

Dramaturgical Roles of Present and Past Teenage Characters in Post-Agreement Northern Irish Drama

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ABSTRACT

The Good Friday Agreement (1998) has set in motion significant changes in Northern Ireland, generating new conditions which, however, also brought numerous problems to the surface on various levels of society. Sociologists have called attention to how intensely the persistent afterlife of sectarian hostilities affect especially teenagers who are often unable to see their goals clearly. Several contemporary Northern Irish playwrights have relied on young characters to pinpoint timely and pressing social and cultural issues as well as to throw light on the precarity of the post-Troubles environment. This essay discusses three plays from different decades of the post-Agreement period: Gary Mitchell's *Trust* (1999), Lucy Caldwell's *Leaves* (2007), and Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (2012). Their respective dramaturgies showcase the long-lasting influence of the historical burden of the Northern Irish conflict on young peoples' subjectivities as well as demonstrate how middle-aged characters are still haunted by memories of the psychic wounds they suffered during the most formative years of their lives. Through their underage protagonists, each playwright suggests that members of this generation might not be able to further strengthen the peace they have formally inherited. (MK)

KEYWORDS: Northern Ireland, post-Agreement society, teenage characters in drama, dramaturgies of psychic wounds

The signing of the Belfast Agreement, also called the Good Friday Agreement (1998), was a historical landmark which terminated a thirty year-long violent sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland—globally known as the Troubles—and aimed to create a more just society based on the principles of mutual respect, partnership, and equality in the region. In due course, significant changes started to take place generating new conditions which, however, brought numerous problems to the surface on various levels of society. Twenty years on, in 2018, the Belfast-edited cultural and literary journal *Irish Pages* published an anniversary issue, in which several authors—poets, scholars, politicians and journalists—reflect not only on the euphoria surrounding the Agreement, but also on the disappointments in its aftermath. Political scientist Paul Arthur highlights the sense of victimhood still pervading political culture in Northern Ireland, “the political economy of helplessness where we fail to make the distinction between victim and perpetrator” and “the fear of the unknown” as crucial affective factors limiting the success of the Agreement, concluding that “[i]n a society in which the past carries such heavy heft the uplands of the future are not easily embraced” (48).

In the same *Irish Pages* anniversary issue, acclaimed writer Anne Devlin also sharply comments on the sense of uncertainty and confusion with respect to the future: “The combatants don’t know how to live, and the civilians and survivors don’t know how to grieve. The younger generation don’t know” (127). Her comment succinctly calls attention to the fact that many people find it challenging to accommodate the effects of post-Agreement socio-political transformations and to reposition themselves in relation to the religious and political others. As her second, elliptical sentence suggests, the prospect of viable changes in Northern Ireland is uncertain at best for the time being so much so that especially young people on the verge of adulthood are not able to see their goals clearly. Sociologists have also called attention to how strongly the persistent afterlife of sectarian hostilities affects underage persons who, under different circumstances, might be more forward-looking and insistent on changes: “In recent

years, research has indicated that reactionary ethnopolitical stereotypes are part of the outlook even of infants and central to the mindset of many teenagers in the region” (Coulter and Murray 16).

Representations of underage characters came under methodical scholarly scrutiny in literary studies only at the end of the last century, but their exploration has rapidly developed since then. In a 2012 essay collection on the child in literature, editor Adrienne E. Gavin claims that the presence of child characters often raises ethical questions about social justice, and that their inclusion has tended to be particularly problematic since the late twentieth century (5, 11). In addition to the frequent appearance of the “theme of adult responsibility towards children” in literature, “[c]hild characters’ experience of victimization and violence (whether the child is recipient or perpetrator) is, too, a sustained element in writing the child” (Gavin 16–17). Thus, as Gavin observes, “[c]hildhood remains . . . an enduring literary topic [and] the figure of the child continues to raise for writers and readers more questions – about self, youth, life, sexuality, interiority, innocence, evil, hope” (17). Among the literary genres it is probably drama that represents children with most frequency; contemporary plays often include young characters to pinpoint timely and pressing social and cultural issues, while they also throw light on the environment in which they have to face troubles or become troublemakers themselves.

As Merle Tönnies points out in her essay, “Problematic Youth Identities in Contemporary British Drama,” young characters have a special prominence in the “In-Yer-Face” theatre of the 1990s, a period when young British people’s identity development was “made more difficult by severe social problems” (107). Comparably, teenage characters and the recollection of disruptive teenage experiences in Northern Irish theater also appear in greater numbers when young people’s identity is under particular stress, paradoxically more so in peacetime, after 1998, than during the Troubles. In this essay I am going to discuss three plays, each from a different decade of the post-Agreement period: Gary Mitchell’s *Trust* (1999), Lucy

Caldwell's *Leaves* (2007), and Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (2012). The respective dramaturgies of these works showcase the long-lasting influence of the historical burden of the Northern Irish conflict on young peoples' subjectivities; they also demonstrate how middle-aged characters are still haunted by memories of the psychic wounds they suffered during the most formative years of their lives. I understand dramaturgy in the sense Mary Luckhurst defines it: "one of the two common senses of *dramaturgy* relates to the internal structure of a play text and is concerned with the arrangement of the formal elements by the playwright—plot, construction of narrative, character, time-frame and stage action" (10–11). Here I will primarily focus on character construction, on the difficulties besetting the process of young characters' identity formation.¹

Gary Mitchell's *Trust* belongs to the writer's "loyalist thriller-tragedies," offering "a vital counterweight to official narratives of the peace process, dramatizing the dystopian urban underside to Heaney's promissory desire for hope and history to rhyme on the far side of revenge" (Phelan 379).² The action of *Trust* is set in the Protestant working-class area of North Belfast in the present. Several studies discussing the reaction of this segment of Northern Irish society to the post-Agreement situation reveal that most people belonging to it have not experienced any positive change in their lives, rather the opposite. About the time of the conception of *Trust*, James White McAuley claimed that "[s]ectarianism remains the most crucial form of social relationship affecting the Protestant working class as a whole. . . . For many Loyalists, however, their experience also needs to be seen in the context of dramatic economic decline, political disarticulation, and ideological disintegration" (204). They saw their distinct Loyalist identity crumbling, even in danger of dissolution as political leaders now came from both sides of the sectarian divide and the Protestant sense of superiority to Catholics had become severely undermined. Moreover, the process of military decommissioning led to economic deprivation and loss of security for those whose "employment" and social standing,

however illusory this belief turned out to be, was granted by one of the paramilitary organizations. As Fiona Coleman Coffey contends, “[t]his fracture of traditional identity structures in the post-Agreement North is one that is echoed in many contemporary plays” (212). Paradoxical as it may sound, it is primarily working-class men involved in the sectarian conflict in one way or another who find themselves deracinated and redundant in peacetime. As Coleman Coffey observes, several male characters of this kind are portrayed as “[u]nemployed, emasculated, and disoriented by the changing economic, ethnic, and social landscape of the North, [and] they lash out against women, ethnic minorities and children” (212).

Trust opens with two unemployed men, Geordie and Artty, eagerly watching a horse race on television. A third character, Geordie’s fifteen-year-old son, Jake, has been sent to the kitchen to make another pot of tea for the adult men. This initial scene sets the main subject and tone of the play; Jake is ordered about as an inferior being by his father who, after a few exchanges with Artty about their bets, shouts out to the boy: “Where’s that tea, Jake? . . . What are you doing knitting those teabags?” (8, 9). The men’s communication with the boy once he has come in with the tea and asks if he could now watch cartoons on telly or a movie is curtly dismissive, they are still absorbed in vividly discussing the horse race results. When Jake resumes work for his upcoming maths exam, his father exercises adult power over the child, distracting him by making a noise and then he insists that the boy should go out and play football with the other teenagers in the neighbourhood and not stay indoors over his books. Geordie’s degrading attitude to education and his discernible lack of interest in his son’s abilities and performance at school chimes with the assumption that in post-Agreement Northern Ireland “[t]he outrage that many unionists felt at the advent of republicans in government,” including the position of Minister of Education, resulted in mistrusting certain state institutions (Coulter and Murray 8).

The arrival of Jake’s mother, Margaret, throws the household into further disarray: the

parents fiercely argue about the child's problems and prospects, which they see very differently. Margaret feels concerned not only about the boy's proper education, but also about his health because of the headaches he has complained of recently, surmising that Jake's psychic state is caused by being constantly harassed by some bigger boys' gang at school. Indeed, beside their hatred of Catholics, intra-sectarian conflicts within the Protestant working-class community also became exacerbated by the peacetime situation and Mitchell's text implies that the offstage bullies in the play are not Catholics but Protestants. Geordie is revealed as one of the now displaced UDA leaders unable to forge a new identity for himself in the altered circumstances, which explains why he tries to stick to his power at least on the domestic front. Artty, the loyal adjunct, plays up to Geordie by usually echoing his views or asking what he should do next at his order. Margaret would like her husband to go to the school and use his supposed post-paramilitary influence in the Protestant community and do something about the insults the boy suffers, but the man rejects the idea of interfering. Being wedged between his disagreeing parents and experiencing the dictatorial rudeness his father demonstrates towards his mother, only add to the underage Jake's visibly growing uneasiness and reluctance to try to make friends with any of his peers at school or in the neighbourhood. His apparent lack of trust in anyone renders the title of the drama bitingly ironical.

What is more, Geordie thinks that he should take the socialization of the boy in hand and reduce the mother's role in Jake's life. The servile Artty, this time an appreciative spokesman for Geordie, explains to Margaret that the age of fifteen "could be make or break time for the young fella, . . . it's a big year. Leave it with Geordie and he'll make a man out of him" (15). As Megan W. Minogue in her recent article on the key issue of performing hypermasculinity in Mitchell's plays, *Trust and Love Matters* (2012) has observed that in these plays "the continuing influence of paramilitarism is apparent, both in the communities as a whole and on notions of normative masculinity. . . . Perhaps because of such pressure, or

perhaps because they know no other way, the older generation continues to revert to their paramilitary ways, enacting violence and intimidation to their sons' detriment" (93). By way of an initial step to make a man of Jake, Geordie decides that the boy should go with him and Artty to the pub they frequent and the three of them will have a "men's night" (31).

Mitchell shapes the plot and structures the incidents in which Jake is involved in order to demonstrate how the boy is introduced to his father's "paramilitary lifestyle" (Minogue 96). On entering the pub, the boy "*looks a nervous wreck*" (30), obviously wishing he were back at home on his own. His father's cure for the sensitive boy's malaise is that he presses Jake to drink beer, which the boy will "get used to" in his view, even if he does not immediately come to like it after the first gulp.

GEORDIE. (*To JAKE*) Drink that.

JAKE. I don't really want to.

GEORDIE. Just drink it, Jake. (31)

The two men's bossy behavior aims to teach Jake that alcohol consumption is a vital part of manhood. The same evening, Jake is also introduced to sexuality and the secret discussion of planning an illegal purchase of weapons through a mediator, a good-looking young woman, Julie. She enters the pub and talks with the two men about her soldier boyfriend's potential theft of weapons from the British army, which he then could sell to Geordie and his ex-paramilitary comrades. In the presence of the woman Jake wants to confirm his father's assertion that he is not a kid anymore: he drinks even more beer and starts smoking. When Julie is gone, he anxiously asks the two grown-ups if they think Julie noticed his physical desire for her while he was groping his way out to the toilet. Geordie's reply intends to teach his son about learning "how to read women" (37) with time, as if women were merely puzzles to be solved and not

human beings with thoughts and feelings of their own.

Jake's education by his father about alcoholism, random sex, and illegal dealings as markers of masculine identity is made complete in the final scenes of the drama by the creation of a situation that pushes the boy to committing an act of violence. It is the well-meaning Margaret who, inadvertently, becomes instrumental in generating aggressive behavior in Jake. Since Geordie has not been willing to confront the gang of boys who pester their son, she turns to Trevor, an old acquaintance just released from prison under the amnesty law of the Good Friday Agreement, after doing thirteen years for terrorism. Badly in need of money, Trevor is desperate to find a job to provide for his ailing mother and his children, who are living with his ex-wife. Margaret hires him to investigate who the intra-community bullies are and beat one of them by way of punishment for insulting her son, but she insists that Jake should be involved in the plan and thus earn respect for himself. Having put into practice what Margaret said about Jake's necessary involvement in the physical sense, Trevor comes back with the story that he seriously hurt a young lad among the bullies in front of Jake, whom he then armed with a knife in case he is attacked in return. Trevor's tactless interfering and then shameful fleeing from the spot to save himself led to the tragic event that finally Jake did use the knife to fight the bigger boys who wanted to expose him to profound humiliation. The incident ended with Jake's arrest by the police; his performance of "his father's notions of normative masculinity have only been damaging," as Minogue concludes (97).

Margaret brings the boy home from the police station the next day. In the boy's presence the parents and Artty fiercely argue about making a deal with the police and the army representatives who want to get back the guns which Julie's soldier boyfriend stole and sold to Geordie. Typically, in a self-contradictory manner, ex-paramilitary leader Geordie blames the British and the Agreement for his own criminal act: "If it wasn't for them, Margaret, we wouldn't need their fucking guns" (79). Indeed, Jake's freedom is at stake now and the parents

have vastly different plans for a deal with the authorities to save him from prison; the boy even has to witness his mother's anger mounting so high that she points a gun at her husband's chest, unaware that it is unloaded. This scene and the earlier one with Trevor beating up a lad among the bullies from East Belfast, another Protestant territory but not under the influence of the one-time UDA, further advance Jake's initiation into the Belfast-style world of adults with (former) paramilitary connections. He experiences that members of the older generation easily resort to inter-communal or intra-familial violence and tend to make an even greater mess of things than the one they wanted to put an end to. The closure of the play leaves only Margaret and Jake on the scene. The mother picks up the phone to contact somebody but her purpose is not revealed. Jake's future remains conspicuously unresolved like that of the dislocated and jobless adult unionists who "continually revert to the old, paramilitary way of doing things" (Minogue 95), usually in illegal ways because they are incapable of meeting the social challenges and demands of the new, peacetime situation.

The ideal of hypermasculinity in relation to political violence is also explored in Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (2012), but in the context of post-conflict memory at work. As Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern have argued, there has been a strong communal need in post-conflict Northern Ireland for recollecting events of the traumatic past because "simply forgetting the conflict is not a real option" (29). Consequently, there have been various social and cultural initiatives within Northern Irish society to foreground the potential of individual storytelling about Troubles-related vicissitudes, haunting wounds and losses, with a view to communal healing (Lundy and McGovern 37–38). Theater is undoubtedly an appropriate conduit for telling stories of trauma as it can effectively incorporate different characters' narratives which may generate, complement, add to, or contradict one another, thereby leading to an often cathartic move forward in the dramatic plot. McCafferty's play stages an encounter between a Protestant and a Catholic man, both fifty-two, who grew up during the worst years

of the Troubles. In 2010, when the play is set, they still struggle to come to terms with their experiences of the conflict's manifold legacies. The scene is a Belfast bar run by a young Polish publican, Robert. The meeting of the two middle-aged men was initiated by the Protestant Ian, who asked the Catholic Jimmy to meet him in this place, which Jimmy, like his father before him, frequents. Ian comes with the intention to express his regret and sense of guilt to Jimmy, whose father and his drinking pals died as a result of a sectarian bomb attack on this pub in 1974 executed by Ian, then a lad of sixteen, as commanded by the leaders of the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), one of the biggest loyalist paramilitary organizations.

The meeting begins with Jimmy head-butting Ian on arrival by way of a prelude to their sharing their stories of the time when they were both teenagers. Ian accepts Jimmy's unexpected attack on him as righteous, and makes a gestic sign that Robert should not interfere. However, reaching far back to the past from their present adult life proves much more difficult: their exchange is riddled by awkward half-sentences, and the football match on TV occasionally keeps them fixed to the screen for several minutes with their conversation suspended. Although it is Ian who has initiated the meeting because of "not being able to look [him]self in the eye when [he's] havin a shave" (28), Jimmy is the one who begins to speak about his childhood spent near the pub, in a mixed neighborhood. Events from about thirty years before demand to be "memorially reconstructed" (Roche 79) by both characters. Jimmy's first story focuses on an incident which involved an older Protestant boy who kicked his brand-new football into the river and whom Jimmy beat fiercely, repeatedly screaming "in his face—fuckin orange bastard." His parents raised him to be tolerant, so this sudden, violent rage to avenge what seemed downright provocation on the part of the Protestant boy wearing the politically symbolic tartan scarf, "came out a nowhere," Jimmy says (29).

Ian takes his turn narrating the events of the day on which he threw the bomb into the pub. "Half ironical[ly]," in the words of Anthony Roche (81), Jimmy believes he has made it

easier for Ian by referring to his own out-of-proportion violence when the incident with his new football happened. Ian would like to go on with their mutual confessions in private, but Jimmy insists that their verbal encounter about the distant past should take place in public, having at least one witness: “if this succeeds we will be seen as the first—we will be held up as a beacon—. . . Robert will be our committee—our truth and reconciliation committee” (30). Roche notes the metatheatrical nature of Jimmy’s comment, since it functions as “a reminder that the theatrical stage is both a private and a public space” (5), and as such it reconfirms the role of the theatre in telling the intertwining stories of both victims and perpetrators across the sectarian divide while also creating the audience who listen to them. As the stories of the two men follow each other, it becomes clear that despite the different nature of their actual deeds, their childhood experiences and growing up in a society constantly ruffled by sectarian antagonisms show a number of parallels. Jimmy’s shouting of “fuckin orange bastard” whilst beating the Protestant boy who kicked his new ball into the river is echoed by Ian’s “fuckin fenian bastards” (29) when he threw the bomb into the bar to kill all the men watching a match on television there, including Jimmy’s father.

Indeed, both teenage boys were nurtured in the communal belief that the religious other was an enemy. What “came out a nowhere,” in Jimmy’s words, was a culturally acquired instinct, and in Ian’s case the “men I had been taught to believe” served as authority and model for him and “it felt like these men had personally given me an identity” (36). When committing their violent deeds both sixteen-year-old boys felt they were right because, according to tribal consciousness, the enemy deserved beating and even annihilation. As the exchanges testify, neither of the two men was a faithful believer, their sectarian hatred of the other side had deeper roots and a greater complexity than a denominational gap. According to Roche, Ian’s narration of the circumstances of his fatal throwing of the bomb into the bar on that July day in 1974 emphasizes the physical side of the event, while “Jimmy will supply the personal histories”

(80). I would argue, however, that both Ian and Jimmy highlight the affective dimension of how they experienced that day. Ian introduces his deed in a way that shows how he felt about the preparations for his very first real act in the service of the UVF: “I was excited and petrified at the same time—I didn’t eat—my mother made me breakfast but I didn’t eat it” (17). Jimmy, in turn, gives a viscerally touching description of the ruins of the pub and the men’s hardly identifiable truncated and mutilated bodies lying around as he and his mother caught sight of them when running to the site.

The immediate aftermath of the bombing, however, proved to be vastly different for the two boys. Ian’s “tale of victorious celebration” is complemented and contrasted with Jimmy’s “wading through the remains” (Roche 82). The UVF, in which Ian served, similarly to other paramilitary organizations, combined commitment and patriotic heroism with a compulsory display of masculine power and male superiority. As a reward for the boy’s successful explosion of the Catholic pub, sixteen-year-old Ian was treated to pints of beer and celebrated for “fighting the good fight” (45). Also, he was invited to choose a girl whom he could have sex with for the first time in his life. Thus, both his act of violence and its reward worked as an initiation for Ian not only to a militarized and divided, but also to a coercively patriarchal society, in which the girls who gathered in the orange club “were all warned whatever one I picked had to do what I wanted” (47). Like the Protestant teenage boy in *Trust*, Ian in *Quietly* was also socialized in and influenced by the context of violence, where a manly deed earned him the right to drink alcohol and have loveless sex to mark his supposedly heroic masculinity. In stark contrast, the central event of that 1974 day brought a huge loss for Jimmy and his mother, who “saw what we shouldn’t have—bits and pieces—it was all just bits and pieces” (44) of scattered body parts and remains of the building.

In the long run, however, the gap between the boys’ emotional and physical experiences which separated them as perpetrator and victim became narrower, even modified. Ian did time

in prison, after which he accidentally met Sheila, the woman he had sex with on his “big” day, and learned that she had conceived a child as a result of their intercourse and had to travel to Liverpool for a secret abortion. She suffered in lonely desperation, away from her relatives and acquaintances. Sheila told Ian that “it all haunted her” and he could realize the more personal and far-reaching consequences of his glorified service to the UVF and the celebration he earned by it: “that’s how she looked—haunted” (47), he tells Jimmy. Jimmy’s comment, “not much of a reward then after all” (47), acknowledges that Ian did have his share of suffering. After his father’s death Jimmy remained the sole family member his mother could rely on for an understanding and helpful company, yet, as he admits, “I didn’t know how much pain my mother was in—only knew my own pain . . . she wanted me to look after her and I didn’t—I looked after myself” (50). His mother died of cancer probably caused by her grief-stricken loneliness and disappointment, which the middle-aged Jimmy now attributes to his own self-absorption and lack of empathy for her: “she wanted me to notice her and I didn’t” (50). Although in vastly different ways, both boys became responsible for others’ death during the Troubles, a time when governing ideologies and living through private tragedies disabled a lot of people, especially the young ones in their formative years to develop a sense of intersubjectivity, the capacity to recognize “the other as subject rather than object” (Benjamin 10). For sixteen-year-old Ian, the Catholic men in the pub were only a bunch of enemies, mere targets of his fight for abstract ideas, and young Jimmy failed to see the personal aspects of his mother’s agony and console her according to her needs and wishes.

Having shared their traumatic experiences of the events and aftermath of that certain day in 1974 and how their later lives and relationships were affected by them, the two men shake hands and Ian leaves, never to return. Listening to each others’ authentic stories, which question the perpetrator-victim opposition, concludes with a kind of reconciliation of the once antagonistic sides, metonymic of what is happening or is hoped to happen in post-conflict

Northern Irish society at large. Ian's suggestion that "we've seen the same things" (32) holds true in the sense that both he and Jimmy have experienced and witnessed events rooted in or related to the manifold and ubiquitous effects of the long-lasting sectarian warfare. To the Polish barman's inquiries whether the two of them will ever meet again, Jimmy replies: "you know nothing do you. . .—we met—we understand each other—that's enough" (53), so the first step toward recognizing the other as a person has been made and forgiving may also follow. According to Connall Parr, "*Quietly*'s fictive interpretation is more believable and accurate than the sociologies and legalities of the 'peace industry' in its conveyance that there is no easy solution or simple way beyond the impasse of the past" (540–41). That Northern Irish society is still not entirely at peace is indicated in the drama by framing references to the disturbing offstage presence of kids incited by the football match between Northern Ireland and Poland and the closing words of the play, which come from unidentified offstage Voices beating the window shutter of the bar and shouting: "fuckin polish bastard—dirty smelly fucking bastard—go back to where you come from and shite in the street you fucker—polish wanker" (55). This shows the fragile victory of peaceful humanity in Northern Ireland: there is still a lingering confusion of emotions and uncertainty of identity, which might motivate people, especially youngsters, to find new objects of hatred and transfer their aggression onto them. Significantly, Jimmy says to Robert at the beginning of the play, "kids can do more damage than you think" (12)—the use of the present tense here carries ominous implications regarding not only past troubles, but also the potential future directions of the Northern Irish society.

Leaves (2007) by Lucy Caldwell, also set in Belfast, provides yet another picture of teenage relationships, those of girls to their parents and each other, impacted by their lingering conscious or unconscious memories of the Troubles in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Winning her the George Devine award, the play established Caldwell as a young author worthy of attention. In an interview shortly after her successful debut, Caldwell revealed that her father

was Protestant and her mother Catholic, who sent her to a non-denominational school on the east side of the city, and she felt “very sheltered from the Troubles”: “I remember we had pen pals in school and they would send us letters asking how many bombs had gone off that day and we’d just laugh. But maybe we didn’t realize how thin the veil was that separated us from the violence” (Lynch). *Leaves* is a play about a family called Murdoch, with the father, a scholar of Irish place name lore, his wife, and their three daughters, eleven-year-old Poppy, fifteen-year-old Clover and nineteen-year-old Lori. There are no other characters, so the family might seem to be a shelter for its members while it is also a claustrophobic space from another angle, calling to mind the enduring claustrophobia of Northern Ireland itself. However, the outside world intrudes into the life of the Murdochs time and again, not so much directly as in the form of disheartening and undermining effects on both the parents and their teenage children.

The dramatic action consists of the family members’ conversation revolving around Lori, the oldest girl, who left for London to pursue university studies there only three months before, but following a suicide attempt, she was hospitalized, and after some time released to the care of her parents. As Caldwell has said in another interview, “statistically, Northern Ireland has one of the highest teen suicide rates in the world . . . Higher than the south, even. And it affects boys and girls, all classes, all religions . . . in the North this is the post-ceasefire generation. So I started wondering whether it had something to do with having grown up in a heightened political atmosphere” (Wallace). Lori’s situation in *Leaves*, thus, seems to present a case study of suicidal teenagers who have been children in conflict-tormented Belfast. Exploring her homecoming and reception at home, the drama does not identify the cause of Lori’s suicide attempt, but there is a strong sense that it is related to the Troubles, the context of her formative years. The mother, Phyllis, is searching for a clue in the family past, in how they raised their daughters, and concludes that everything was done to protect them from traumatic experiences:

Whatever it was, it wasn't us! Because we did our best. We made sure we were out of the country over the Twelfth, we made sure they didn't see the worst of the news, we explained to them what was going on, and why it was wrong—didn't we? We kept the worse of it at bay as best we could—sang songs when they couldn't sleep for the helicopters (33).

Her husband, David, however, stresses the inescapable impact of having lived for years under police surveillance and a variety of threats on all of them: "We are where we come from, Phyllis, and there's no getting away from that" (33) he says. This oblique statement seems to imply that Lori did take Belfast with her to London, where among students and academics coming from not so notorious backgrounds as hers, she may have felt the burden of Troubles-related experiences more acutely than before.

During her first day at home, Lori (her full name, Dolores suggesting melancholy and sadness) remains lying in bed, unable to leave her room, let alone to attend the family dinner her mother carefully prepared, and greet her sisters. Later it is the imagined noise of a helicopter, so memorably connected with everyday life during the Troubles, which induces Lori to speak about her feelings of depression caused by the violence-disrupted state of the contemporary world:

LORI. Did you hear the helicopter last night?

PHYLLIS. What? I don't—I don't think so . . .

LORI. I always think, you know—When you see pictures of . . . Iraq or Kabul or wherever—Places where there is real fighting going on—Helicopters overhead—And remember the times when we were little and we couldn't sleep because of the

helicopters?

. . .

PHYLLIS. . . . you should just try and concentrate on getting well again—

LORI. But Mum, how can you not think about it? And I don't mean—*you*—I mean—
anyone. . . (98–99)

Lori's depression is rooted in losing the belief that "things get better and people get happier" (100), because the daily threats of the sectarian bombings, the continuous surveillance, and the concomitant limitations on personal freedom she experienced in Belfast as a child, albeit not always directly, tend to reappear in other places of the world.

Donald Woods Winnicott observes that "many families break up because of the strain of psychosis in one of their members, and that most of these families would probably remain intact if they could be relieved of such intolerable strain" (89). Even though it does not break up, the family in *Leaves* is seriously affected and paralyzed in their relations to each other by the suicide attempt of Lori. Their communication is interspersed with unfinished sentences, monosyllabic responses as well as emotionally charged pauses, creating a dramatic style for which close parallels can be found in the work of Harold Pinter, an author much concerned with the collapse of families. The ways in which David, Phyllis, and Clover respond to this all-changing episode in Lori's personal life is also influenced by their experience of so much loss during the Troubles, which generated in them, largely unawares, certain defense mechanisms. David, the father escapes to his research of Irish place names and spends the first full day of Lori's homecoming in the Linen Hall Library. Phyllis, the mother, escapes to reminiscences of her own youth which offered much fewer opportunities than what could be available to Lori now. Clover, the fifteen-year-old daughter, is both disappointed and confused because she cannot look up to her older sister as a role model anymore and has to listen to the pitiful remarks

their acquaintances make about the Murdochs' grave problem. She blames Lori for what the news of the latter's suicide attempt is doing to the whole family: "Do you know that you pretty much broke Mum's heart, for a start? Do you think there's a hope that she'll ever be happy again? I always used to be so proud that you were my older sister. In school and that" (71).

The parents sympathize with Lori's plight, try to talk and listen to her about her feelings, but sometimes their efforts sound forced. Phyllis's defensive attitude as a mask of psychic injuries can also be explained in terms of Margaret Ward's analysis of motherhood: "Of course, for mothers increased disturbances meant greater confinement within the home for themselves as well as their children. The mental cost of their experiences has still to be considered" (271). Theorizing the expression of emotions on the international stage, Peta Tait highlights the distinction between sympathy and empathy. The former can be seen as a "precursor" of the latter, which means not only feeling with but also feeling for someone else, as empathy is "considered to arise through thinking and feeling that simulate what another (others) is experiencing" (20). In *Leaves* it is the eleven-year-old Poppy who genuinely welcomes Lori back home—preparing little surprise presents for her—and who does not think that things will get awkward or "weird" with Lori's return, in stark contrast to Clover, the middle sister (27). Poppy has an intuitive understanding for Lori, and in her case, sympathy turns into empathy as she keeps taking her sister's side in all the arguments. In a sense, she is the opposite of Lori despite the relatively small age difference between them. Lori's remark about her younger sister explains to some extent the historically grounded nature of the changes which are likely to disrupt the usual generational borders: "you were born after the Ceasefire, Poppy, and because of that I think there's hope for you" (91).

Poppy's role in the play is accentuated by the technique of *mise en abyme*, provided in an intergeneric form. She reads a sentence from *The Chrysalids* (1955) by John Wyndham to her mother, a science fiction novel with a teenage boy protagonist, which they study in class:

“hostilities had been in a state of abeyance for several months and so a confrontation was inevitable and imminent” (47). Poppy asks Phyllis what “abeyance” means, and after her mother’s attempts to explain the word, she eventually comes to understand it as “things have been okay for a while but it [hostilities *sic*] hasn’t gone away” (48). The quoted sentence from Wyndham’s novel functions as a *mise en abyme*, encapsulating an essential feature of the Murdochs’ life, which also reflects the affective state of post-conflict Northern Irish society: people have come to keep their hostilities, or at least bad feelings toward others, at bay, but it does not mean that tensions may not resurface. Inspired by the novel’s concern with the gift of telepathy the protagonist and a small group are lucky to share in a claustrophobic society, Poppy, the youngest and most open-minded member of the family wonders whether it is possible to gain greater insight into the thoughts and psychic life of other people.

Reviewing the play’s production at Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 2007, Philip Fisher criticizes Caldwell’s work saying that “the central figure of Lori remains a lacuna.” Tellingly so, I argue, since the play does not aspire to the status of a psychiatric study but foregrounds the increasing alienation of family members under the weight of an unsolvable situation in the context of a culture harboring the negative emotional effects of deep-rooted socio-political conflicts. Also, Fisher’s description of the last scene in terms of a “filmic flashback, set a few months earlier on the eve of Lori’s departure for University ‘across the water’” in which “we see what has been destroyed. This was a normal, loving family that knew how to be happy” is contentious. The last but one scene, taking place in the present, concludes with Lori’s words: “(suddenly, fiercely, to no one) I’d give anything—anything—to start again. Anything. I mean if I believed in God, or in the Devil, or—I’d give anything—” (110). The technique of analepsis in the last scene of the play allows for a kind of starting again because it is set in the evening before Lori’s departure for London three months earlier. Here the family is together, seemingly happy, as Fisher claims, yet their talk betrays nuances suggesting that they hold repressed

feelings in “abeyance” as the norm, which will erupt in the confrontations across the previous scenes of the play once the relative calm and predictability of their life has been disturbed by the oldest girl’s plight.

In our era of anxious feelings about the future of societies and individuals, a sinister kind of posthuman vacuum and loss are coming to the fore, these have become more pronounced in the theater as well. The figure of the child and images of childhood in plays and their staging often raise questions about what might await humankind in the years ahead. Discussing case studies of the performance of Shakespeare’s underage characters in recent years, Gemma Miller argues that the way “they are reflected, refracted and reinterpreted in performance provides valuable insights into modern concerns about how we see not only our pasts but also, and perhaps more importantly, our futures” (5). In *Leaves*, Caldwell’s anxiety-ridden, depressed and suicidal teenager, Lori doubts that “there’s any such thing as the future” (102), yet, some slight hope appears in the character of Poppy, as Lori herself acknowledges. *Quietly* by Owen McCafferty and *Trust* by Gary Mitchell convey fearful thoughts about the future less directly. By means of their respective dramaturgies they suggest, however, that the youngest generation in a post-conflict, yet still healing Northern Irish society might be in danger of growing up to become disoriented individuals unable to strengthen the peace they have formally inherited.

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Notes

¹ The use of trauma theories could be another option, as is exemplified by Alexander Coupe’s study “Performing Trauma in Post-conflict Northern Ireland: Ethics, Representation and the Witnessing Body.” *Études Irlandaises* 42.1 (2017): 105–21.

² The last line, “And hope and history rhyme” from the Chorus in Seamus Heaney’s play *The Cure at Troy* (1990), written at the time when the first tentative steps were taken towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland, is frequently quoted in various texts dealing with the Peace Process.

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