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THE 'MISERABLE' IRISH CHILDHOOD: THE UTILIZATION OF
YOUNG NARRATORS AS A WINDOW INTO NATIONAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC
STATUS

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ABSTRACT

The utilization of child narrators in contemporary Irish literature is not only a stylistic decision, but also effectively serves as socio-political commentary on Ireland's recent history. Narration filtered through the eyes of a child provides the reader with a heightened transparency, as young people lack jaded life experience that would otherwise influence social description. The narrators in the following novels, *The Butcher Boy* and *Breakfast on Pluto* by Patrick McCabe, *The Speckled People* by Hugo Hamilton, and *Reading in the Dark* by Seamus Deane employ simplistic, candid language to visibly capture coming-of-age situations. The concept of the 'miserable Irish childhood' readily emerges during the course of the novels, as each coming-of-age story capitalizes on obstacles and struggles unique to growing up in Ireland. As personal experiences shape each of the young narrators discussed, simultaneously transpiring national events shape Ireland. Prime Minister Éamon de Valera facilitates a period of cultural hegemony, which deeply impacts the narrators within *The Butcher Boy* and *The Speckled People*. Further, as the narrators reflect on their own childhood, the reader sees elements of Frantz Fanon's three stages of decolonization, imitation, return to traditional values, and a new identity. The undeniable challenges that come with the final stage of independence are evident within *The Butcher Boy* and *The Speckled People*. In *Breakfast on Pluto* and *Reading in the Dark*, the terrorist organization the Irish Republican Army plays a crucial role in the narrator's coming of age story. How each narrator handles the trauma of sectarian violence

reflects the polarized state of political unrest exacerbated by the IRA's controversial methods.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: A Brief History of Ireland Marked by Invasion and Oppression

Ireland's history is largely categorized by periods of invasion and sociopolitical oppression. In 1169, the British first arrived in Ireland during what is now called the "Norman Invasion, which profoundly altered the course of Irish affairs" (State 63). The arrival of British forces began a tradition of violent colonization that would continue for more than 700 years.

This paper will analyze the historical context that provides the backdrop for the four novels discussed. The political arena of Ireland during the mid 20th century was dominated by Éamon de Valera, Prime Minister of Ireland. De Valera "was a non-native – the New York-born son of a Spanish father and Irish mother" (*Chicago Tribune*). He "developed a deep interest in politics in time to risk everything for the 1916 Easter Rising" (*Chicago Tribune*), establishing himself as an important person in the early stages of Ireland's quest for independence. Following the Easter Rising, Éamon de Valera was a crucial figure during Ireland's campaign for independence, publically, and controversially, claiming to the international community that, "Ireland [is] now the last white nation deprived of its liberty" (Nelson 16). When Ireland finally received its independence in 1922, de Valera's opposition to Michael Collins's 1921 agreement led to a civil war that lasted the entire first year of Ireland's autonomy. After a year of failed negotiations, de Valera "took rapid steps to establish

a new national movement” (*Fianna Fáil: The Republican Party*). He remained Prime Minister for 16 years, and used his position to sever any socio-economic ties to Britain. During WWII, “De Valera, under threat of invasion by the British, ... stood firm for Ireland's neutrality, while at the same time accommodating the British by returning downed airmen” (Rotella 63).

As Prime Minister, de Valera sought to create a new identity for Ireland in the wake of its independence and the atrocities of WWII. He emphasized the importance of a homogenous Catholic population, and created an ideal familial structure, claiming “the church and the family were essential to Irish social life...[and] enshrined within the constitution of 1937 were clauses to guard with special care the institution of marriage and outlaw divorce” (Chapple 5). By “[celebrating] quintessentially American models of federalism, constitutionalism and judicial review”, De Valera advocated for a capitalist society with strong rural roots that utilized hegemonic rule (McCarthy 13). Through his political agenda, de Valera perpetuates a cultural hegemony by “[relying] on a dominant group’s ability to procure subordinate group’s consent to the existing social order” (Kim 6645). By anchoring the model of the ‘ideal’ Irish family within the Church, de Valera created a systematic continuation of cultural oppression. Still newly independent, Irish individuals felt pressured to live up to the religious and cultural ideals of the government, which is reflected in the proceeding works.

The authors explored in this paper all came of age during the tumultuous time in Ireland known as ‘The Troubles,’ which occurred following de Valera’s rule in the

1960s until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The civil unrest is evinced by the very real connection each narrator has to Ireland's national internal conflict.

Specifically, *Reading in the Dark* and *Breakfast on Pluto* call attention to additional pressures of sectarianism as a challenge to Irish self-hood. Throughout the period, the IRA exacerbated the aforementioned crisis as it "maintained its armed threat, helped launch the civil rights movement (although it was never a republican front), and used the resulting explosion to mobilise for a second revolution" (Hart 59). The characters in these works are challenged by their inevitable associations with sectarian social pressures and strife.

Compounded by the dual pressures of cultural hegemony and sectarianism, these three authors also shape Irish selfhood in relation to a divergence from the 'colonizer': England. The three authors uniquely connect to, and struggle with, an internalized notion of decolonization. Frantz Fanon, a noted philosopher, outlines the stages of the aforementioned decolonization as imitation, return to traditional values, and a new identity. Nationally, Ireland's third stage is the aforementioned 'Troubles' following WWII. During Ireland's journey to independence, the cultural values evolve as the nation moves from one phase to the next.

As Ireland "comes of age" by transitioning through Fanon's three stages of decolonization, each narrator grows from youth to early adulthood. Bildungsroman refers to the coming-of-age genre and "focuses on the development of the young protagonist" (Boes 647). As the novels progress, each author slowly loses the youthful naiveté that had dominated early descriptions. In all four works, each major

event further strips away the narrator's youthful innocence and facilitates a transition into adulthood. Bildungsroman works "depict the influence that men and environments exert on the hero and explain to us the gradual formation of his inner being" (Boes 654). The tensions in Ireland as the nation attempts to reconcile hegemonic rule with newfound independence have a profound affect on each of the narrators. *The Butcher Boy* and *Breakfast on Pluto* use the Bildungsroman formula as a mechanism for mirroring national and cultural tensions through very personal experiences. Conversely, the narrators in *The Speckled People* and *Reading in the Dark* internalize these external tensions as a means of building a coming-of-age story that parallels the political events that frame each work.

Chapter 2

The Butch Boy and *The Speckled People*: A Window Into the Pressures of Cultural Hegemony

In Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* and Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People*, the narrator is an Irish youth exposed to both internal and external conflict. Young narrators best reflect the socio-economic status of a country due to their subconscious absorption of the political climate. The young narrators in *The Butcher Boy* and *The Speckled People* tell their stories with a uniquely youthful transparency: the two boys are distinctly lacking in the jaded experiences of their families and relay the story with an unmistakable honesty. By utilizing a personal first-person perspective, the narrator's fractured psyche parallels Anglo-English divide defining Ireland post WWII. McCabe's novel is written using an increasingly demented voice of free indirect discourse; yet despite his fragile mental state, the narrator Francie aptly captures his complete environment. His young age and troubled socioeconomic upbringing facilitate an unfiltered description of events as they transpire. Francie is ignorant to the concept of 'political correctness' and narrates with his simplistically crude vocabulary. However, the provincially minded Francie remains ignorant to the national environment. Beyond the events of the town, he has little knowledge of current events of the time, nor the reasoning behind the socio-political stratification he faces throughout the novel. Conversely, Hamilton is hyper aware of Irish culture as a whole and internalizes national events. Hamilton's memoir uses simple

sentences to facilitate an unmitigated window into a culturally tense childhood.

Because the voices are uncorrupted by life experience, a clearer view of Ireland in the post WWII era emerges. In exploring their own childhood experiences, both narrators reflect Frantz Fanon's three stages of decolonization: imitation, return to traditional values, and a new identity, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

In Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, the narrator's 268-page descent into madness is so artistically crafted that the horrific conclusion still comes as a surprise despite having a direct access to the narrator. Francis 'Francie' Brady is a rebellious adolescent whose story chronicles the collapse of his struggling lower-class Irish family. Throughout the story, Francie remains tragically unaware of the world around him, consistently ignoring the demise of his family. Unlike the narrator in *The Speckled People*, McCabe's Francie does not analyze the socio-political climate around him. Instead, he becomes the criminal typified by his lower-class environment.

Outside the home, Francie spends most of his time with Joe Purcell pretending to be the American Western hero John Wayne while building forts and playing in the river. Francie and Joe pick on one boy in particular, Philip Nugent, who comes from one of the wealthier families in town. One of the dividing factors between the Nugents and the Bradys is socio-economic status, further exacerbated by the Nugent's English heritage. Philip is introduced early on in the novel, with Francie recalling his teacher's description of Philip on the first day of school, "Philip used to live in London" (McCabe 2). Philip's time in England becomes his most defining trait as far

as Francie is concerned and he associates England with an unjustified sense of importance. As a young narrator, Francie illustrates that while he is ignorant to most socio-political issues, the discrepancy between the wealthy English and the struggling Irish guides his actions and are the subconscious root of his resentment towards the Nugents. Despite having a very limited understanding of the historical significance of English repression, Francie still realizes there is a perceived 'superiority' in claiming English lineage. When Francie and Joe steal Philip's comic books, Mrs. Nugent admonishes Francie's mother, calling her and the entire Brady family 'pigs.' Francie's mother becomes visibly distraught when Mrs. Nugent continues her tirade, claiming that "[s]he [Mrs. Nugent] knew the kind of us [Brady family] long before she went to England" (McCabe 4). In addition to insulting the Brady family, Mrs. Nugent takes the opportunity to claim superiority because of her time in England. This becomes a focal point throughout the novel, as this ordeal begins Francie's unhealthy obsession with the Nugents and Mrs. Nugent's view of the Brady family as pigs.

The novel takes place following decades of de Valera's cultural hegemonic rule. As de Valera "established a humanistic, neo-Marxist approach to revolutionary change," higher economic standing becomes the threshold for complete cultural acceptance (Kurtz 6642). The idealized nuclear family is also depicted as an unwavering requirement for successful integration into Irish society, as "hegemony takes place in the realm of private institutions including... families, churches... called civil society" (Kim 6645). Though he does not outwardly acknowledge this, the

juxtaposition of the dysfunctional Brady family against the successful Nugents facilitates Francie's subconscious feeling of rejection by the very society he inhabits.

Francie's inability to process the external world is most clearly evinced by his relationship with his family. Through Francie's unadulterated versions of events, the reader readily grasps the implications of the actions of the adults in Francie's life. Francie, however, has a tendency to take things at face value and remains unaware of his collapsing family structure. Early on, McCabe lets us know that the narrator often does not understand the implications of adult actions. The catalyst of Francie's descent into madness and criminality begins with his own mother's struggle with mental illness. Judging by the abuse his mother suffers at the hands of her failed alcoholic husband, it is easy for the reader to sense the pain she endures on a daily basis. When Francie returns home early unexpectedly from the candy store, he observes the following:

...when I got into the kitchen who's there only ma standing there and a chair sideways on the table. What's that doing up there ma I says it was a fuse wire belonging to da just dangling but she didn't say what it was doing there she just stood there picking at her nail and going to say something but then not saying it. (McCabe 7-8)

It is evident to the reader that Francie walked in on his mother attempting to hang herself. Francie readily buys her excuse that she was fixing "a fuse wire belonging to da" (McCabe 8), leaving the reader wondering if Francie is simply grasping at the only stability in his home, or if his child-like mentality prohibits him

from understanding the breadth of the situation. Following the suicide attempt, Francie's mother is sent to a mental hospital.

When Francie's mother returns, the reader is introduced to Francie's Uncle Alo, who serves as the Brady family's sole connection to the distant success England represents throughout the novel. Uncle Alo is considered somewhat of a local celebrity, as he was able to "escape" his humble upbringing and reinvent himself in London with "ten men under him" (McCabe 28). Francie's mother, seemingly happy after her stint in the mental institution, spends the time before Alo's visit making cakes, cleaning, and filling the house with songs. Alo, though only physically present for a short time, has overarching implications, individually on Francie as well as providing socio-political commentary. The entire town, despite its seeming aversion to the Brady family, rejoices at Alo's homecoming. Several townspeople even approach Francie in excitement, reminding Francie of the one success his family has managed to achieve. When Alo arrives, there is a large party for him, and Alo reconnects with his hometown love. The somewhat economically depressed town celebrates one of its own, as they believe he has found monetary success in England.

Both Alo and the Nugents represent the pseudo-colonial influence England maintained in Ireland following its independence. Set in the 1960's in a small, unnamed town, Francie's view of Alo and the Nugents illustrates the hold England still maintains over its struggling former colony. Both Francie's family and the town revere Alo because not only did he find a steady job, but also became successful in England. England thus still represents, geographically, a place of power and

economic prestige the Irish had not yet experienced. Young narrators represent the current struggles of a place, foreshadowing where a culture is headed. Francie reflects a darker side of the Irish community – a deep-seated resentment and envy towards the ‘successful’ British. Although the Nugents are arrogant, Francie’s unhealthy obsession with the Nugents parallels a deeper omnipresent mistrust between the British and Irish. Alo and the Nugents represent two conflicting schools of thought of the British presence in Ireland: while Alo represents Ireland’s desire to achieve the economic success of England, Mrs. Nugent embodies the animosity felt towards the oppressive colonizer. Young voices represent the emotional state of a country through a natural osmosis: Francie absorbs the sentiments of his struggling parents and suffers under the elitism of the Nugents.

The novel utilizes a writing style that embodies free indirect discourse, furthering the transparency of Francie’s thought process. After his mother’s inevitable suicide, Francie suffers his first mental break and vandalizes the Nugent household. When the Nugent catch him defecating in their house, Francie is sent to an ‘industrial school’ run by priests. At the school, a priest repeatedly molests Francie. Similar to the aforementioned situation of his mother’s first suicide attempt, Francie does not comprehend the full gravity of the situation. When Father Sullivan first molests Francie, he tells the reader “...the next thing what does Sull do only plant this big slobbery wet kiss right on my lips...[and then he took] out his mickey and started rubbing it up and down and jogging me on his knee” (McCabe 84-85). His reaction to this traumatizing event is renaming Father Sullivan ‘Father Tiddly,’ exemplifying

the increasingly darkening comedic aspect of Francie's thoughts. Francie does not report Father Tiddly, nor does he actively attempt to discourage his advances.

Though he mockingly recalls each incident with the priest, the audience can clearly tell that the priest is capitalizing on Francie's vulnerability: He lost his only source of emotional support and was punished by the very family that he originally blamed for the collapse of his familial structure. As evinced by the quote above, Francie makes no attempt to censure the molestation, and though his commentary is overtly humorous, the reader can painfully visualize each component of the physical and emotional molestation. Francie's unmitigated descriptions reinforce the lack of censure inherent to young narrators.

In his narration, Francie never comments on the affect the molestation has had on him, glossing over the incident with dark humor and distinct, if not falsified nonchalance. However, upon his release from the industrial school, Francie's complete mental breakdown becomes glaringly obvious. Though Francie almost censures his own commentary, he describes the events and dialogue of those around him with surprising accuracy. The juxtaposition of Francie's imagined conversations and his real observations of the world around him highlight Francie's madness. He begins working at the slaughterhouse and attempts to use his new earnings to better the life of his family, now consisting of just him and his father Benny. It seems as if Francie is turning over a new leaf, proclaiming, "[i]t was all up to me now. Me and nobody else... I told him he didn't have to worry, his worrying days were over" (McCabe 127). Despite his intentions, Francie's already fragile state, combined with

the devastating loss of his best friend to Philip Nugent, finally pushes Francie over the edge. As he spends more time with the town drunk, his hallucinations begin to dominate his narration. He imagines his Uncle Alo returning to town and celebrating Christmas with him and his dad. This illusion is cut short, however, when the town doctor and the local sergeant burst into the house. Francie, despite his own disturbed mentality, still relates everything the police say, “[t]he sergeant was saying something to another policeman. He said: Maggots-they’re right through him. The other policeman said: Sweet Mother of Christ” (McCabe 153). This implies that Benny, Francie’s father, has been dead for an extended period of time, as maggots have essentially chewed through his decaying flesh. Francie has been interacting with his father’s corpse, unable to deal with the death of the last member of his family. Despite this clear and total break from reality, the narration still adequately reflects the external world. He tells the audience of the exact conversation he overheard between the police officers, and it is this clarity of the real world that allows the audience to understand the extent of Francie’s internal collapse. In a much darker interpretation of the Bildungsroman genre, Francie’s ‘growth’ culminates at a breaking point when he has a complete departure from reality. Francie “develops toward his true nature by means of a collaboration of his inner dispositions with outer circumstances” (Boes 656), however, these aforementioned outer circumstances contribute to his complete mental breakdown.

While the two works utilize the intimacy of first person in definably opposite genres, the writers share a common upbringing during mid 20th century Ireland. *The*

Speckled People's Hugo Hamilton was born in 1953 and *The Butcher Boy*'s Patrick McCabe was born in 1956. Hamilton's memoir *The Speckled People* reflects his upbringing during the 1950's and 1960's underneath the strict rule of his ardently Nationalist Irish father. As detailed in his childhood memoir, his mother, Irmgard Kaiser came to Ireland following World War II, and married his father Sean O'Urmoltaigh. The family lived outside of Dublin in a suburb Dun Laoghaire, and often vacationed to Connemara, a dogmatically Irish town. His father continually brought the family to Connemara to expose his children to one of the few towns where the Irish language was spoken more frequently than English. As mentioned above, the language barrier imposed by their Nationalist father ostracized the children. As Irish 1950's politics became increasingly invested in Catholicism and hegemonic rule, Sean O'Urmoltaigh's Nationalist Irish identity became definably antagonistic to the changing face of what constituted 'Irish' society.

Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* utilizes the socio-political turmoil of 1950's Ireland as the central conflict of the story, using the author's individual memories to further his description of a controversial social history. Unlike the dogmatically Irish Francie Brady, the protagonist of *The Speckled People*, author Hugo Hamilton (O'Urmoltaigh), is caught between three cultures: his Irish Nationalist father only allows his children to speak Irish, his mother only speaks German and is constantly trying to forget the atrocities of World War II, and the outside community demands an adherence to English.

Whereas Francie is merely subconsciously aware of the implications of the social colonizing of the English, Hamilton is constantly immersed in the war for an Irish cultural revival. From an early age, Hamilton's father is abusive in his insistence for Irish and German values. His father even shuns his familial past by literally hiding pictures of his father in the closet and changing his name. The author recalls, "There were things they didn't talk about...he buried his past...[h]e hid the pictures of his own father in the wardrobe...He didn't want...photographs of a British Sailor hanging in the house" (McCabe 41). As the novel is written from the perspective of the author as a youth, his simplistic retelling of his childhood leaves little ambiguity. The child-like voice of the narrator allows the reader to fully grasp the extent of the father's commitment to nationalism. Further, the somewhat naive commentary allows the audience to better understand the political climate of the background.

As 1950's Ireland sought to forge a new identity post WWII, the narrator recounts traumatizing incidents at the hands of his peers. His father admired the German people and attempted to instill a sense of German pride within his children. Additionally, despite her often conflicted feelings about her nationality, his mother also wanted to see her children grow up fully aware of their German heritage, ordering "lederhosen" for her children from her family still in Germany (Hamilton 2). However, following the atrocities of WWII, anti-German sentiment swept Europe, and Irish people were generally unreceptive to 'outsiders.' As his peers obeyed the hegemonic rule that dominated Irish politics in the post WWII-era, the narrator is

painfully aware of the isolation that comes with nonconformity. With a yearning purity, the narrator proclaims, “Out there in Ireland you want to be the same as everyone else, not an Irish speaker, not a German or a Kraut or a Nazi” (Hamilton 3). The narrator is painfully aware of the stigma that comes with being culturally different.

When the narrator is bullied by a group of children during a walk after Christmas dinner, his view of the holiday as a day of cultural universality is shattered. The narrator initially described Christmas as having no cultural boundaries. However, while walking with his younger brother Franz and younger sister Maria, he encounters a group of prejudicial schoolmates. This preconception is discredited when the three children are bullied by a local group of kids:

“we were ambushed by a gang of boys. We had never seen them before and it looked like they had been waiting for us...’Nazi bastards,’ he said...He wanted me to be the enemy and to see how tough us Germans really were...I heard one of them say that we should be put on trial.” (Hamilton 141-142)

The family is known throughout the town as defiantly German and Irish, due to their dress and language. In an effort to please his father and mother, the narrator and his siblings forfeit assimilation in favor of displaying their cultural background. The impressionable narrator offers little commentary of the Christmas incident, allowing the reader to understand the full extent of popular Irish opinion and conformity. “‘Execute them!’ one of them shouted. They didn’t even have time for a trial” (Hamilton 142). The narrator innocently relays the dialogue, yet his simplistic retelling emphasizes the anti-German sentiment that defined post WWII-Ireland. In

his innocent statement of the execution, it is clear that the local Irish 'gang' is representative of the Irish population as a whole. Their rash judgment illustrates the post-WWII Irish opinion of Germany and Germans.

Chapter 3

Frantz Fanon: The Inherent Destabilizing of Decolonization

Frantz Fanon was a French psychiatrist and philosopher whose theories of postcolonial development clearly outline Ireland's socio-political transformation during the 20th century. He claimed there are three distinct phases of 'decolonization,' which is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the process of becoming free from colonial status." The first stage is imitation, which occurs when the oppressed or colonized party seeks to gain legitimacy through mirroring the culture and language of the oppressor. The second phase is a return to traditional, native values. The third and final stage is considered the "fighting phase," when the colonized nation emerges with a new identity that incorporates traditional ideas as well as values of the oppressor. This new identity is theoretically the break from the colonizer as it attempts to look to the future in an effort to obtain autonomy. His three phases (imitation, return to tradition, and new identity) are tangibly accessible through the struggles of the Irish people under English rule. Considering the aforementioned politics of President Éamon de Valera, the transition from oppressed to autonomous is exemplified in both politics and literature.

Both *The Butcher Boy* and *The Speckled People* aptly illustrate each of the three different phases. Neither novel cites Fanon's phases as influential within the scope of the plot; however, the attitudes of the narrators reflect a changing dynamic within Irish society. The audience can see evidence of English imitation, an

attempted return to traditional Irish values and a new identity at the conclusion. The initial phase of imitation is evident in both plotlines: while the narrator of *The Speckled People* sees the English language as a venue for the acceptance he so craves, *The Butcher Boy's* Francie conversely aspires to English success with horrific results.

In progressing through the phases of decolonization, Francie's twisted imitation of the Nugent family ironically illustrates the first step of moving away from the oppressor. After his mother's suicide, Francie snaps and takes revenge on the Nugent family, whom he blames for his mother's death. However, in his twisted vandalism, he mimics the mannerisms and language of the Nugent family. Francie describes his attack on the Nugent home, declaring, "I went round the house like Philip. I walked like him and everything" (McCabe 63). As he defaces the house, Francie imagines the members of the Nugent family interacting with him and paradoxically encouraging his antics. During this imagined discussion with the Nugent family, Francie 'overhears' Philip say to his mother, "You know what he's doing here, don't you mother? He wants to be one of us. He wants his name to be Francis Nugent. That's what he's wanted all along! We know that – don't we mother" (McCabe 64)? This deranged fantasy illustrates Francie's subconscious longing to be accepted by the Nugents, whose English lineage and economic security exacerbates the bleak Brady family existence. Particularly, the subconscious projection of Philip clearly states, 'He wants to be one of us,' a statement that personally applies to Francie's own crumbling family structure, holistically mirroring the national instability brought on by years of the Civil War. As outlined by Fanon,

the first phase of decolonization is “the period of unqualified assimilation” (Fanon 178). Francie sees the Nugents as oppressors because they represent an unattainable social status and familial stability. In his twisted quest for revenge, he subconsciously attempts to assimilate into the Nugent family’s successful and relatively ‘normal’ English-Irish existence.

In *The Speckled People*, the narrator recognizes the societal demand for English. Although his father forbids English in their household, the children are painfully aware of their peers’ attempts to assimilate into English culture. When describing his childhood, the narrator recalls:

...[I]t was too late, because most people were already speaking English and following the English road signs. And nobody wanted their children to speak Irish anymore for fear that they would not be able to find their way in places like America and Canada and Australia. (Hamilton 161)

Although his father was very resistance, to a fault, to English influence, the narrator observes the undeniable shift throughout the country. He simply states the facts – that the Irish language was facing extinction at the hands of English. Free from the judgmental edge that characterizes most adult voices, the narrator earnestly acknowledges the aforementioned “imitation” phase. Language plays a crucial role in marking the imitation phase depicted in *The Speckled People*. The narrator had an “obsessive desire to being to the English-speaking world. He wanted to translate his Irish-speaking personal world into English – and in doing so – imitate a transition that has occurred in large tracks of the country” (Nic Craith 104). As the sentence structure and thought process is definably simple, the reader can easily see the

national efforts to assimilate into English culture. The lack of commentary facilitates a transparent look at the Irish absorption of English language and values. By juxtaposing the uniquely Irish O'Urmoltaigh family against their English-speaking peers, the overall transition into the first phase becomes evident.

The second phase, a return to traditional values, is essentially the theme of *The Speckled People*, becoming the defining tension as the father advocates for a complete break from England. The narrator's father shuns all things English, including his own family. The narrator explains, "[h]e changed his name from Jack to Sean...and spoke Irish as if his home town didn't exist, as if his own father didn't exist, as if all those who emigrated didn't exist...My father pretends that England doesn't exist" (Hamilton 37). The narrator's father Sean is completely resistant to the encroaching English language and utilizes his children as a way to return to traditional Irish values. However, in his fanatical quest to cleanse Ireland of the English presence, his children become casualties of social rejection. Sean attempts to physically return to Irish roots by vacationing to Connemara with his family. After the birth of his younger sister, Brid, Hamilton recalls, "[t]hen we went back to Connemara for three months to be as Irish as possible...we would come back native speakers...I learned how to turn English words into Irish" (Hamilton 230). Sean becomes a personification of Fanon's second phase, and spends the entire memoir forcing his beliefs on his children, despite their ultimately negative social ramifications.

The third and final phase is attempted in both novels, with dramatically different results. In *The Butcher Boy*, Francie's final act of madness following his institutionalization brings him once again to the Nugent household. With both his parents gone, and Joe having formally rejected him as a friend, Francie takes his rage out on Mrs. Nugent, "I smacked her against the wall a few times...and shot the bolt right into her head *tholk* was the sound that it made...I opened her then I stuck my hand in her stomach and wrote PIGS all over the walls of the upstairs room" (McCabe 209). In his demented killing of Mrs. Nugent, Francie is subconsciously attempting to fight what he feels has been his main tormentor during the course of the novel. He views the Nugent family as oppressive elitists who were responsible for the death of his parents and the loss of his friendship. Although his methodology is darkly demented, by murdering Mrs. Nugent, Francie is attempting to escape the oppression of the Nugent family.

In *The Speckled People*, the conclusion defiantly enters the third and final phase of decolonization as the narrator breaks from his former coping methods and forges a new identity within the Irish community. At the end of the novel, a 'gang' of local boys catches the narrator alone while swimming. The boys physically assault the narrator as punishment for his German ancestry. In a moment of youth-driven clarity, the narrator conveys a sad truth about his peers, "I knew they were learning to hate and that you're allowed to hate Germans. They wanted me to surrender" (Hamilton 293). Throughout the novel, Hugo's mother argued that ignoring tormentors was the only acceptable coping method, reflecting her own conflicting

feelings about being from Germany. During the course of the novel, the narrator faced discrimination for his German ancestry and his refusal to speak English. At the conclusion however, the audience sees a decisive shift in his mindset as we reach the cumulating of moment of self-actualization, “I looked up to show that I was not afraid to be silent...There was nothing they could do to hurt me now...I grew up being good at saying the opposite and giving wrong answers. I was not afraid anymore” (Hamilton 294). The reader sees the narrator reject both the imitation and traditional phases simultaneously as he asserts his own independence from the influence of his parents. The narrator further defines his break from his past by claiming:

When you're small you know nothing...I'm not afraid anymore of being German or Irish, or anywhere in between. Maybe your country is only a place you make up in your own mind...I'm not afraid of being homesick and having no language you live in. I don't have to be like anyone else. (Hamilton 295)

The narrator acknowledges the ignorance associated with youth, reinforcing the adolescent neutrality that characterized his portrayals of earlier events. This self-awareness projects a future identity that is directly in line with the third phase of decolonization. Because the proclamation of change comes from the simplistically undiluted voice of a confused youth, the audience easily accepts its credibility and understands its link to Ireland as a whole. The third stage of decolonization is very similar to the narrator's arrival at adulthood: “the struggles of age pass. The nation reaches a state of greater external peace and property is secured...and reason gradually asserts its rights over what had previously been the domain of imagination” (Boes 653).

Both works closely explore childhood tribulations through an intimate first person dialogue between the narrator and the reader. In *The Butcher Boy*, Francie's descent into madness captures the struggles of the Irish people. His increasingly twisted stream of consciousness reflects a society torn between the values of the oppressor and the stress of forging a new identity. *The Speckled People* instead focuses on the external conflict, as the narrator highlights the social stigmas he faced as a result of his mixed heritage. The earnestly young voice of each narrator allows the readers to truly understand the socio-economic tension of 1950's Ireland. Both novels capitalize on an innocence only afforded in childhood as each narrator makes often-painful observations without a true understanding of their ramifications. While the audience can freely infer the depth of critical situations, the unmitigated absorption of the Irish culture facilitates an unparalleled transparency.

Chapter 4

The Role of the IRA in *Reading in the Dark* and *Breakfast on Pluto*: The Trauma of Sectarian Violence

The period from the early 1960s until 1998 is historically recognized in Ireland as ‘The Troubles.’ After 30 years of civil unrest, an “[a]greement was reached in 1998...hailed as a blueprint for political compromise, peace and stability” (Wagner 4). Recalling Fanon’s three phases, The Troubles marks Ireland’s quest for a new identity free from the tyranny of British oppression. However, while forging a new identity, internal disagreements surrounding the future of Ireland became violent. The Irish Republican Army, extremist proponents of Irish Nationalism, are the cause of the most violent aspects of The Troubles. The anonymous young male narrator of Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* and Patrick “Pussy” Braden, the transgender narrator of McCabe’s *Breakfast on Pluto* are both painfully effected by the Irish Republican Army’s guerilla war campaign during the mid 20th century. Once again, the ‘innocence’ of each narrator facilitates an unadulterated description of the intrinsic attacks, as well as the sociopolitical repercussions. *Reading in the Dark*’s unnamed narrator and “Pussy” have very unique interactions with the ideology of the IRA, as well as the immediate physical violence of guerilla warfare. By internalizing their experiences with such a factually transparent voice, the traumatic personal experience captures the tumultuous impact of the IRA on Ireland as a nation.

The Irish Republican Army, hereafter referred to as the IRA, was officially recognized by Dáil Éireann in 1919, subsequently waging a guerilla campaign from 1919-1921 known as the Irish War of Independence. After the Anglo-Treaty was signed ending the war, the organization split. However, soon after gaining independence from England, Ireland engages in a violent civil war:

The new deal [Anglo-Treaty] is happily accepted by the Ulster Unionists...but the disenchanted nationalists start yet another war...against the forces of the Irish Free State, their own country men. And the IRA will lead the fight in a bloody Civil War which lasts until their defeat in June 1922. (Martin)

During WWII, the IRA remains relatively neutral, as the international crisis overshadows internal disputes. Following the end of the war, in a response to dwindling membership, the IRA

mount[s] a series of raids on British Army barracks and installations in the North, seizing a formidable array of weapons...armed and ready, they take the fight back to the British, attacking military bases, blowing craters in roads, bombing police stations, court houses and engaging in gun battles with troops and police alike. (Martin)

By restocking their weapon supply, the IRA resumed its trademark methodology of terrorism through guerilla warfare. By 1962, there have been “around 500 incidences, in what became known as the Border Campaign” (Martin), illustrating the perpetuity of violence instigated by the IRA. The bombings became a part of everyday life, as the threat of IRA terrorism slowly became engrained in post WWII culture.

Deane’s *Reading In the Dark* chronicles the life of an unnamed poor Irish Catholic who has deep familial ties to the IRA. The narrator’s mysterious Uncle

Eddie plays a pivotal role in conveying the social tensions plaguing Northern Ireland. Introduced early on in the novel, Eddie is somewhat of a legend among the narrator's family, as his father and uncles routinely tell stories about his exploits. In particular, they frequently discuss "the night of the big shoot-out at the distillery between the IRA and the police when Uncle Eddie disappeared. That was in April, 1922" (Deane 8). As mentioned above, the IRA was engaged in a Civil War from 1921 following the signing of the treaty until June of 1922, one month after the disappearance of Eddie. The violence of the war, while not something the narrator experienced personally, deeply affects his family. Evident to the reader, Eddie's initially perceived connection to the IRA and defiance to the police led to his disappearance. Politically, this illustrates not only the danger of IRA association, but also the violent methodology of the police.

The ironic role of police as a threat as opposed to their conventional status as protector is reinforced during the narrator's first personal experience with the police. Early in his youth, the narrator recounts the story of how he smuggled a pistol out of his house to impress some boys in the neighborhood after a football game. The gun is spotted by a known police informant, as the narrator realizes his grave mistake: "[s]ince we had cousins in the gaol for being in the IRA, we were a marked family and had to be careful. Young as I was, I was being stupid" (Deane 29). The idea of a 'marked' family is not overtly explained or questioned by the young narrator, illustrating the adolescent tendency to simply accept assertions that are too socially complex. The more mature reader, however, immediately understands that an IRA

association puts one at direct odds, perhaps unfairly, with local authorities. When the informant does predictably alert the police, the hostile search for the gun clearly illustrates the divisive nature of IRA association within communities: “the house was being splintered open...the linoleum was being ripped off, the floorboards crowbarred up...the slashed wall paper was hanging in ribbons” (Deane 29). The narrator is simply describing what he sees, and through the descriptive narrative, police brutality is established as a ‘normal,’ and perhaps more importantly, generally unquestioned part of the culture. Though the narrator is not even ten years old at the time of the incident, he, his father and brother Liam are all brought to the police station for a brutally violent interrogation:

Where was the gun?...They beat him [my father] on the neck and shoulders with rubber truncheons, short and gorged-red in colour...They beat us too, Liam and me, across the table from him. I remember the sweat and rage on his face as he looked on...Then my head bounced so hard on the table with the blows that I bit my tongue. (Deane 30)

In this especially poignant scene, the raw sequential description of the interrogation makes the horrific nature of the beating all the more apparent. After being beaten in front of his children, the narrator’s father is then forced to watch his own children physically assaulted. The young voice of the narrator does not attempt to capture an emotional devastation he is incapable of understanding. Instead he lets the event speak for itself. A more mature reader recognizes the emotional and psychological trauma the father would suffer while watching his children being beaten in front of him. Reflecting the escalating violence of the IRA’s post WWII guerilla attacks, the police blatantly violate basic human rights in an attempt to eradicate rebellion.

Through Eddie's first introduction and the horrific beating the narrator and his brother received from police as children, the narrator cannot understand the true extent of the terror inflicted by the IRA. Specifically analyzing the actions of the police through the narrator's personal experience partially mitigates the violent tactics used by the IRA in guerilla warfare. However, as the novel progresses and the narrator matures, the carefully crafted black and white portrayal of the police versus the rebels slowly dissolves. In a climactic scene, the narrator uncovers a family secret that forever shatters his image of Eddie. The narrator's father painfully admits, "Eddie was never killed in a shoot-out...He was an informer. His own people killed him" (Deane 138-139). This revelation complicates the narrator's view of both the police and the IRA. Internalizing this information represents one of the cornerstones of the Bildungsroman genre. A holistic understanding of reality forever corrupts the simplicity with which the narrator previously viewed the world. While the narrator still relays his experiences with a simplistic transparency, he can no longer return to a simple acceptance of events. No longer stunted by the interpretations of life events from the adults around him, the narrator now "demands freedom from the oppression of external needs...so that he might strive to advance himself using his own powers" (Boes 656).

Opposing political factions and strong familial ties forge the identity of the anonymous narrator in *Reading in the Dark*. Conversely, the narrator in McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto* is only partially aware of the social tensions plaguing Ireland as she embarks on a journey to find her birth mother. Whereas outside political tension

was the primary source of conflict in *Reading in the Dark*, Pussy's personal journey and inner demons are the root of *Breakfast on Pluto's* plot. A transgender woman, Pussy engages in risky sexual behavior, and opens the novel by boldly proclaiming, "I was a high class escort girl" (McCabe 1).

Pussy's early life is marked by a tumultuous and unloving upbringing: she is the product of rape. Her biological father, a priest named Father Bernard, raped his house-keeper, resulting in an unwanted pregnancy. Pussy is subsequently raised by an abusive, alcohol foster mother and struggles with her identity as a transgender woman. Pussy's first true moment of stability and happiness comes when she finds a 'sugar daddy' in a local married politician named Eamon Faircroft. Pussy admits, "I was more than content to be the regular partner of my new benefactor in the warm and toasty cosiness of his perfumed Merc" (McCabe32). Pussy's sugar daddy allows her to pursue a very affluent and flamboyant lifestyle. However, while Pussy greatly details the superficial details of their relationship, she nonchalantly mentions, "there were many who would impugn his good name-importing arms for the IRA and any amount of old nonsense!" (McCabe 32). Although Pussy predictably trivializes the politician's dangerous rebellion endeavors, Eamon Faircroft's IRA association has devastating consequences. Upon learning of his death, Pussy laments, "I often like to think of him, blown up like that, ... There are those who say it was the IRA and others the protestant Ulster Defense Association and then some who say it was the two of them together...it was something to do with guns and the money to buy them" (McCabe 33). Bombings were a trademark of the post-WWII IRA. Hoping to expel

British forces through fear, they would strategically detonate bombs as a means of political protest. While Pussy appears only mildly inconvenienced by the ordeal, the reader understands the true magnitude of the situation. The politician was coldly assassinated for supplying guns to the IRA, illustrating social unrest and rampant vigilante justice.

Only peripherally aware of the true nature of the IRA, Pussy nonetheless acknowledges that when she asked him about his involvement with the IRA, Faircroft refused to tell her any details, instead warning, “No! Then they’d only come for you!” (McCabe 33) This implies that, although Pussy would have had no tangible involvement with the IRA, simply knowing trade secrets would be dangerous. This seems to be common knowledge, as even the relatively self-absorbed Pussy later remarks, “No, his real name was much more ordinary than that [referring to his bestowed nickname, Dummy] and I’d tell it to you only I have better things to do than get myself blown up again!” (McCabe 34) This tongue-in-cheek admission belies the true culture of fear the IRA has created due to their erratic and constant acts of terrorism.

Following the death of her sugar daddy at the hands of opposing political parties, Pussy leaves her hometown of Tyreelin. While the focus is on her search for her birth mother, Pussy faces very real political obstacles in her quest. In one instance, she enters a disco-pub frequented by soldiers. A highly sexualized individual, Pussy continually seeks the advances of male patrons, and finally captures the attention of “the short-haired squaddie” (McCabe 141). However, just as she is

beginning to flirt with the soldier, “one part of his head went to the left, the other part to the right and the brains which were inside to the floor pouring like scrambled egg...[t]he squaddie was definitely dead” (McCabe 141). By trivializing what is the horrific nature of the detonated bomb, the reader ironically can visualize the explosive moment more vividly. Unrestrained with no regard for political correctness, Pussy’s comparison of human casualty to the act of scrambling an egg paints a very graphic, painful picture. This explosive act of violence reminds the reader of the social tensions that are devastating Ireland while Pussy remains relatively apathetic towards politics.

Following the explosion, Pussy reacts inappropriately by laughing. Although it is simply an instinctual reaction, the police accuse her, shouting, “we know you planted that bomb” (McCabe 144). In Pussy’s delirious state of shock following the mass destruction around her, she readily confesses to a crime she did not commit, proclaiming, “But of course I did, my darling! Of course I did – and have planted hundreds” (McCabe 144). Clearly this is a lie, and yet such an admission is the catalyst for what is implied to be a brutal interrogation at the hands of Detective Inspector Peter Routledge of Scotland Yard Criminal Investigation. Routeledge holds Pussy four of the maximum seven days allotted, and internalizes “Who could blame him for ‘losing it’ as his colleague had termed it, when he had seen and heard the laughter of that lunatic bastard in the cell,” (McCabe 148). Once again, the implication of unnecessary force in this situation is a clear violation of basic human

rights, reminiscent of the interrogation experience of the anonymous narrator in *Reading in the Dark*.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: How the ‘Miserable Irish Childhood’ Simultaneously Shaped Each Narrator and the Country

In spite of their differences, each of the four coming-of-age narratives reflects the uniquely Irish genre of the ‘miserable childhood.’ Frank McCourt popularized the genre in *Angela’s Ashes*, a memoir of the author’s half-Irish childhood. McCourt laments, “it was of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood” (McCourt 11). Through the lens of the coming-of-age narrative, the ‘miserable’ aspect of Irish childhood facilitates an actualization of Irish selfhood as the narrator matures. The ‘miserable Irish childhood’ becomes an expression of the cultural hegemony that forces an internalization of uniquely Irish external pressures.

There is a dark aesthetic that distinguishes the Irish childhood: The genre simultaneously capitalizes on the universality of childhood while conveying Ireland’s internal socioeconomic turmoil in the wake of colonization and sectarianism. All four of these novels were published in the 1990s, when Ireland was experiencing an unprecedented socioeconomic expansion. However, the recognition of the national phenomena of ‘miserable’ childhoods in the wake of fiscal success suggests a retroactive analysis of the Irish identity. In the true sense of Fanon’s final stage of decolonization, the reflection of Ireland’s successful ‘new’ identity during the 1990s

is possible because of the struggles that strengthened the nation. The stability and growth of Ireland at the turn of the century was achieved not in spite of its 'miserable' childhood, but because of it.

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