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An Approach to Autobiographical Irish Literature of
the Troubles: Short Stories by Victims, Witnesses,
and Activists.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to show an approach to some of the memoirs that were written since the Irish Troubles (1960s - 1990s) started; and offer an analysis of the identity and violence that appears in the chosen stories. To do so, first I have contextualized the historical context of the Troubles and explained some characteristics of this kind of texts. The selected writings are six autobiographical short stories from the book *Children of the Troubles* compiled by Laurel Holliday. The fact that they have been written by different authors shows the different points of view existing among the population during that time. Finally, I have analyzed the way in which authors express identity and violence in their memoirs, since these two features appear repeatedly in Irish literature related to the Troubles.

Key words: Autobiographies, Conflict, Identity, Northern Ireland, Troubles, Violence

RESUMEN

Este TFG tiene como objetivo mostrar un acercamiento a algunas de las autobiografías que se escribieron a raíz del conflicto conocido como los “Disturbios” en Irlanda, y ofrecer un análisis de la identidad y la violencia en las historias escogidas. Para ello, se ha contextualizado el período histórico en el que se desarrolla este conflicto, que duró alrededor de treinta años, y se han explicado algunas características de este tipo de textos. Se han escogido seis historias cortas del libro *Children of the Troubles* de Laurel Holliday, redactadas por distintos autores, que nos permiten tener una muestra de los puntos de vista de la población existentes en ese período. Finalmente, se ha analizado la forma en que los autores manifiestan la identidad y la violencia, pues estos son temas recurrentes en la literatura relacionada con los “Disturbios”.

Palabras clave: Autobiografías, Conflicto, Identidad, del Irlanda Norte, Disturbios, Violencia

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INTRODUCTION

The Troubles, a conflict that involved political, social, and religious issues between Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, lasted from the 1960s to the 1990s. Despite it is very recent in terms of time, we will see that these decades had a major impact on people's lives, especially on those who lived in the border of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland or in Northern Ireland itself.

Marsh argues that the conflict was a political issue and “no-one in the Left believed that the problem in Northern Ireland had anything to do with religion” (qtd. in Boyce 117). Certainly the issue arose because of the confrontation about whether Northern Ireland should belong to the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. However, other issues like social discrimination or religion were involved in the same conflict. Maybe in the high spheres of politics it was a purely political issue, but in the streets, the religious conflict was very much present as we will see in different short stories.

This situation of conflict influenced the writings of the period, and many writers wrote about the horror they were living in both fictional and autobiographical stories. I will deal with autobiographical short stories taken from the book *Children of the Troubles* compiled by Laurel Holliday. I have chosen six stories which have different authors and also different plots. The authors of the stories are not professional; they are people who wanted others to know about the situation they lived in during their childhood.

Stories will be divided in three main groups, victims, witnesses, and activists. I have included two texts in each group, and I will analyze two issues: identity and violence. I will analyze the way in which they are represented. In relation to identity, how it is represented or claimed by the author. And in the case of violence, if it is central to the story, if characters consider violence normal, and why they include it in their stories.

1. "THE TROUBLES"

The period of Irish history with which I will be dealing with goes from the late 1960s until the 1990s and it is called "the Troubles". During these years, the political, social and religious situation in the country was very unstable, and violent incidents happened every day (McKittrick and McVea 1-2).

The conflict of the Troubles was mainly an issue of differences in politics and religion. To explain how the conflict was originated we have to look back to the beginning of the twentieth century because it was then when some troubles between the Irish and the British appeared because of the British rule in the island.

Since the very beginning of the twentieth century there was a feeling of anxiety in the political life of Ireland. At that time, the island was still controlled by the British, but in the very first years of the century it was already obvious that people were not happy with the British rule in the island and real movements started to be developed against that rule. An example of this is the Easter Rising in 1916 in which some nationalists rebelled against Britain. (McKittrick, David, and David McVea 3-4) Even though this rebellion was suffocated, the war of Independence started in 1919. It lasted until 1921 and during those years the British Army and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought against each other. Meanwhile, on the political side of the issue, both sides ended up signing a treaty by which the island was divided in two, and two different Parliaments were created, one for the six counties of Northern Ireland and another one for the South. This situation gave the southern counties certain degree of independence, but still both parliaments should obey the British Parliament. Many people were still not happy with that degree of independence nor the partition of Ireland, and the feeling of unrest and disconformity was still alive for the years to come.

This moment in which Ireland was divided in two highlighted some differences between these two new regions that had been created. For instance, in Northern Ireland there was a majority that supported the British rule in the island, while in the South the majority was against it, so tensions were already there since these years. Due to this instability, a

Civil War started in Ireland in 1922 and confronted the ones that were pro-treaty with the anti-treaty ones, but the war did not last long and it ended one year later, in 1923.

Little by little, Britain lost some power over the Irish Free State which included the whole island except the Northern Ireland counties, and an Irish Constitution was approved in 1937. It did not recognize the name of “Irish Free State” given by the British, and it was changed to “Eire” or “Ireland”. Finally, in the next decade, Ireland was declared a Republic which meant that it would become completely independent from the British rule. Nonetheless, the six Northern Ireland counties remained part of Great Britain, and so it is until today.

In the late 1960s, it started in Ireland the period known as “the Troubles” which lasted until the 1990s. During these years, the political, social, and religious situation in Ireland was very uncertain and violence was present in everyone’s life. The confrontation involved a mixture of political, social and religious issues related in many cases to discrimination of part of the population. These three issues were very much related in people’s consciousness, and the population could see that their stance in relation to these issues was directly affecting their daily lives.

We have to bear in mind that in the Republic of Ireland the population was, in terms of religion, mainly Catholic; but in Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom, the population was mainly Protestant (McKittrick and McVea 1-2). This is important because there was a sector of the population that remained to be Catholic in Northern Ireland and it provoked conflicts among the population too. Catholics in Northern Ireland suffered certain discrimination because of their religion in situations such as the election of members of Parliament, and they could have problems when looking for a job or renting a house (McKittrick and McVea 5). On the other side, in the South of the island it already existed the Irish Republican Army (IRA) which was a paramilitary group that fought to liberate Ireland from the British rule, and wanted Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland and stop belonging to the United Kingdom.

In 1967, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was created and its aim was to end the discrimination against the Catholic population in Northern Ireland. It was a sign that the small things that politics could do in in that region for Catholic

people were becoming more direct and they might turn to military actions (Boyce 104). This movement had some similarities with the Black Civil Rights Movement of the US and it was as effective in terms of media dissemination. In the end, the Irish movement had the same purpose that the one in the US (Boyce 104). These two movements did not have the same aim in terms of the group of people they defended, but the final aim was exactly the same: social equality. The NICRA organized lots of marches during these years, such as the Derry civil rights march in 1968 after which several reforms were taken to the Parliament. Only a few months later, a student radical group organized another march which ended up with an attack by some Unionists and the police. This was an incident that shows how fragile peace was in Northern Ireland as well as the reforms taken in the Parliament just a few months before (Boyce 105-07).

The British Army had not intervened in any of the incidents that happened in Northern Ireland until the date. However, in 1969, there were riots in Derry and Belfast, and the Northern Ireland resources did not seem to be able to suffocate them. This inability to put an end to the riots forced the British Army to intervene in the conflict, and it is at this point when the streets of Northern Ireland started to see British military presence. It was a measure taken to keep peace, but it increased the anger of at least the Catholic population and especially the members of the IRA (Boyce 107-09).

By 1972, marches had been banned by the government, yet there were still some. In this year, a march in Derry ended up with the death of thirteen civilians at the hands of the army. This incident is remembered as the “Bloody Sunday” and it changed the way in which Catholics saw the Northern Ireland Parliament laws as they felt they were no longer valid or legal for them (Boyce 110-11). The same year, Britain took control of the issues of Northern Ireland and later the Dublin government claimed to have a word in the Northern Ireland issues too.

In the following years, the tensions between both sides of the conflict did nothing but increase. On the one hand, there were the political measures taken by the government and on the other hand, the IRA continued to attack repeatedly different targets in Northern Ireland. The IRA had already been considered as a terrorist group before, but it is during these years that the idea of terrorism as something bad in itself gathers strength among the population. Fay *et al* argue that if we take into account the statistics

of violence, “the IRA has essentially [...] been an offensive rather than a defensive organization, with little evidence that it was able to protect the Nationalist population from either the security forces or sectarian attack” (qtd. in Dixon 12-13). Gupta says that the IRA was supposed to protect Catholic neighborhoods from the attacks by Protestants (128), but as Fay *et al* say, the number of attacks carried out by the IRA was highly superior to the times they had to act as a defensive group. This turned the IRA into a group that uses violence repeatedly to achieve a political goal, and that agrees with the most commonly accepted definition of terrorism. Nowadays the IRA is still considered a terrorist organization.

In 1975, a ceasefire was agreed between the government and the IRA, which caused again the distrust of the Unionists. Even though a truce had been agreed on, it did not mean the end of violence in the streets. Civilians continued to be victims and demanded more security which was not granted (Boyce 116). During the first years of the 1980s the nationalistic parties won a lot of followers, specially the Sinn Féin because they “mobilized previous non-voters and first-time voters, who saw no prospect of any sort of fulfilling life within the Northern Ireland they knew” (Lee 455). This might indicate a radicalization of part of the society that before had remained on the sidelines, and during these years decided to take sides in the conflict.

In 1985 the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed by the government of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. This agreement included some articles which dealt with the cooperation of both countries in security issues among others. The relation between the governments of both countries was supposed to be easier and more collaborative, and it should have brought some peace to the conflict. However, some unionists and nationalists were not happy with the agreement; Nationalists took it as something bad for their interests because, for them, it meant the continuity of the British rule over Northern Ireland, and for Unionists the agreement meant the confirmation that Britain was relinquishing when it had pressure (Kennedy-Pipe). This disconformity by unionists after the signing of the agreement “marked the beginning of an upsurge in Protestant mobilization and paramilitary violence” (Kennedy-Pipe 123). On the other side, “even though the Provisionals (IRA) had claimed that they were not going to disrupt the Anglo-Irish Agreement through violence, [...] after the signing of the

agreement they intensified their activity with bombings and bloodshed” (Kennedy-Pipe 125). The Agreement was signed to try to bring some peace to Northern Ireland but this attempt ended up causing more violence in the streets, and also more British military soldiers in the region to try to keep peace between the two communities.

“The IRA ceasefire on 31 August 1994 and the loyalist ceasefire six weeks later brought to an end – for a time at least - twenty-five years of violent communal conflict in Northern Ireland” (Ruane and Todd 1). Most of the population saw the ceasefire as a hope for a prolonged peace in Northern Ireland. The ceasefire was broken by the IRA in 1996 and renewed in 1997. In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed, it contained “a radical reforming agenda in areas of equality, human rights, policing and justice, with prisoners being released [...] and it was overwhelmingly endorsed by the people of Ireland, North and South, in concurrent referendums” (Cox, Guelke and Stephen 39). This agreement marked the end of continuous violence between the two communities of Northern Ireland and the beginning of the peace in the region. “By international standards, with peace marred only by a low level of violence, the Northern Ireland peace process is a success” (Cox, Guelke and Stephen 39). The period known as “the Troubles” finished with this agreement, but even though violence decreased, it did not mean the end of violence in Northern Ireland.

2. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

The kind of texts I will be dealing with in this essay are autobiographical texts, and they were written some years after the conflict of the Troubles ended. The two things that all these writings have in common are that the stories are personal stories that happened to the authors of the texts, and that all the authors were very young when they wrote about their experiences of the Troubles. I think this detail is very interesting because we can have a different point of view of the events through the eyes of very young people who lived the conflict first hand.

Autobiographical writings are compilations of personal events written by the same person who went through them (Vélez 47). Nicola King argues that “autobiographical narratives reconstruct the events of a life in the light of “what wasn’t known then,” highlighting the events which are now, with hindsight, seen to be significant” (qtd. in Lynch 24). Then, autobiographical works are not only the compilation of all the events that happened in someone’s life, but they are the compilation of the events that the author considers to be important for which-ever reason. Autobiographies are, most of the times, written when people have certain distance from the experiences they want to write about, and these writings can be seen sometimes as a review of someone’s life. This is why King speaks about seeing events with hindsight, because the author chooses the events that he wants to include, leaving out the ones that he does not remember or does not consider significant enough. Besides, when we grow old our point of view is usually different from the one we had when the events actually happened, and this might give the experiences a different sense or analysis.

Lynch suggests that it is important whether this kind of writings have a good quality or not, but we also have to take into account the reason why authors expose their lives to the public because it is equally important as the way in which the work has been written (25). There is always a reason to write an autobiography because they are very personal and the authors are taking the risk of being judged. The stories with which I will be dealing with are not written by celebrated authors, but by normal people who lived

through the Troubles, and wanted the world to know what was happening in Northern Ireland. So their reason to start writing would be the existence of a conflict around them and the need to tell what was happening in their lives and how they were facing it.

Autobiographical writings in Ireland increased along the twentieth century and so did their importance. The “Irish autobiography has developed in relation to precise socio-historical conditions that have separated it from other European traditions” (Lynch 29). The same way it happens with the literature of any country, the events that happened in Irish history influenced its society and the themes addressed in its literature, specially the autobiographical writings. The Troubles was a period in which the use of violence was very frequent with a result of many casualties, and there was also a sense of disconformity among the population. These two things are usually a source of inspiration for new writings to show the situation of the country and its population. In the case of autobiographical writings it could be a way to protest against the situation and also a way to record specific events of the authors’ lives that they do not want to go unnoticed. Lynch suggests that in fact, the conflicts that happened in Ireland at the beginning of the century were fuel to Irish autobiographies where writers could explore new identities and express their ideas and concerns (21). As well as it happened at the beginning of the century, the Troubles were also a source of material for lots of autobiographies in the the second half of the century.

Identity is one of the issues that are usually present in Irish autobiographies and it seems to be even more central after the partition of Ireland, when the Island was divided in two and a new country appeared. Together with the birth of the new nation that was the Republic of Ireland, the issue of identity was also accentuated because there were new possibilities of identity among the population (Lynch 19). This has been reflected in autobiographies, where authors tried to define their identity, and to do that they usually had into account their religion and nationality. Lynch argues that:

In autobiographies written in the decades immediately following independence, the complex process of defining Irishness is often simplified into drawing a parallel between nation and self. In other words, it is not what but where Irishness is that shapes the identity debate.” (21)

The idea of Irishness is hard to define and authors tend to associate it to geographical areas rather than to people. It seems that Irishness would be associated to a certain piece

of land and everyone born there would be Irish. The problem with this division is that with the partition of Ireland there were people who remained trapped on one of the sides and probably did not agree with the identity generally accepted by that side of the partition.

In the last decades of the century, autobiographical writings suffered some changes compared to the ones of the previous decades. During those decades there was a change in Irish society that modified the way in which the Irish thought about their nation and their identity (Lynch 21). Society was different, as well as its thoughts and the reality in which people lived. That situation affected the memoirs written during this period because people had other interests about which they started to write, such as their identity or the violence they were surrounded by. Besides, autobiographical writings suffered a delay during these decades until authors who suffered or took advantage of the changes happening in the country wrote about them (Lynch 22). As I have already said, in most of the cases, this kind of writings are not written at the same time as the historical period develops, but rather authors need some distance from the events to write about them. This delay in the case of autobiographies of the Troubles might be due to the length of the conflict. Thirty years might not seem much, but there was a sector of the population that probably did not know a different way of life from the Troubles, which made them see the situation as normal. However, when the conflict ended, and they could live in peace, they might have wanted to record their experiences during the previous period.

This kind of writings of the late twentieth century and beginning of the twenty first shows a contrast between how different the past was and which impact it had in the present (Lynch 22). Authors were trying to capture the many changes that took place during those years and the enormous impact that they had in their lives. These changes I am talking about had to do with politics, culture and society and they changed the Irish identity that was claimed in previous works. After the time and space that authors needed to start writing about these years, in the last decade of the twentieth century many of those writers started to write, and many of their stories dealt with violent or traumatic experiences from their childhood (Lynch 26).

This work deals with short stories, each of them is an autobiographical memoir of a concrete memory. Even though they are quite short writings, we will be able to see the nationalistic element present in some of them and the violence involved in all of the stories.

3. IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE

The issue of identity in Ireland is not new; the Irish wanted to define themselves as different from the British who were the colonizers of the island. “One’s race, culture and language are of great importance in gaining this individuality, in differentiating oneself, and consequently, the nation from others” (MacCarthy 77). The question of Irishness has been present in people’s minds for a long time. “The Troubles were the consequence of two opposed national identities [...] that involved the borders and legitimacy of the state [...] and in which violence was a major element” (Arbizu 112).¹

As I have explained before, in Irish literature identity is, in many cases, related to the idea of nationalism and land. “Nationalism is often another way of speaking of a struggle for independence and autonomy from a dominant power undertaken by a subject people who feel themselves to be united by either language or race or both. This struggle is normally in the form of resistance to a colonizing power.” (MacCarthy 76) This idea of nationalism linked to the idea of identity is important because that is the way in which many authors define themselves in autobiographies. On the other hand, religion is also something we have to take into account because in Ireland, it is closely related to nationalism and politics, and it has been reflected in Irish literature too (MacCarthy 119). Arbizu suggests that “in general terms we can say that Catholics identify themselves as Irish or Northern Irish and Protestants as British or Northern Irish”, which means that both communities have completely different ideas of identity (81)².

Another element that is directly linked to identity in Ireland is the language. The Gaelic language is official in Ireland as well as the English language and has been used in literature as a means to defend Irish identity. It reflects another difference between the two communities of Northern Ireland. Arbizu suggests that “the fact that the Gaelic language is spoken mostly by Catholics, and specially nationalists, [...] directly links

¹ Author’s translation

² Author’s translation

this language to a specific political position” (99)³. Then, language has also a role when we speak about identity because the Irish looked for anything that differentiated them from the British to make it theirs and also a symbol of Irishness. As well as it happens with language, other images and symbols of Ireland that were related to one or the other side “became fixed in the mind of a whole generation (Ruane and Todd 2).

In the stories I will deal with, we will see that the authors normally do not identify themselves as Irish or British, but the reader can clearly identify them with one religious side or another. This way, even if they do not tell us in which political side they are; the reader can know it because of their religion and what they tell us in the story.

“As a consequence of an undesirable extended situation of political and religious confrontation between the two communities in the isle, terrorism will become an essential theme in Irish literature” (Llamas 30)⁴. Since terrorism involves violence, this is another element that is usually included in Irish literature. I have already said that many of the autobiographies that were written after the period of the Troubles were about violent or traumatic incidents, which means that violence is a significant component in that kind of writings. Velez argues that the main aim of writing autobiographical memoirs that include violence is not so much to have a record of what really happened, but to give a voice to people who lived through violent situations and also those who were, directly or indirectly, involved in the conflict (52). Autobiographies give authors the opportunity to express themselves and record their experiences. This way, those events will not be forgotten and other people will be able to know about them.

“Violence in the texts [...], like the violence in our world, is multifaceted. It functions at different levels, is perpetuated by different motivations, and is experienced in a variety of ways” (Franzak and Noll 663). In the stories that I will analyze, there are different situations of violence and the authors experience them in different ways, which means that their reaction towards violence will be different too. In addition, violence can be the central element of the plot or it can be “less visible and serve as a backdrop to the story” (Franzak and Noll 664). This will happen in our short stories too because some of the

³ Author’s translation

⁴ Author’s translation

authors focus on the violence because they have a specific purpose, such as to persuade the reader of their opinion about the other community; and some others speak about violence with no other purpose than to show the reality of those years.

“It is common that contemporary Irish fiction includes the exploration and representation of the consequences of violence and madness of the human being” (Llamas 114-15)⁵. Violence usually has consequences in both the people who commit and suffer it. The texts that will be analyzed in the next section will show some of the consequences that violence can have in people, including committing suicide or inducing more violence.

⁵ Author's translation

4. ANALYSIS OF THE SHORT STORIES

The chosen corpus of stories consists of six autobiographical pieces that deal with violent events during the Troubles. They were written by people who lived on the proximities of the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which was one of the places where there were more conflicts from the 1960s onwards. The authors of the stories are different one from each other in age, gender, religion, and political ideas, which is interesting because this way different people who went through similar events provide different points of view of the conflict.

The book from which the stories have been selected is *Children of the Troubles* by Laurel Holliday. The book is a compilation of short stories written by people who lived through the Troubles. Before each of the short stories, the author of the book includes a brief description of the author, where information such as place of birth of the author, his interests at the time, or his job in the moment on which the story was written can be found. In most of the descriptions she also adds the “side” to which the author belongs, the Catholic or Protestant side.

In the book, the stories are not specifically separated in Catholic and Protestant authors, but the reader can easily identify that distinction in the stories. I will focus on how the authors express their identity and the way in which they speak about the violence involved in their lives. The division I will do will separate victims, witnesses and activists depending on their role in the stories, and each division will have two stories to discuss.

4.1. Victims

This stories deal with authors who suffered some sort of violence because of their religion. In this section I will be dealing with the stories “A Normal Childhood?” written by Joyce Cathcart and “If the Worst Should Happen” by Joan Farrell.

The first short story tells us about a girl that even though, as every child, believed that bad things would never happen where she lived, gets involved in the violence of the Troubles with only seven years old. Her family did not live in Belfast but her parents travelled frequently there. She tells us that even at that early age, she was concerned about what may happen to them in those journeys, and whether one of those would be the last time she would see them or not. One night the phone rang and someone told them that her grandfather and uncle were missing and the pub where they used to go had been blown up. At the end, both were found alive but that attack left them a feeling of fear because it meant that quiet areas were a target too. When she was ten some men entered her home while she was at school but her parents were still there. They were tied, gagged, and threatened with shooting. When the girl went home after school, she found out about what had happened and even though nothing had happened to her, she did not consider her home a safe place any more.

The author of this memoir does not give any clue of her identity. We can only know that she is a Protestant because of the information about the author that we find before the memoir starts. This means that, in her story, she does not claim any religious identity for herself. She does not give any signs of being anti- Catholic, in fact she “always had friends on both sides of the religious divide” (Cathcart 157). It seems that she did not take sides in the conflict and she does not dismiss Catholics just for being so, which is something that, as other stories will show, was not very frequent among the population. “I want peace. No principle is worth spilling another drop of Ulster blood for” (Cathcart 158). She refers to the whole population of Northern Ireland by saying “another drop of Ulster blood”, she is including the two communities in the statement.

Several acts of violence can be found throughout the memoir such as “The pub had been blown up and both my grandfather and uncle were missing” (Cathcart 156).

Masked gunmen had ransacked the house, taken my father’s guns [...], tied and gagged my parents, and threatened to shoot them. The ordeal lasted several hours. As they left, they warned my parents that they knew the schools my brother and I attended and, should they prove too helpful to the police, we would suffer. Our home had been violated and was never again the safe childhood heaven it had been. (Cathcart 157)

The first situation is poorly described, but the second one has some more details and the author expresses the feeling that she had after that intrusion in her house. She did not suffer the violence of being tied and gagged herself, but the knowledge of what had happened, left her a feeling of insecurity in her own house.

Besides, even though she seems to accept both communities to the same extent, repeated violence made her become distrustful of those who belonged to the opposite community. "With every new atrocity I wondered if I could really trust those of a different persuasion" (Cathcart 158). In this sentence she shows that she started to be distrustful of the whole opposite community, she is indiscriminately treating all Catholics in the same way, as possible attackers.

Finally, the author perceives those violent situations as normal, and accepts them because she had lived most of her life with that kind of incidents. "I was on the edge of my seat on the way in and out, ready to dive to the floor should our car be sprayed with bullet fire" (Cathcart 155). "Normal is a comparative term when you've lived with the Troubles longer than you've known peace" (Cathcart 157). She says it, when you do not know another way of life, normal becomes what you know. And in her case it was the violent situation of the Troubles.

In the second story, "If the Worst Should Happen", the author tells us about her youth, she was a Protestant and her first clash with a Roman Catholic happened when she went home after school. She had to go through an area of the town that had many sympathizers with the Republic of Ireland. While walking, another girl from the neighborhood took her beret and threw it to the road shouting insults. She was shocked by that event because no one in the street said anything to the other girl. Some years later, she moved to Londonderry and there she often woke up at night because of the noise of the bombs, and from her window she could see exchanges of gunfire. Her boyfriend joined the Ulster Defense Regiment with which he went out on patrol along the border. Later they heard that he was on a death threat list, at the beginning they did not take it seriously but he took precautions and did not take the same route twice when going or coming from work. A year later, one of his friends was shot and killed by the

IRA when patrolling. Her boyfriend should have been in that patrol that day but he had been delayed at work. Another day, three armed men entered his house and held his grandparents at gunpoint because they thought he would be there since his car was parked outside, as any other Sunday. Since that day, he moved from one place to another and continuously changed his route to work. They finally got married and went on their honeymoon. When they returned, another UDR member was shot, this time in his house. The same year her husband was shot and killed when going to work, he had used the same route two days.

This author starts by telling us that her house was literally in the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland which left a part of her family's farm on both sides of the border. She had never had problems with any Catholic until her teens when she started to change her idea on Catholics. She, as well as other authors that we will see later in this essay, has the idea of "us" and "them" from a very young age. "I had to walk over through this "Republican" area. I really was not worried at all because I had never experienced any difficulties with Roman Catholic people" (Farrell 232). Here it is visible the division between the two communities of Northern Ireland, which were separated geographically in different neighborhoods. Besides, this sentence gives an idea of her identity too because, as it has been said before, identity, nationalism and religion were closely related. In this case the clear division between Catholics and Protestants gives the reader a clue of which is the identity with which the author identifies herself, which is Protestantism. She speaks like she should have been afraid of going through that neighborhood because Catholics lived there, which indicates the general thinking of Protestant population.

In the following extract the author expresses again the distinction between the two communities: "I realize now that we were witnessing then the start of Republicans' open hostility toward Protestants" (Farrell 232). Here, we have the same idea than in the previous paragraph, the author identifying herself as Protestant and portraying her community as peaceful. She gives the impression that Protestants had done nothing in the conflict while Catholics were doing horrible things. "We certainly never believed that twenty-five years later we would still be feeling the effects of a massive IRA murder and bombing campaign" (Farrell 233). The author only mentions the violent

actions of the IRA, but there were other groups in the unionist side that took lives too and she says nothing about them. It seems like she only condemns the actions of the Catholic side and not the ones of the community she belonged to.

The violence involved in this story goes from the mischief of taking the author's beret and throwing it to the road to the murder of her husband. She says "there were no further attacks that day" (Farrell 232) in relation to the girl who took her beret, which I consider to be a mischief rather than a violent act. However, she uses the word attack which seems to suggest it was something quite serious for her. In addition, she tells us about other events in which violence was more obvious, for instance, the exchanges of gunfire that she could see from her bedroom window.

The violence that appears in this story is, in most of the cases, not described in detail, she normally says how the person died and where, but she does not give many more details of it. "One of Kenneth's colleagues, and a very good friend [...] was shot dead in an IRA gun attack" (Farrell 234). "Another part-time member of the Ulster Defence Regiment was shot. The murder took place on a Monday [...] he had been killed in his own house, in his bedroom" (Farrell 235). However, the author does describe in more detail the murder of her husband.

On Friday morning, 10th December 1971, Kenneth was ambushed and shot dead going to his work. As he lay on the road, already shot several times in his right side, the gunman walked up to his body and fired three more shots into his face. (Farrell 236)

This extract is more explicit than the others and the reason might be that she wanted to create a bigger impact on the reader because he was her husband and she wanted him and his death to be remembered.

This text does have violence as a central theme. The story does not revolve around one single act of violence, but the author speaks about her youth being interspersed by different threats or acts of violence all coming from nationalist Catholics.

4.2. Witnesses

In this section I have selected two stories in which the authors did not have such a closer or direct contact with the violence that people suffered during those years. They have seen conflicts and even deaths but the people involved in those events were much more distant to them than in the section of victims. In this section, authors are going to witness some assaults which might change them even though they did not affect them personally. The two stories of this section are “Personal Memories of the Troubles” written by John McCann and “The Death of a Soldier” by Alistair Little.

The first story, “Personal Memories of the Troubles” tells us about the impressions of its author about the things that he saw when he was just a ten year old boy. He lived close to Belfast and he usually heard people talking about Catholics as if they were less than Protestants. He knew of a kid from his school that attacked a Catholic kid and almost left him blind. When the kid realized what he had done he shot himself death. In his adolescence, he saw a warehouse being blown up by a bomb, and he remembers he could felt the ground shake because of it. He started to distrust everything his teachers told him about the Republic of Ireland and Southern people. He had been at his aunt’s place, who was a Protestant too and lived in the Republic of Ireland, and he had not seen any of the things his teachers told him about, but quite the opposite. When he was sixteen, he joined the “InterSchools Movement” which joined people from all the social, religious and political backgrounds. It was there, at the age of eighteen, when he spoke for the first time with a Catholic. It was his contact with Catholics and his trips to the Republic which helped him to create his own idea of both sides of the conflict.

This author seems to be quite alert of the situation of the country since he was very young. He identifies himself as a Protestant and he knew of the anti-Catholic sentiment that his community had.

I remember him lecturing my mother about what he saw as the dirt, dishonest Catholics “dictating” to the Protestant majority. This type of view is occasionally encountered today and seems very naive, extreme, and dated. But it was common then.” (McCann 162)

In this extract, the general opinion of Protestants against Catholics is very clear, and also the segregation that existed in the time between the two communities. “I was very

aware of how strong the Unionist tradition was there and how anti-Catholic the sentiments were [...] but I kept my mouth shut. If you said anything different than your community you'd be considered a turncoat" (McCann 161). According to this author saying something different would mean to be considered as a traitor to the community, but he knew that many of the things said about Catholics were not true, so he always had a bit of skepticism towards Unionist ideas about them. He accepts the community to which he belongs but he does not seem to agree with those ideas in some cases. Besides, it is interesting the idea of the importance of the community and that people inside the same community thought the same way about Catholics in this specific case. It gives a clue of the significance of belonging to one of the two communities, and the impossibility to remain in the middle.

Violence is not the central theme in this story, there are some examples, but they are described from a quite objective point of view and not very detailed. I believe that by including these situations that involve violence, the author is just portraying the reality in which he lived. In addition, I do not think he tries to convince the reader that the community to which he belonged was better or more peaceful like other authors do. Here there is an example of the violence he describes:

A lad I knew picked on one of the Catholics who was in his class. He gathered a gang and before we knew it a trap had been set for the Catholic as he walked home from school. He was set upon and savagely beaten with sticks and iron bars and was nearly blinded as a result. The perpetrator, as much a victim of the troubles as *his* victim, realized in the cold light of day what he had done; threatened by his father and with expulsion from school hanging over him, he shot himself dead. I always felt that people like him were the unrecorded, unnoticed victims of the Troubles. (McCann 163)

This quote describes two violent incidents, one on each side of the conflict. He might be showing the reader that the Troubles were devastating for everybody in both communities of Northern Ireland. It also shows to what extent violence was expanded. A boy beating another kid because he is from a different community is obviously not normal at all. This can be considered as a "small" act of violence compared to a bomb, but it is concerning that children were able to do those things.

This vantage point afforded an excellent view over the town which, despite its Protestant majority, is dominated by the tall spire of St .Patrick's Catholic Church. One of my friends had

just commented [...] on that building and Catholicism in general, when there was a huge explosion – a deep rumbling boom which reverberated through the ground where we were some half mile away. In front of my eyes, a large furniture warehouse near the Church seemed to lift into the air, then disintegrate with further explosions into a confetti-like cascade of roof rafters and slabs of masonry which showered the surrounding area. In the school yard below us there was eerie silence. (McCann 163)

This other quote is more detailed than the previous one. We do not know where the explosion came from because the author does not seem to know it either. The author gives more details probably because it was an explosion and not something like a shooting which is more ghoulish. He describes the feeling of the explosion and how the warehouse was completely destroyed in a second. In addition, in the last sentence he describes the reaction of the school yard to the explosion, which was complete silence. This silence seems to have caught his attention maybe because it was shocking the silence as a response to the huge bang of a bomb. In addition, in general terms he seems to accept violence as something normal and he does not show signs of being shocked by none of the situations he saw.

The second story, “The Death of a Soldier” is a very short one and it tells us about how a single death affected an adolescent that already hated Catholics. He belonged to a gang called the Tartans, and the man who was killed was the father of one of the boys that was in the same gang as him. A few days after, he went to the funeral, which was his first funeral, and he heard people talking about the reprisal that Catholics deserved. When the coffin was lifted by the coffin bearers and they began to move, the kids of the dead man started to scream and everyone cried. That picture made him angry and he left the funeral thinking that if he ever had the chance of revenge on the IRA or Catholics, he would take it. Later, he joined a Protestant paramilitary group and at the age of seventeen he was arrested for murdering a Catholic and he was sent to prison for twelve years.

The author identifies himself as a Protestant who hated Catholics since a very young age. “In 1973 I was fifteen years old, I was a Protestant, I believed there was a God and that He was a Protestant also. I was in a gang called the Tartans. I hated Catholics and

was proud of it” (Little 217). In this quote, the issue of identity that I have talked about earlier in this essay is present and the author maintains a strong position despite his young age. The population was divided in two sides, most of the people on one side hated the other side and vice versa, and again there is the idea of “us” and “them”. This boy thought that being something different from a Protestant meant being less, being despised. He mentions more than once these two ideas as if he wanted them to be very clear or give us the sense of what the thoughts of society were during those years.

The author makes reference to the identity of the dead soldier, and we can consider that to his own too, by saying that “the IRA gunmen escaped having killed another member of the regiment, another Protestant, another Ulsterman” (Little 217) He is making reference to everything that the killed soldier was and everything that the IRA members were not. He might be describing his own identity too because he belonged to a gang; he was a Protestant and an Ulsterman even though at the time he was just a boy. He seems to feel identified with the soldier in some way, and he might have changed to a more radical thinking because he thought it could have happened to anyone. He seems to take that death as an attack on the whole Protestant community. Besides, he is using three different words to describe the soldier: member of the regiment, Protestant and Ulsterman. It is maybe to make more visible the fact that he was one of them, one of the “good” side. It is also a way to emphasize the identity of the soldier and the fact that he belonged to the same community as the author.

In this story, we can see how the violence is present in everybody’s lives and how it can affect people. In this case, that particular moment changed the course of the author’s life, turning him into what he had despised from the person on the other side. He ended up killing someone else in revenge even though the person he killed was most likely not the one that shot the soldier he knew. At the end of the story, he remembers how his hate against Catholics had grown after the funeral, and even though he was very young he was already thinking on revenge, revenge on the whole Catholic community.

I was frightened, I was angry, and I vowed that if I ever got the opportunity to take revenge on the IRA, on Catholics, and their community I would gladly take that opportunity.[...] I knew I hated the IRA more than I hated anything in life and I was quite sure that everyone at the funeral must be thinking the same as I was. (Little 218)

Here, we can see how an act of violence can change people and lead them to commit other acts of violence even when that violence has been seen as a witness and not suffered first hand. The author of this story was very much affected by this death and it did nothing but increase the hate that he already felt towards the Catholic people living in the same country as him because he saw it as an attack against his own community.

4.3. Activists

In the last section of this essay I will deal with two stories that show us how the experiences during the Troubles changed the authors and their points of view, and made them join different groups and became activists in the conflict. As we have seen in the previous section of witnesses, the things that they saw changed their way of thinking. Here, we will see two more cases in which the life of the authors changed after some years living in the Troubles. The stories we are going to see are “My Memories of Life in Derryberg” written by Anne McEvoy and “Hopes and Dreams of Youth” by Joe Doherty.

In the first story “My Memories of Life in Derryberg”, the author tells us about her happy childhood and how her point of view of the conflict changed when she grew up. She remembers some boys that she knew who were shot by Army foot patrols, and another teenager who died after his own bomb blew up on Christmas Eve. Her father was an ex member of the Navy and not him nor his wife were involved in political issues. As he had belonged to the Navy, they had a ship-to-shore radio with which they could listen to the Army and the police. Sometimes, their house was raided by the Army, and with this radio many times they were waiting for the knock at the door. Once, they were caught by the Army and that was the end of their radio. She also remembers that they learned at a very young age to lie flat on the ground when their heard the sound of gunfire. They did not realize that shootings meant deaths and when the fire stopped kids looked for the empty bullet cases as if they were a trophy. The one time her family did get scared by a shooting was once her mother was not at home yet and they thought the shooting may have reached her. When she was thirteen, she started to be politically sympathetic to the party of the Irish Republican Army, and she began to

go to meetings and marches. Few years later, her sympathy to that ideology grew and she attended to more marches and she even got involved in violent incidents.

The author of this story does not say much about her identity but we can see in which side of the conflict she is because of some of the things she says. For instance, at the beginning of the story, she identifies herself as a Catholic living in a Catholic area. “Derrybeg was an estate of 360 dwellings in the town of Newry, all of which were lived in by Catholics” (McEvoy 89). Here the segregation between the two communities is obvious when she says that all the neighbors of the estate were Catholics. Besides, she “became politically sympathetic to Sinn Féin” (McEvoy 195), which is a clear statement of her identity. She was a Catholic and since the Sinn Féin’s political aim was that Northern Ireland became part of the Republic of Ireland, we can deduce that she considered herself as Irish rather than British.

Different violent events are mentioned throughout the story that affected young people that she knew. “One was a boy of thirteen who was shot by an Army foot patrol while he was sitting on a wall. Another was shot during a hi-jacking. [...] The third was an eighteen-year-old boy who was blown up by his own bomb in a local pub” (McEvoy 190). All these incidents happened when the author was very young and she did not realize the danger in which they were living. She even writes that to them this situation of violence, Army patrols, shootings, etc. was normal and they, as kids, did not see the danger involved in it and it was normal because they did not know anything else. In fact, she says that they “felt safe and played quite happily [...] only stopping to lie down when the shooting began. Of course, when it stopped there was a treasure hunt to find the empty bullet cases or rubber bullets” (McEvoy 193). So children were not afraid of shootings, and they considered it as normal, she also says that they “were the envy of children who grew up in quieter neighborhoods” (McEvoy 198). However, with time she realizes that the situation in which they lived their childhood was not normal at all and she would not wish it for any other kid.

The violence that can be found in this story is not very detailed and there is not so much of it. Some descriptions of what she had seen or what she heard of are mentioned, as well as some other actions like hi-jacking with some friends. But it is not until her late

teens when her point of view changed and she started to take the Troubles as a serious issue.

In 1980, we saw the start of the hunger strikes in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh and I no longer saw the Troubles as fun. I felt that men had no choice but to take a stand against the British government. I was now as hostile towards the Army and the police as most of my friends were.”
(McEvoy 199)

It seems that it is during these years of her life when she started to get involved in real hostile actions against the Army and the police. However, she does not mention in which kind of actions she got involved, or how serious they were. This is probably because she does not want to incriminate herself in specific violent actions, or she does not want to be judged by the reader.

In the second story, “Hopes and Dreams of Youth”, the author tells us that he was born a Catholic in Northern Ireland, which was a synonym for social inequalities. When he was still just a boy he started to understand what happened around him which involved the rule of the Unionist government in Northern Ireland. The author explains those heavily armed policemen were seen even before the Troubles started. He considered the Unionist government as highly unequal for Catholics who had the highest unemployment, the poorest houses and a lot of emigration confronted to the control of factories, the government, and the law controlled by Protestants. This discrimination created in him an attitude of distrust towards the state and resistance towards the injustice. In his last year of school different organizations such as the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association were created with the purpose to achieve social equality. However, they saw how their requests were taken down by the state and there were reprisals too, like arrests or beatings. After one of these reprisals, he decided to get involved and it led him to commit his first violent acts moved by anger and frustration. He could not understand why such basic demands were not listened. In the end, he turned to armed insurrection because he thought that none of their marches was successful at all. He ended up being arrested and sent to a maximum security prison without a trial when he was seventeen; he was released and sentenced a few more times to prison. Actually when the book was published he still remained in prison.

In this story the author clearly identifies himself as a Catholic and Irish at the beginning of it.

I had committed an offence against the state. [...] I was born an Irish Catholic in British-controlled northeast Ireland. Naturally was unaware of my political illegitimacy in this Anglo-created society. But being an indigenous person, a member of an underclass, one gradually develops an awareness of social inequalities, especially when one is at the receiving end of discriminatory measures, judicial imbalances, and a police baton. (Doherty 222)

He starts the story by defining himself and telling us which are his thoughts about the British rule in Northern Ireland. In this case, he does make a distinction between Catholics and Protestants and also between Irish and British, which is something that other stories do not have. Since these first words we can know that he wants Northern Ireland to be part of the Republic of Ireland because some of the words he chooses are revealing. He says “I was born an Irish Catholic in British-controlled northeast Ireland” (Doherty 222), and with it he is implying that Northern Ireland is part of Ireland, just as any other region. In addition, he seems to suggest that the British rule over Northern Ireland is somehow forced.

In this writing the element of “us” and “them” is also present. “An Irish Catholic death in Dallas, Texas, brought much sorrow to our ghetto. “Jack Kennedy was one of our own,” people whispered” (Doherty 222). We can see that society in general had the same idea because of the expressions “our ghetto” and “was one of our own.” They show the division between the two communities and the impossibility of being in between. Doherty insists on this idea by stating that “it was their government, their law, their courts, their forces of law, and their factories. [...] We Nationalist Catholics lived in a separate world of outcasts” (Doherty 222-23).

In relation to violence, the author is not very specific about what he did to end up in a maximum security prison because he is still there and it could be harmful for himself. However, he does speak about other events. “I remember the civil rights marchers coming back into the ghetto bleeding from baton wounds and with eyes bloodshot from something called CS gas (tear gas). It was then that I felt a growing need to get involved; anger and frustration drove me to pick up my first stone” (Doherty 224). He tells us about all the violence that Catholics suffered and how that anger made him turn

to violence too. As we saw in the story “The Death of a Soldier”, a violent act changed the way of acting of the author, here we have a similar behavior. Violent acts carried out by the opposite community turn the author to commit the same kind of violence.

During the whole story the author makes reference to the violence and the injustice that the British inflict on his community. Joe Doherty refers to the situation in Northern Ireland as a “quasi-apartheid rule” in which the British “controlled all aspects of government [...] and, in turn, all other facets of society” (222). He insists on the submissive role of Nationalist Catholics that accepted the “British rule – their head of state, flag, and other symbols. All we asked for were equal rights and justice within the system. What we received was a violent intransigence in meeting those demands” (Doherty 224). Besides, the author complains about the violence involved in the reactions of the government towards peaceful marches that were “met by further state violence” (Doherty 225). But he points out that those reactions “only reinforced the Nationalists’ forward surge”, and “marked my way to armed insurrection” (Doherty 224-25). All these statements by the author seem to be a justification of his involvement in armed insurrection. As it happens in other stories, the author tells us only about the violence inflicted towards his own community and not the other way around.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Irish Troubles were a complex conflict that involved political, religious and social issues in Northern Ireland. During this period society was divided in two different communities that could be differentiated most of the times by their religious and political position. The autobiographical stories with which I have dealt with in this essay were personal memoirs of the Troubles written by people who went through that period as children. I have only analyzed six short stories which might not be enough to draw general conclusions about this kind of writings but it is true that they may be considered representative, as most of the stories involved both identity and violence elements, which are the ones I have commented on.

Identity in Ireland is an issue that has been there for long because of the British rule over the Island. With the partition of Ireland this issue gathered strength since the Irish wanted to be able to define Irishness. However, since it was hard to define, it started to be closely related to nationalism and land. In most of the stories there is a clear positioning of the authors identifying themselves as either Catholic or Protestant. Since religion and nationalism, and therefore identity, are closely related, this distinction in terms of religion allows the reader to know to which community the author belongs, even if he does not say it. Catholics were usually identified with an Irish nationality while Protestants were identified as British.

Violence is the other element I have analyzed, and in most of the stories it is not a central theme, but rather authors describe different situations of violence as isolated events along their narration. Besides, the way in which violence is narrated is not very descriptive, in the sense that authors describe it but they do not give many details of what happened. Surprisingly, the authors that give more details are the ones which I have considered as victims. I thought they would give fewer details than witnesses because the violence was closer to the author, but a possible reason for this might be that those events are important and they want people to know about them. On the other hand, activists do not describe any of the violence in which they were involved. It might

be because it could be harmful for those who are still in prison, or they do not want the reader to know in which issues they were involved because they do not want to be judged.

In some of the stories the violence that the authors describe does not seem to have other purpose than a means to illustrate the situation of those years. In other cases, especially in the case of authors that end up being activists during the Troubles, the violence that they describe is not the one perpetrated by themselves or their community. They tend to show violent acts that were carried out by the opposite community, and they somehow try to persuade the reader that those violent acts were the ones that “forced” them to turn to violent actions themselves.

Both identity and violence are features that appear repeatedly in Irish autobiographical writings, especially since the partition of the isle. This paper has a small corpus of writings, but for further research, it would be interesting to collect more texts with similar characteristics and analyze to what extent these two features are recurrent in Irish writings. Besides, the same features could be analyzed in the writings of other countries that had suffered partitions, such as Israel and Palestine, to see whether they are also recurrent or not.

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