.

R. Kishor Singh, “Humour, Irony and Satire in Literature” in *International Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 3, n°4, pp.65-72.

R. Munck, “The Making of the Troubles in Northern Ireland” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 27, n°2, April 1992, pp. 211-229.

R.J. Spjut, “Internment and Detention without Trial in Northern Ireland 1971-1975: Ministerial Policy and Practice” in *The Modern Law Review*, vol. 49, n°6, November 1986, pp. 712-740.

S. McEvoy, “Communities and Peace: Catholic Youth in Northern Ireland” in *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.37, n°1, January 2000, pp.85-103.

S. Wolff, “The Road to Peace? The Good Friday Agreement and the Conflict in Northern Ireland” in *World Affairs*, vol.163, n°4, Spring 2001, pp. 163-180.

T. White, “Generational Change and Redefining Identities: Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland” in *Peace Research*, vol.45, n°2, 2013, pp. 95-117.

U. Ümit Üngör, V.A. Verkerke, “Funny as Hell: The function of humour during and after genocide” in *European Journal of Humour Research*, vol. 3, n°2/3, August 2015, pp. 80-101.

Thesis and dissertations

J. Genot, *The Representation of the Northern Irish Conflict at the Cinema*, Louvain-la-Neuve, UCLouvain, 2017-2018.

L. Campos Souza, *The Absence of Names and the Lost Individuality in* Milkman *by Anna Burns*, Brasilia, Universidade de Brasilisa, 2019.

M. Admana Furqon As'Ari, *Racism as Reflected Through Entropic Comedy in Blakkklansman movie (a Structuralism Approach)*, Surakarta, Raden Mas Said, 2023.

M. Parekh, *Humor Perception in Men and Women: Effect of Joke Type and Gender of Joke Target*, College Station, Texas A&M University, 1999.

R. Mihaughany, *Who's Laughing Now? Comedy as Coping Mechanism and Critique in Paul Beatty's* The Sellout, Virginia, University of Mary Washington, 2014.

Newspaper and blog articles

A. McKinty, “Milkman by Anna Burns review: Impressive, wordy and often funny” in *The Irish Times* (online), 12 May 2018, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/milkman-review-impressive-wordy-and-often-funny-1.3484139 (accessed on 25 June 2024).

A. Russel, “How the Creator of “Derry Girls” Found Humor in a Troubled Time” in *The New Yorker* (online), 2 June 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/how-the-creator-of-derry-girls-found-humor-in-a-troubled-time (accessed 3 August 2024).

A. Russel, “How the Creator of “Derry Girls” Found Humor in a Troubled Time” on *The New Yorker* (online), 2 June 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/how-the-creator-of-derry-girls-found-humor-in-a-troubled-time (accessed 6 August 2024).

B. Kelly, “How Derry Girls tells the true story of a city where laughter conquers all” in *The Independent* (online), 5 March 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-

entertainment/tv/features/derry-girls-season-two-mural-troubles-northern-ireland-watch-netflix-a8797261.html (accessed 3 August 2024).

C. Ross, "How To Get To Heaven From Belfast sees Derry Girls creator explore female friendship in your 30s" on *Glamour* (online), 18 July 2024, https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/how-to-get-to-heaven-from-belfast-tv-series (accessed 11 August 2024).

D. Slucki, "Too soon? The case for Holocaust humour" on *The Conversation* [online], 1 October 2012, https://theconversation.com/too-soon-the-case-for-holocaust-humour-9894 (accessed 10 July 2024).

J. Creamer, "Lookout Point to adapt Michelle Gallen's Big Girl Small Town" on *Televisual* (online), 21 October 2020, https://www.televisual.com/news/lookout-point-to-adapt-michelle-gallens-big-girl-small-town/ (accessed 11 August 2024).

J. Gordon, "The PEN Ten: An Interview with Michelle Gallen" on *Pen America* (online), 3 December 2020, https://pen.org/the-pen-ten-michelle-gallen/ (accessed 11 August 2024).

L. Allardice, "'It's nice to feel I'm solvent. That's a huge gift': Anna Burns on her life-changing Booker win" on *The Guardian* (online), 17 October 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/17/anna-burns-booker-prize-winner-life-changing-interview. (accessed 11 August 2024).

M. Melaugh, "The Omagh Bomb – Main Events" on *Cain* (web service), Ulster University, 14 May 2024, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/omagh/events.htm (accessed on 25 June 2024).

N. Jones, "My Northern-Irish Family Reviews Derry Girls" on Vulture (online), 21 August 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/08/netflix-derry-girls-northern-irish-family.html (accessed 11 August 2024).

R. Thompson, "'Derry Girls' portrayal of Northern Irish women is a breath of fresh air" on *Mashable* (online), 25 February 2019, https://mashable.com/article/derry-girls-northern-irish-women-portrayal (accessed 11 August 2024).

T. Beer, "The Long Road to Big Girl Small Town" on Kirkus Reviews, 30 November 2020, https://www.kirkusreviews.com/news-and-features/articles/michelle-gallen-big-girl-small-town-interview/ (accessed 10 August 2024).

U. Mullally, "Kneecap: 'Low-life scum' of west Belfast rap whose day has come" on *The Irish Times* (online), 12 April 2019, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/music/kneecap-low-life-scum-of-west-belfast-rap-whose-day-has-come-1.3854738 (accessed 11 August 2024).

Encyclopaedia articles and dictionary definitions

"Pop Culture" on Cambridge Dictionary (online), https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/pop-culture (accessed 10 August 2024).

"Satire" in *Cambridge Dictionary* (online), https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/satire (accessed 24 June 2024).

"Sitcom" on The Britannica Dictionary (online), https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/sitcom.

A. Koestler, "Situational humour" in *Britannica* (online), https://www.britannica.com/topic/humor/Situational-humor (accessed 3 August 2024).

C. H. Hoy, "Comedy" in *Britannica* (online), https://www.britannica.com/art/comedy (accessed 3 August 2024).

J. Wallenfeldt, "the Troubles" on *Britannica*, Britannica, 7 June 2024, https://www.britannica.com/event/The-Troubles-Northern-Ireland-history (accessed on 25 June 2024).

J.E. Lubering, "Dark Humour" in *Britannica* (online), https://www.britannica.com/topic/black-humor (accessed 27 June 2024).

R.C. Elliott, "Satire" in *Britannica* (online), https://www.britannica.com/art/satire (accessed 24 June 2024).

Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.), 'Category: Works about The Troubles (Northern Ireland)', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Works_about_The_Troubles_(Northern_Ireland)

Works of literature

F. O'Toole, *We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland*, New York, Liveright, 2022.

L. Kennedy, *Trespasses*, New York, Riverhead Books, 2022.

M. Gallen, *Factory Girls*, London, John Murray Press, 2023.

P. Beatty, *The Sellout*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

P.R. Keefe, *Say Nothing*, New York, Doubleday, 2019.

R. McLiam Wilson, *Ripley Bogle*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1989.

Audiovisual sources

A. DuVernay, *Selma*, 20th Century Fox, 2014.

J. Sheridan, *In the Name of the Father*, United Kingdom, United International Pictures, 1993.

J. Siemien, *Dear White People*, United State, Netflix, 2017-2021.

K. Branagh, *Belfast*, United Kingdom, Universal Pictures, 2021.

P. Greengraas, *Bloody Sunday*, United State, Feature Film Company, 2002.

S. Lee, *Malcolm X*, Largo International, 1992.

S. McQueen, *Hunger*, United Kingdom, Pathé Distribution, 2008.

Others

C. Landow, J. McBride, "Moving Past the Troubles: The Future of Northern Ireland Peace" on *Council of Foreign Relations* (online), 16 February 2024, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/moving-past-troubles-future-northern-ireland-peace (accessed 7 August 2024).

Independent Commission For The Location Of Victims Remains, *The Disappeared* via http://www.iclvr.ie/en/ICLVR/Pages/TheDisappeared (Accessed 5 August 2024).

Jamie opens up about her own childhood in Derry, Channel 4 Documentaries (YouTube), 6 February 2023, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/44fsWkHRIeQ (accessed 11 August 2024).

L. Burke, *Lessons from Northern Ireland: Policing, Polarization and Moving Forward*, German Marshall Fund of the United State, 2020.

M. Gallen, "Child of the Troubles" in *Book Club Kit*, via michellegallen.com, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f79b0ce8523ab39c875bd10/t/5fc7f512bc205d67881cabc0/1606939941337/gallen_bgst_bookclubkit_final.pdf (accessed 28 July 2024).

S. White, *Policing Reforms in the Aftermath of Conflict: Justice and Security Sector Reform Lessons From Northern Ireland for Peacebuilding and Countering Violent Extremism - A Practitioner's Perspective*, Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2018.

Appendix 1

Original text:

Understanding humour, especially in the context of cultural nuances, can be challenging, particularly when it is crafted by and for a specific audience. When addressing the complex topic of the Troubles, the works being analysed demand a deep understanding of this historical context to fully grasp the comedic elements. The characters play a crucial role in shaping the humour. While Erin, the main character of Derry Girls, is a typical teenager, leading to humour that is more universally accessible, the middle sister and Majella, from the two books, are young women with challenging social skills, resulting in a more niche and particular humour. Because humour often hinges on shared experiences and social dynamics, much of the humour in these works may be difficult for those outside this demographic to fully appreciate. To counterbalance this effect and to avoid breaking the humour, this paper will explain some elements and their context to ensure a better understanding.

ChatGPT prompt:

Revise the following text to make it more concise and academic while keeping the structure and ideas of the original.

Final version (as seen on p.6):

Understanding humour, especially in the context of cultural nuances, is challenging, particularly when crafted by and for a specific audience. When addressing the complex topic of the Troubles, these works demand a deep understanding of the historical context to fully appreciate the comedic elements. The characters play a crucial role in shaping this humour. While Erin, the protagonist of Derry Girls, is a typical teenager whose experiences lead to more universally accessible humour, the characters of middle sister and Majella in the novels are socially challenged which results in a more niche and particular form of humour. Because humour often hinges on shared experiences and social dynamics, much of the humour in these works may be difficult for those outside this demographic to fully grasp. To mitigate this, the paper will explain relevant elements and their context to ensure a broader understanding.

Appendix 2

Source: A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 25

He'd homed in on that flag issue, the flags-and-emblems issue, instinctive and emotional because flags were invented to be instinctive and emotional – often pathologically, narcissistically emotional – and he meant that flag of the country from 'over the water' which was also the same flag of the community from 'over the road'. It was not a flag greatly welcomed in our community. Not a flag at all welcomed in our community. There weren't any, not any, this side of the road. What I was gathering therefore, for I was not up on cars but was up on flags and emblems, was that those vintage, classic Blower Bentleys made in that country 'over the water' came with the flag on from that country 'over the water'. Reading between the lines therefore, of maybe-boyfriend's neighbour's comment – what was maybe-boyfriend doing, he implied, not only partaking in a raffle in which he might have won the bit with the flag on, but what was he doing, partaking in a raffle to win any bit – flag or no flag – of such a patriotic, nation-defining, 'over the water' symbol at all? Historical injustice, he said. Repressive legislation, he said. Practice of and pacts for, he said. Artificial boundaries, he said. Propping up of corruption, he said. Arrest without charge, he said. Declaration of curfews, he said. Imprisonment without trial, he said. Proscription of meetings, he said. Prohibition of inquests, he said. Institutionalised violation of sovereignty and territory, he said. Hot and cold treatments, he said. Anything, he said. In the name of law and order. All that was what he said though even then that wasn't what he meant. What he meant – underneath all the interpretation of that flag business was the driving home of the other business which was that the flag from 'over the water' was also that same flag from 'over the road'. 'Over the road' was viewed in our community as more 'over the water' than actual 'over the water', with the flag perceived to be flown there with more proximity and grandiosity than ever could muster – try as it might – the territory it came from in the first place. To come from this side of the road – our side – and to bring that flag in then, was divisive, indicative too, of a traitorous kowtowing and a betrayal most monstrous over which even informers and those who marry-out would be held in higher esteem. This of course was all part of the political problems here which I, for one, didn't like to get into. Amazing it was though, how much inflammatory suggestion could be gotten over in a few comments. Even so, yer man hadn't finished yet.

'I mean like I mean,' he said, 'don't get me wrong or anything, and obviously I'm saying this from a place of humility, and it's not that I've got experience in desiring to take part in anything disloyal to my own community, something that might involve winning something that had that flag on, then bringing it home, then being proud to have it in my area instead of being ashamed to have it my area. Far be it from me too, to asperse anything or anybody, to sow seeds of rancour. I'm not a stirrer- upper of rules or a summariser of conclusions and no expert am I either, or inciter, or bigot; in fact, ignorant as I am and gingerly as I hesitate to voice an opinion but ...' – then he repeated all that about no matter how famous and coveted was the thing with the flag on, he himself wouldn't deign to legitimate such an ensign of oppression, of tragedy, of tyranny, not to mention the bad taste left in the mouth of losing face, not so much to the country 'over the water' as to that community 'over the road'. More to the point, he said, someone bringing that flag into a staunchly anti-establishment district could open himself to

accusations of traitorship and of informership. So yes, flags were emotional. Primevally so. At least here.

So that was what he was about – that maybe-boyfriend was a traitor – and it was at this point maybe-boyfriend's friends started in on his defence. 'He doesn't have that bit with the flag on,' they said. 'Anyone can see that that supercharger has no flag on it.' They were angry rather than dismissive in that, no matter how unlikely that flag would appear on 'this side of the road' on 'this side of the water', thing was, these were paranoid times. These were knife-edge times, primal times, with everybody suspicious of everybody. You could have a nice wee conversation with someone here, then go away and think, that was a nice, wee unguarded conversation I just had there – least until you start playing it back in your head later on. At that point you start to worry that you said 'this' or 'that', not because 'this' or 'that' were contentious. It was that people were quick to point fingers, to judge, to add on even in peaceful times, so it would be hard to fathom fingers not getting pointed and words not being added, also being judged in these turbulent times, resulting too, not in having your feelings hurt upon discovering others were talking about you, as in having individuals in balaclavas and Halloween masks, guns at the ready, turning up in the middle of the night at your door. By now maybe-boyfriend's friends were pointing to the supercharger and it was clear there was no flag on it. 'Anyway,' they said, 'those cars didn't always come with flags on.' 'Besides,' ventured a neighbour – and this was one brave neighbour considering the others, in contrast to their earlier enthusiasm, had now grown silent – 'would it not be okay, because of what it is and all, of how rare it is, to take it if you won it even if it did come with that flag on, then to bring it home and cover the flag with a bomber aircraft sticker – say, a B29 Superfortress Joltin' Josie sticker, or a Superfortress Girl Dressed In Not Very Much sticker, or A Bit o' Lace B17 Flying Fortress sticker, or a sticker of Minnie Mouse or Olive Oyl or the planet Pluto or even a wee photo of your ma or a bigger one of Marilyn Monroe?' He was trying hard, this diplomat, stressing reference to the exceptions, to those dispensations, the individuals and situations here that were afforded exemption from bigotry, from prejudice, from exclusion. These would be the rock stars, the film stars, the culture stars, sports people, those of exceptional fame or of some highest personal endeavour. Might it not be the case, he intimated, that this crossover category also include superchargers from Blower Bentleys? Could not desire and rarity, he urged, be sufficient for the supercharger to be granted leeway, or was it to be the case that that flag was too big an impediment for one side of the divide – our side in this instance – to be overlooked and let through?

Appendix 3

The personal trauma as seen in *Big Girl Small Town* & *Derry Girls*:

The case of the disappearance of Majella's father: "But she wondered what he told other people about her. About her ma. Her da. She'd sometimes wondered if he knew where her da had gone. For all she knew, the whole town knew where he was, and it was just her and her ma who didn't. That was often the way of it."

> Source: M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, pp. 109-110.

Michelle as a brother in prison due to is paramilitary activities, his mother refuse to visit him and forbid other to do so. The situation is addressed in the last episode, here in a conversation between Erin and Michelle, as Michelle does not want to get her hopes up if the Agreement in not accepted:

> Erin: You don't actually think he should get out, do you?
>
> Michelle: He's me brother.
>
> Erin: He killed someone.
>
> Michelle: I know that, Erin.
>
> James: I'm not sure we should be talking about this.
>
> Erin: Isn't this exactly what we should be talking about?
>
> Source: "The Agreement" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 3, episode 7, Channel 4, 2022.

The collective trauma as seen in *Big Girl Small Town* & *Derry Girls*:

The normalcy of the Troubles and their importance in people's lives: "Majella had watched the funeral on the news with a neighbor, who had murmured "Long Runs the Fox" as the camera closed in on her da and granny standing stunned by the graveside. She watched her granny flinch as masked men shot a volley over her uncle's coffin. It was years before Majella realised that not everyone got a volley of gunshots over their grave."

> Source: M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, pp. 54-55.

The fear of the Orange Marches that makes the whole Quinn family leave Derry: "You know what age I am boy? You know how many of these parades I've lived through? You think I don't realise how quickly a situation can turn? Do you think I'll do anything to put my family at risk?"

> Source: "Episode 5" in *Derry Girls,* created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 5, Channel 4, 2018.

Community and identity as seen *Milkman* & *Derry Girls*

"The names not allowed were not allowed for the reason they were too much of the country 'over the water', with it no matter that some of those names hadn't originated in that country but instead had been appropriated and put to use by the people of that land. The banned names were understood to have

become infused with the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict, enjoinments and resisted impositions as laid down long ago in this country by that country, with the original nationality of the name now not in the running at all."

Source: A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 23.

The opposition between the communities is as they list their differences, and thus show how deep the communities run: "Protestants are richer. [...] Catholics really buzz off statues and we don't so much. [...] Protestants like to march and Catholics like to walk. [...] Catholics watch RTE! Protestants love cleaning! Protestants are taller! Catholics have more freckles. Protestants hate Abba."

Source: "Across the Barricades" in *Derry Girls*, created by Lisa McGuee, season 2, episode 1, Channel 4, 2019.

A woman's perspective as seen *Milkman* & *Derry Girls*:

The middle sister discuss the difference created between boys and girls: "I could not say so, however, for I could not be fitter than this man, could not be more knowledgeable about my own regime than this man, because the conditioning of males and females here would never have allowed that. This was the 'I'm male and you're female' territory. This was what you could say if you were a girl to a boy, or a woman to a man, or a girl to a man, and what you were not – least not officially, least not in public, least not often – permitted to say. This was certain girls not being tolerated if it was deemed they did not defer to males, did not acknowledge the superiority of males, might even go so far as almost to contradict males, basically, the female wayward, a species insolent and far too sure of herself."

Source: A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 7-8.

Michelle is breaking the numerous norms, for example talking directly about sex from the first episode and, worst, talking about having sex with a British soldier: "But do you think if I told him I had an incendiary device down my knickers, he'd have a look? [...] Ach, some of them are all right. I'm willing to admit it, even if nobody else will, because I'm a beacon of truth, Erin."

Source: "Episode 1" in *Derry Girls*, created by Lisa McGuee, season 1, episode 1, Channel 4, 2018.

Youth as seen in *Milkman* & *Big Girl Small Town*:

The middle sister addresses rather directly the impact of the Troubles on her youth: "I knew even as a child – maybe because I was a child – that this wasn't really physical; knew the impression of a pall, of some distorted quality to the light had to do with the political problems, with the hurts that had come, the troubles that had built, with the loss of hope and absence of trust and with a mental incapacitation over which nobody seemed willing or able to prevail."

Source: Source: A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 89-90.

The youth is used to the Troubles who are a source of fun more than a source of worry: "While she was at school there were only the riots around the Orange marches to look forward to in the run up to summer, or the odd bomb or gun attack for a bit of excitement."

Source: M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, p. 42.

The difference in generations as seen in *Milkman* & *Big Girl Small Town*

The middle sister's mother is implementing the "rules" of the community to all her children, northing is without consequences: "Anytime she'd get whiff I might be dating (never through me), I couldn't walk in the door but it would be, 'Is he the right religion?' followed by 'Is he not already married?' It was vital, after the right religion, that he be not already married. And because I continued to give nothing, this became proof he wasn't the right religion, that he was married and, more than likely, not only a paramilitary, but an enemy defender-of-the-state paramilitary as well."

Source: Source: A. Burns, *Milkman*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p. 46.

Majella is living with the consequences of the Troubles, trying to distance for them, when members of her family, like her father and godfather who were in the IRA: "The poster didn't upset Majella, for although Bobby had been her godfather, he was dead this sixteen years now and she had never really known him to begin with. She could remember him calling at the door, looking for her da, and them heading on together. The line they gave the police over and over again was that they were going fishing across the border, though they never brought fish home. When she'd asked her da about that, he'd said they sold their catch to a shop in Donegal as her ma couldn't stand the smell of fish cooking in the house. Majella had heard that Bobby'd done well in school—he'd achieved some of the best O-level results anyone had ever seen not just in Aghybogey, but in Northern Ireland. But nobody bothered to suggest teacher training to him. According to her ma, everyone knew where Bobby's ambitions lay from the minute he sauntered into St. Christopher's wearing a camouflage schoolbag decorated with a tri-color flag colored in on top of a blob of Tippex, and IRA ALL THE WAY biro'd on his left forearm. Local legend had it that this was a phrase he drew on his arm every morning, despite being forced to wash it off by the headmaster each and every day, until he had it tattooed on at the age of fourteen."

Source: M. Gallen, *Big Girl Small Town*, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2020, p. 53-45.

UNIVERSITÉ CATHOLIQUE DE LOUVAIN
Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres
Place Blaise Pascal, 1 bte L3.03.11, 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgique | **www.uclouvain.be/fial**