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Derry Girls and the Developing of Black Humour in Ireland

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Abstract

Il termine *Irish humour*, umorismo irlandese, è comunemente usato in Irlanda sia nei media che nella vita quotidiana, ma la comprensione delle sue qualità specifiche può richiedere una conoscenza fondamentale delle sue origini e del suo sviluppo nel tempo. Utilizzando il popolare show televisivo *Derry Girls* come punto focale, questo articolo esplorerà il concetto di dark humour in tutte le sue forme, definendo la terminologia pertinente, discutendo la sua risposta costantemente controversa e riconoscendo i vantaggi del suo utilizzo rispetto alle forme più leggere di comicità. La storia generale dell'Irlanda sarà utilizzata per comprendere il ruolo dell'umorismo nero nel Paese; tuttavia, il contesto storico dell'Irlanda del Nord in particolare e il conflitto settario che vi si è verificato, *the Troubles*, completeranno esempi particolari di umorismo irlandese nei media e mostreranno come il trauma comune contribuisca al suo utilizzo. Altri scrittori o drammaturghi il cui lavoro è incentrato sull'Irlanda, tra cui Paul Muldoon e Martin McDonagh, verranno analizzati per confrontare le risposte della critica e del pubblico a Lisa McGee, autrice e scrittrice di *Derry Girls*. Tra questi confronti, verranno discusse le questioni dell'autenticità e dell'intenzione, che sono argomenti comuni nel dibattito sull'umorismo culturale nero. Infine, i diversi aspetti dell'articolo convergeranno nel mostrare come uno degli scopi principali dell'umorismo irlandese sia quello di agire come meccanismo di coping per coloro che sono afflitti da traumi diretti o intergenerazionali, oltre che come mezzo per resistere all'impatto emotivo paralizzante dell'oppressione e della violenza.

Sinopsis

El término *Irish humour,* humor irlandés, se utiliza habitualmente tanto en los medios de comunicación como en la vida cotidiana de Irlanda, pero para entender sus cualidades específicas puede ser necesario tener conocimientos básicos sobre sus orígenes y su evolución a lo largo del tiempo. Tomando como punto de partida el popular programa de televisión *Derry Girls,* este ensayo explorará el concepto de *humor negro* en todas sus formas, definiendo la terminología pertinente, debatiendo su respuesta sistemáticamente controvertida y reconociendo las ventajas de su uso en comparación con formas más ligeras de comedia. Se utilizará la historia general irlandesa para comprender el papel del h*umor negro* en el país; sin embargo, el contexto histórico de Irlanda del Norte en concreto y el conflicto sectario que tuvo lugar allí, *the Troubles*, complementarán ejemplos particulares del humor irlandés en los medios de comunicación y mostrarán cómo el agudo trauma comunal contribuye a su uso. Se analizarán las obras de otros escritores o dramaturgos cuyo trabajo se centra en Irlanda, como Paul Muldoon y Martin McDonagh, para comparar las respuestas de la crítica y el público a Lisa McGee, creadora y escritora principal de *Derry Girls*. Entre estas comparaciones, se discutirán cuestiones de autenticidad e intención, ya que son temas comunes en el debate sobre el humor cultural negro. En última instancia, los diferentes aspectos del ensayo convergerán para mostrar cómo uno de los principales propósitos del humor irlandés es actuar como mecanismo de supervivencia para los afectados por traumas directos o intergeneracionales, así como un medio de resistir el impacto emocional paralizante de la opresión y la violencia.

Introduction

Comedy serves a multitude of purposes and suits a plethora of scenarios—but these purposes and scenarios are subject to personal interpretation and cultural expectations. Despite the inherent nature of light-heartedness, it has become commonplace, depending on circumstance, to employ them as tools on more sombre or dangerous occasions. In these cases, jokes can fall under the umbrella of *gallows humour* or *black humour*—the former being implemented by those suffering from the circumstances; the latter by any individual, affected or unaffected by the circumstances about which they are joking. A breeding ground for these jokes is wartime. Examples are universal and unlimited, but some primary instances include WWII, from both troops and victims[1], and the Troubles in Ireland[2].

In fact, dark humour has been commonly used in Ireland since long before the Troubles of the 1970s onward—concurrent with the country's tumultuous history of colonisation, religious discord, and famine—to the degree that it has been dubbed *Irish humour*[3]. Its particular nuances are varied and have for the most part only translated into popular media in recent history, spurred in the immediate sense by the work of Irish creators such as Lisa McGee, the writer for the hit television show *Derry Girls*.

The show, based on the creator's own adolescence, acts a primary and popular example not only of gallows humour in general, but also of Irish humour—and a version of Irish humour that appeals to and represents a more diverse populace than some more hotly-contested examples in media, as will be discussed. Some of the primary flaws or debated elements of this style of comedy will include that of authenticity, intention, and power. Not only will public and critical opinion factor into the reception of non-Irish media, but it will also offer multifaceted perspectives on the cyclical relationships between Irish people's experiences and the media they create to represent themselves.

That said, the details of *Derry Girls*—such as the fashion in which it gives depth to its stereotypically "Irish" characters, or the way it equates larger societal conflict with the seemingly unimportant everyday struggles of adolescents—offer depth, nuance, and sincerity to the degree that it is widely accepted as a realistic and characteristically Irish representation

[1] Clementi, 2013: 250-292
[2] DenHoed, 2020: 12-16
[3] Ó Conchubhair, 2016: 237-259

of life amidst the late Troubles and subsequent peace accords. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how the use of this language to broach contentious, complicated, and otherwise traumatic subject matter allows for those afflicted to deal with their experiences in a way that requires little emotional labour while gaining reprieve from an oppressive seriousness, as well as retaking control of how their image as a postcolonial nation is broadcast to a greater audience.

To provide context for the analysis of the show, Chapter 1 will define necessary terms and delve into some historical and contemporary examples of the comedy style, showing its uses and its penchant for controversy. Chapter 2 will then set up some of the defining features of *Derry Girls*, breaking down its key characters and episodic plotlines in order to analyse the writers' takes on the struggles in the late 1990s and common perspectives at the time. Chapter 3 will discuss the history of Irish humour, show its range through different media examples, and offer differing perspectives on the issues of authenticity surrounding popular films. Lastly, Chapter 4d will provide research on the lingering trauma of the Troubles after the peace agreements and analyse how the show compares mass cultural traumas with individual or "mundane" teen dramas, all tying into how dark humour can act as a coping mechanism during times of emotional turmoil.

1. A foundation for the exploration of Irish humour

1.1 The history of black humour

There is no identifiable origin for this style of comedy. As both humour and tragedy have existed throughout human history, but accessible or commonly produced media have not, this kind of humour may have originated in one place or many at any given time. That said, as media reach increased over the course of the 20th century, individuals were given access to the slew of tragedies across the world, including wars, natural disasters, systemic discrimination, violence, and more. It is a natural leap to infer that this has contributed to a rise in the prevalence of dark humour.

Furthermore, it is widely believed that there will be no time in which this comedy style goes out of fashion or disappears. As Gubanov writes in his breakdown of these types of jokes, "Indeed, black humour 'does not age', as it touches on the most taboo topics relevant to all times and peoples: death and violence, serious diseases and physical deformities, sexual deviations and discrimination" (2018: 379). Prevalent contemporary concerns about the impact of black humour on marginalised groups and borderline omniscient track records of its use by individuals by way of social media may have caused increased hesitation in its use, but shows, films, and comedians who employ it maintain popularity to this day. As will be discussed, its potential to have a negative or positive impact is determined largely by who uses it and how.

As mentioned above, WWII strongly popularised this comedy. These jokes thrive on struggle or misfortune, and the Holocaust remains one of the greatest tragedies in human history. Victims of Nazi Germany are recorded using it, but so are soldiers, artists, and journalists of the time covering the events of the war.[4] Filmmaker Ernst Lubitsch garnered infamy in Nazi Germany due to his mere success as a Jewish man, but in particular after using his art medium to mock Hitler and his regime. In a Nazi propaganda picture named *The Eternal Jew*, released in 1940, Lubitsch's face is even used as the archetype of "corruption and depravity" (Cardullo, 2021: 62). His film *To Be or Not to Be* was an early example of popular media with a sizable reach that employed gallows humour. Despite the controversy of this

[4] Clementi, 2013: 250-292

style of comedy, as will be discussed, the film was timely and relevant. Cardullo quotes in his analysis of the filmmaker's work:

> In a world that can produce a Hitler or the destructive capability of the atomic bomb, nothing is sacred, nothing absolute; all values, beliefs, principles, and truths are open to question. This questioning then logically gets extended to artistic forms, where, in black comedy, the most serious subjects are given, not a serious or tragic treatment, but a satirical, even farcical, one. (2021: 63)

He goes on to describe some of the psychological benefits of this kind of humour, as well as its contribution to the war effort. As any mockery of the Nazi regime could incur severe consequences, to continuously employ it on an individual or mass scale, in newspapers or in one's own home, was an act of resistance against a system that sought to harm the comedian. This purpose seems particularly poignant when exploring the remarks of Holocaust victims, such as Anne Frank herself.

The famous diaries of Anne shed light on many harrowing and emotional experiences, but she was also able to exhibit her dynamic personality and very natural sense of humour. Frederica Clementi in her chapter in *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters* echoes and expands upon the sentiments of Cardullo. She notes how thousands of death sentences were handed down for treason in the form of anti-Nazi humour, a figure which only emphasises the strength of jokes in the face of grief—or, as she puts it, "the power of laughter as an extraordinarily subversive technique of resistance against moral, psychic, and civic annihilation" (2013: 258). To recall a specific example, there were orders sent to the German army following an attempt on Hitler's life by a German general that any soldier should note a superior suspected to be involved in assassination attempts and execute them on the spot. Anne joked in her journal that a soldier now had licence to take up arms against any "snooty officer who dared to reprimand him" under false suspicions of treason.[5] Anne's comments were not always made in an exercise of gallows humour; in many cases, they simply exhibited the innocence and positivity of a young girl. However, this remains an apt example.

This wartime humour did originate before the 1940s, however, as shown by Mary Kelley Reid's article discussing how the British satirical magazine *The Wipers* covered the

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[5] Clementi, 2013: 260

horrors experienced by British soldiers in WWI.[6] It also continued into later conflicts, such as the Korean War, which was represented by the popular dry comedy show *M*A*S*H*. Nuclear threats, Vietnam, and more became targets of jest. However, as comedy popularised and grew in reach and brazenness, with comics increasingly becoming those unaffected by the tragedies being remarked upon, the style sowed greater and greater controversy.

1.2 Controversy

Some of the factors which contribute to the reaction around specific jokes include different types of distance, namely temporal distance (or the length of time since an inciting incident), spatial distance (how literally close or far one is to whatever occurred), social distance (one's closeness to the person or people group affected by the incident), and hypothetical distance (how close or far the joke is to the reality of what happened).[7] Interestingly enough, the certain 'distance' between someone making a joke and the incident about which they are joking can cause the remark to be found funny by some, but can be the exact reason it is found harmful or distasteful by others.

Take, for example, a natural disaster. In 2016, the city of Amatrice in Italy was struck by a high-level earthquake, causing heavy rates of death and homelessness. A popular French magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*—known for its controversial dark humour—published an illustration comparing the bleeding and crushed bodies of the earthquake victims to different types of pasta. In some ways, the illustrators' and readers' distance from what happened could've helped it to be seen as funny. A common French reader may not know anyone directly affected by the incident (social distance); they likely weren't in Italy when it occurred (spatial distance); the magazine's description of the event is accurate, making it mesh with preconceived notions of what happened (hypothetical distance); and the event occurred recently, making it fresh in everyone's minds (temporal distance). This combination of factors could make an average French reader find the illustration funny—after all, it is easier and more pleasant or safe to joke about something that does not affect the person making the joke. Any anxieties the disaster may have brought out in a reader could be swept aside for a time by its comedic representation.

[6] Kelley, 2014: 120-127
[7] Gubanov, 2018: 283

That said, it is these very factors that could make the illustration inappropriate or insensitive to another reader. Perhaps a reader was in Italy or was Italian, or they knew someone directly affected. Maybe they simply have a stronger emotional consideration for others who were directly affected, regardless of their social or spatial distance. It could easily be argued that to present the natural disaster in such a manner was disrespectful and a marker of the privilege possessed by the people who produced the illustration, metaphorically pouring salt into a wound.

The elevation of a person's social status has contributed to discourse on the topic. The phenomenon of crafting comedy around an incident or about a people group from a distance, with the comedian mostly or entirely unaffected, has been referred to as *punching down*[8] or *hangman humour*[9] (alluding to a hangman's proximity to—but freedom from—harm). This refers to a person's potential privilege or power; they are 'above' the subject they are joking about in a social food chain of sorts. Returning to the Charlie Hebdo example, the French possessed no social privileges that spared them from the natural disaster. However, the combination of their safety in having notable spatial and social distance with the close temporal and hypothetical distance (in depicting the events very literally and soon after their occurring) created controversy. Making humorous depictions of the disaster, and profiting off of it specifically, could be seen as exploitative.[10]

The magazine has thrived on discourse of this manner, to the degree that it has been accused of racism, Islamophobia, and various other forms of prejudice.[11] Speculation heightened and became varied in response after a shooting at the Hebdo office in France that claimed the lives of seventeen people. The terrorist attack was speculated to be an act of retribution by Islamic forces for the magazine's illustrations of the Prophet and jokes which had incurred legal actions for potentially hateful depictions of Muslims.[12]

While the magazine's history is a severe example, the value and impact of black humour remains a subject of discussion to this day. The distance and privilege connected to certain

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[8] Spampinato, 2020
[9] Gubanov, 2018: 283
[10] BBC, "Charlie Hebdo Italy…", 2016
[11] BBC, "Charlie Hebdo backlash…", 2016
[12] Petrikowska, 2023

forms of dark comedy will also be discussed later in a breakdown of Irish humour and its media representation.

1.3 The context of the Troubles

The Troubles were a decades-long tumultuous conflict that inflamed and actualised division between Catholics and Protestants, identities commonly aligning with Irish nationalism and British unionism. Beginning in the late 1960s, concurrent with popular civil rights movements, an anti-colonialist passion seized the youth of Northern Ireland (NI). The discord had existed long before this time due to British colonialist occupation and the region's lack of inclusion in Irish independence, achieved in 1921, but systemic discrimination against Irish Catholics fanned the flames of animosity between demographics. Belfast was a prime location for violence, being the capital, but Derry was subject to particular scrutiny due to its previous name, *Londonderry*, which loyalists stuck to and nationalists objected to. The city council changed the name to *Derry* in 1984, but efforts to legally change this on a national level have been thwarted for decades.[13]

A major influence on perceptions of the conflict is the murkiness or unclear moral standing of forces on either side. In the popular nonfiction book *Say Nothing*, the exploits of the IRA in their supposed fight against Ulster loyalists and the Royal Ulster Constabulary are shown from multiple angles. At times, with dire consequences, their efforts towards a free Irish state are undermined by the excess violence and disappearances which played out at their hands. While the plight of independence from British occupation is a reasonable and positive desire, the drawn-out conflict ended up inflicting severe self-harm on the Irish populace with little success. Anti-colonialist aims still linger, but so do anti-IRA sentiments.[14]

Many were directly affected by these events, still considered recent history, and while life had to carry on despite the violence, the trauma inflicted by it ran deep, and this juxtaposition further shaped and added depth to Irish humour as it existed at the time. *Derry Girls* takes place in the mid-1990s, a few years before the Good Friday Agreement. It has included events like the 1994 ceasefire and the 1995 visit from US President Bill Clinton. This setting is not only an accurate representation of the writer's childhood, as mentioned in the

[13] BBC, "Council efforts to change…", 2015
[14] Keefe, 2018

introduction, but it also combines some useful factors of distance. The close social distance offers accuracy and familiarity, but the larger temporal distance from the start of the Troubles removes a bit of the sting from the wounds caused by some of the more severe events in preceding decades, such as shootings, bombings, and hunger strikes. It was at this time that peace was being desired by many demographics after years of strain and fear; the show depicts the ceasefire announcement as a massively joyful event for the community. Violence was not eradicated during the timeline of the show, however, and acts of it are somberly acknowledged by the main characters. As it turned out, it was the show's informed perspective and ability to balance humour with seriousness that contributed to its success.

2. How *Derry Girls* broke the mould

2.1 *Derry Girls* and stereotypes

Before placing *Derry Girls* into the discussion of Irish humour, it's important to understand what makes it funny. Like the fundamentals of dark or Irish humour, its success lies in the fact that it subverted expectations.

When it came to building the characters, the writers weren't trying to reinvent the wheel. The five main characters are Erin (primary protagonist), Orla (peculiar, spacey cousin), Clare (anxious academic star), Michelle (hypersexual trouble-maker), and James (Michelle's put-upon English cousin). Some were archetypes more common to the Irish, such as Erin's Ma Mary (the 'Mammy') or Sister Michael (the exacting Nun who governs the school); but others are more universal, like the overbearing in-law (Erin's Granda Joe, who lives with the family and takes out his ire on his son-in-law) or Erin herself, who is a rather pretentious aspiring writer that gets so caught up in her romantic ideations that she can't always grasp the situation before her.

There are some minor characters who are familiar archetypes and act solely as antagonists or comedic relief (such as Jenny Joyce, the overbearing school prefect whose 'teacher's pet' antics often spoil the main characters' schemes). However, the show's primary utilisation of stereotypes consistently served a higher purpose in challenging the more stale or shallow boundaries of these clichès, as "when the reader presumes one entity, their expectations are invariably and comically undone" (Ó Conchubhair, 2016: 244). On several occasions, if only briefly, the story pauses its comedic tone to give these people notes of depth and sentimentality. Ma Mary gets fed up being the homemaker responsible for everyone and decides to go back to university; Granda Joe tries dating, as his wife died ten years ago, but finds neither he nor his daughters are ready for it; and Sister Michael shows hints of caring deeply for her students' independence and well-being despite her apathetic, flinty exterior.

The writers' approach to character strikes a balance when it comes to appealing to audiences. It helps the show evoke a sense of nostalgia, as the adult audiences can likely remember very similar members of their own childhood, while still offering opportunities to use these clichè characters as the butt of a joke from time to time. For example, James attends the all-girls school with his friends because of adults' fear that he would be harmed at an all-

boys school for being English and, in their minds, somewhat effeminate. His 'regrettable' English identity is constantly used against him as a joke, but this doesn't reduce the humanity or goodness of his character. The attitudes exhibited likely wouldn't have been uncommon at the time, but the writers never allow it to grow into anything truly malicious or violent. Their goal is to create familiarity, namely as a comfortable foundation for an exploration into more nuanced territory.

Furthermore, the approach emphasises the overall motif of *Derry Girls*, which is simply: normal people. There are no characters that utterly *defy* conventions, as "in between the gags and the set-ups, the series highlighted the ubiquity of the Troubles in everyday life and, by extension, its normalcy" (qtd. in Long, 2021: 1). The existence of sectarian conflict did not suddenly make the residents of NI into a different species. Media perspectives on NI could be one-note and inauthentic, often painting the citizens in a very specific way.[15] Because of this, to comically represent very 'normal' people and then reveal universally relatable depth to them over the course of the show, often in very light-hearted ways, was subversive.

2.2 Bomb threats vs teen drama

With the foundation of the characters settled, this aim of subverting expectations through familiarity and even disregard is sewn throughout the plot and constitutes a healthy portion of the jokes made. Not even one episode affects the next—the show follows an episodic style wherein each one bears its own independent plot, free of consequence. The show sets the comedic standard from the first episode: a bomb threat has shut down the main bridge into town where the main characters attend school, and while the audience's first thought may be to dwell on the gravity of the conflict that elicited such an act, the parents' only concern is having to keep their children home and deal with them all day. Erin's aunt, Sarah, worries that she'll miss her appointment at the tanning salon. Later, Clare, who is fasting for the day in solidarity with starving children in Africa, is derisively called *Bobby Sands* by Michelle, referencing a famous NI prisoner who died in a hunger strike the previous decade.[16] Instead of showing solemn regard for the impacts of the conflict, they're more preoccupied with their daily squabbles.

[15] Lelourec, 2009: 32-44
[16] Coulter, 2022: 431

There is no real seriousness regarding the Troubles until the series finale. While the main character, Erin, runs to her cousin's defence with her friends during the school talent show to spare her embarrassment, the family at home watches a news report on a recent bombing, one of the deadliest attacks of the Troubles. A hopeful song by The Cranberries plays in the background, juxtaposing the vicarious grief of the family with the endearing, joyful bonding act occurring between the students. This technique is used again in the fifth episode of series two, but in reverse: the main characters start a fight at the school dance set to The Cranberries' 'Zombies' (a song famously lamenting the horrors of the Troubles), but their teen struggles are contrasted by the family celebrating with their neighbours in response to the news that the IRA have agreed to a ceasefire. By placing these experiences together, with apparent equal weight in the storyline, the show implies that the conflicts dealt with by these teenagers will impact them just as deeply—that a fight between girls over who would become prom queen occupied a space in their memory and affected them just as immediately, in that moment. They can't be defined by sectarian conflict when they're experiencing adolescence like anyone else. The sheer opposition of these experiences in seasons one and two, while poignant and layered, is intrinsically amusing.

This thematic implication carries throughout the show. James enjoys taking videos, and he and the girls try to recreate the stereotypical fuzzy, shaky-cam, 'brutally honest' look at the experience of living in Troubles-struck Northern Ireland. Contrasted with their real lives, these jokes show how inaccurate, or rather one-sided, these depictions were.[17] The writers don't miss a chance to give updates about then-current events via news reports or Erin's self-absorbed, amusingly dramatic speeches about her place in the conflict, but they more so act as ways to create a timeline for the audience and set up punchlines showing how little the main characters care on a day-to-day basis. They, ultimately, have to go about their lives; there is no opportunity or capacity to react deeply every day to a fight that has gone on for decades. Many depictions of this era are meant to elicit sympathy or horror at the atrocities that occurred. But, with an acknowledgement of how normal people act and feel and develop, it would be reasonable to infer that the jokes, shenanigans, fights, and adventures that occur between individuals are just as impactful and important.

[17] Condit, 2009: 282-296

2.3 Stealing power from the common narrative

The show is very cautious to never give rise to excessive animosity or validity to the 'us vs them' mentality. As stated, James is teased for being "the wee English fella" with an unpleasant accent and fish-out-of-water attitude, but the show specifically frames this as silly and unjustified in light of his innate goodness. Repeatedly, the show presents the suffering of its ordinary people as terrible and, ultimately, needless.

To be fair, the acts of injustice towards Irish Catholics and republicans are acknowledged and given credibility. The teenagers are arrested by mistake in the first episode of series three, and they're interrogated by a Protestant police chief (who pointedly refers to the city as *Londonderry*). During this, Erin accuses him of prejudice, and when he protests, she trumps him by asking how many Catholics are employed by the police. He offers a measly answer, realising the disparity does represent and give way to injustice. In the final episode, he is shown to be voting *yes* to the Good Friday Agreement referendum. Overall, there is no argument against the fact that Ireland has been subject to colonisation and oppression.

Nonetheless, as mentioned when discussing Keefe's book *Say Nothing*, the conflict grew to such a degree of indefensible acts of violence and opposition that the consequences overshadowed the goals. The screenwriters, instead of stoking the flames, point out on numerous occasions that the life-or-death hatred towards one's neighbour due to political orientation was damaging. And per usual, this is done through a comedic lens.

In series one, episode four, a Ukrainian immigrant fleeing the Chernobyl incident is told flippantly, "Don't worry yourself about the whole civil war sectarian conflict" (Derry Girls, 2018: 1:4). Claire comes to the conclusion, after a condescending comment from the immigrant, that the Irish conflict is based on trivial reasons and serves no higher purpose, and she wears a Union Jack shirt to a party. Her friends aren't offended, but rather worried about getting beat up. Despite their pleas to change, she dramatically maintains that the fighting has been unnecessary. The show doesn't entirely validate her hyperbolic stance, but it does add to an overall multifaceted viewpoint. The following episode features an IRA member stowing away in Erin's family's car boot to cross the border. Several family members feel rightfully threatened (both by him and the potential consequences that could occur should they be caught with him by border patrol); Granda Joe shows some support for him; Erin's extreme panic is framed as dramatic; and Michelle only cares about how attractive he is. The mixed

opinions allow for a more balanced perspective, appealing to a wider audience. Generally, his character is used as comedic relief.

There is even an episode in series two which directly pits the Catholic teens against a school of Protestants during an organised (and mocked) event to create bonds between the two groups. At the beginning of the event, a well-intentioned but annoying priest attempts an exercise wherein the students all try to write things Catholics and Protestants have in common on a chalkboard, but they can only list differences. A few answers have some truth in them, regarding an oppressive social hierarchy, such as the remark that Protestants had more wealth. As Long remarks in her article about the show and the Troubles, “There are sharp socio-economic divides, exacerbated by the selective education system, which compounds a persistent and significant class-based attainment gap” (2021: 4). This socioeconomic disparity persists today. Mostly, though, the answers range from somewhat accurate in a trivial way—like the idea that Catholics utilise statues more—to more ridiculous things, like the idea that only Protestants like the band ABBA. After a series of shenanigans, the students all end up fighting during a trust exercise. Their parents show up and begin chiding or punishing their children, more or less in the same ways, which prompts Erin to write *parents* on the board of things all people have in common. Ultimately, they are all youths which undergo the same iconic teen struggles. The episode is full of quips and misunderstandings, and remains light-hearted.

Ultimately, though, *Derry Girls* shows far more than disregard for the Troubles. The temporal distance from the events, now a couple decades past, allows people to be a bit more cavalier with their approach, but the hypothetical distance remains very close due to the care of the writers. To ensure the humour remains effective, as opposed to insensitive or inaccurate, the grievous and long-term consequences have to be acknowledged. The third and final series closes with a long episode leading to the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement. Instead of framing this with more of a retrospective lens of positivity, using it as a definitive marker of peace, or smothering it with the show’s trademark sarcasm, the characters feel natural anxieties about the potential outcomes. They worry people won’t be able to forgive, and conflict could return. It is revealed that Michelle’s brother, who has not been spoken about, was imprisoned for his involvement with the IRA that ultimately led him to murder someone. As a prisoner of the Troubles, he would be released, and the moral greyness of the entire

agreement plagues the group of friends. Using these very bleak, but very genuine, storylines in conjunction with the consistently insouciant style of humour allows for a nuanced, dynamic, and effective end result.

2.4 Reception and the diversity element

The show has achieved great success, having been lauded by critics and audiences alike. It was the most-watched show in NI since modern records began in 2002,[18] and it was either shortlisted for or won awards in writing and acting from BAFTA TV Awards, British Screenwriters' Awards, TV Choice Awards, and more. The show maintains near-perfect scores on the popular review website, Rotten Tomatoes, and cast members were even brought on for their own episode of *The Great British Bake Off* in 2020 due to their popularity.

In Long's aforementioned article, she breaks down how deftly the writers weave humour and sociopolitical commentary, often finding sharp-witted and non-offensive ways to offer accurate, scathing observations. Another great contributor to the show's quality and popularity is its emphasis on diversity without tokenism or bigotry. The people-pleasing Clare is revealed to be a lesbian at the end of season one, and the episode makes a point to show how censorship and judgement affect her. With that realistic obstacle portrayed, she suffers no further prejudice or targeted hatred: Sister Michael and her friends, in their own ways, quickly adjust and allow for the promotion of her identity despite the fact it goes against their religion. Some of the humour lies in the messy but well-intentioned ways that people speak about her identity. Michelle uses the word *dyke*, commonly considered a slur nowadays, and later says *lezzie* very frequently. Erin's Aunt and Granda mix up *vegetarians* and *lesbians*, revealing their general ignorance. These comical incidents help point out the reality that there was, to put it kindly, a lack of education regarding LGBT+ identities at the time. It would be inaccurate to portray it otherwise, but the writers never take it as an opportunity to disproportionately beleaguer Clare with negative plot points or struggles compared to her straight counterparts. This balanced attitude is shown in other areas, such as the casual incorporation of physically disabled actors without an undue focus in the story on their disabilities, or the way that the white main characters are called out on their flippant objectification of a new Chinese-Irish classmate.

[18] Belfast Telegraph, 2018

This element of the storytelling and casting is crucial in distinguishing this piece of media from others that exhibit Irish humour, as will be discussed in chapter three. Like any other culture, Ireland has not escaped criticism for some of its most popular comedies, and concerns about the blasé approach to controversial remarks remain today.

3. The context and the qualities of Irish humour

3.1 What is Irish humour?

With a clearer concept of the humour of *Derry Girls*, a focal point exists around which to paint a picture of Irish humour as a whole—its origins and its development in recent years. There are no specific stipulations that define this term, but there are a few theories on its most common characteristics. Ireland is a geographically isolated and insular country subjected to long-term colonisation, with all of its negative consequences on identity, socioeconomic status, and quality of life, not to mention varying degrees of ongoing violence over centuries. The specificities of its cultural history combined with its subjugation under British occupation have resulted in, naturally, a unique and intentional method through which Irish people communicate with one another. This background applies to comedy, as "We can even assume that there are whole nations and generations of people more than others disposed to the black humour—this will certainly characterise the mentality of this social group" (Gubanov, 2018: 379). When further considering the forced revocation of the Irish language, the influences on this country's particular version of gallows humour can seem multifaceted and delicate.

Nicholas Williams categorised the genres of jokes in Irish-language culture as: satire, irony, nonsense words, monstrous exaggeration, ridiculous names, word play, and macaronic[19] speech. However, research on the topic, whether generally or with specific aims to support this particular claim, is scarce. Vivian Mercier argued most "Irish" humour is not actually distinguishable from its English counterpart; he posited that the combination of fantasy and the grotesque or macabre are hallmarks of both.[20] That said, the distinguished historical and cultural development, as well as the power imbalance between the two nations, played its part, especially on the topic of language. Ó Conchubhair discusses the transition from Irish to English in his essay on the topic, "Irish Cultural Humour," noting the difference in sentence structure. He uses the comparison between German and English as a more common example, illustrating how English has a broader capability for "confusion of meaning and the flexibility of its sentences" due to the ability to withhold punchlines until the end of sentences (2016: 240). For example, in English, a speaker could say, *I kissed the weird man*. However, due to

[19] *Macaronic*, meaning language containing words or inflections from one language introduced into the context of another.
[20] O'Donoghue, 1982

grammatical and syntactical structures in German, this would be phrased *Ich habe den seltsamen Mann geküsst*, or literally: *I have the weird man kissed*. Irish follows a VSO (verb-subject-object) order, so that sentence would be phrased *Phóg mé an fear aisteach*, or in English: *Kissed I the man strange.* While the different structures may not seem very impactful in basic sentences used in an academic sphere, they can play immensely with humour, which is often dependent on timing and word flow.

In transitioning from Irish to English, it is likely certain expectations of comedy were mixed over time. This theory moves beyond simple syntax; it also has to do with cultural identity. For example, the popular beer company Carlsberg once ran an ad wherein an Irish man travelling abroad spoke "Irish poetry" to the locals when prompted to do "something Irish," but an Irish speaker would know that what was spoken were actually just random words like *road*, *girl*, and *milk* (Ó Conchubhair, 2016: 238). This joke implies or refers to several things about Irish culture. It begins with the sort of expectation for Irish people to perform their culture, so to speak, and all that people from another country can think to ask for is singing or dancing. The men cannot simply order at the bar; they are prompted with expectations to *be Irish*. So, the ad writers are acknowledging an element of this experience for Irish people. Next, the structure of the ad and its intended audience unintentionally speak to a larger element of the identity crisis and nature of humour in translation: the advertisement has no subtitles. Anyone who does not speak the language will be unable to understand the joke. Considering that the common language in Ireland was forcibly changed to English by colonisers, and learning and finding reason or place to speak it is more difficult, jokes of this nature make an assertion about what *real* Irish identity is and creates a sense of community around Irish-speakers, one which unintentionally and implicitly excludes non-speakers.[21] As Ó Conchubhair put it, "Those that get it are 'Irish' and those that do not are not" (2016: 238). This more negative implication is only one way of looking at it; utilising humour to reference things such as the limited use of and ignorance surrounding the Irish language can actually be a more joyful or stress-relieving way to deal with the situation. He goes on to explain how by fooling these Brazilians with their own language, they turn the negative experience of being typecast into a positive bonding experience amongst each other, something which both bilinguals and monoglots can appreciate.

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[21] O'Neill, 2016: 67-78

As mentioned, *Irish humour* is characterised by subject matter and style, in addition to linguistic development. Extreme or fantastical language combined with unpleasant or grotesque subject matter and imagery are, in some ways, the bread and butter of the style. Reconsider a very simple earlier example in *Derry Girls*, wherein Clare is called *Bobby Sands* by Michelle. The hunger strikes, and the deaths they incurred, were some of the most sombre stories of the Troubles and drew worldwide attention to the cause. Comparing a girl who has, in essence, skipped one meal to a famous hunger striker combined with the light-hearted manner in which Michelle references someone who suffered a painful death meets the criteria: dramatic and macabre. Viewers watching *Derry Girls* would notice these criteria met time and again in every episode, spoken at breakneck speed with little to no opportunity given to ponder them further. As has been mentioned a few times, even this form of humour allows people to cope with negativity, but before breaking that idea down in full, further examples of Irish humour and some of their controversial elements will be laid out.

3.2 From Paul Muldoon to *The Guard*

Writing may not be the first form of media an Irish person considers when summoning to mind examples representative of their version of dark comedy. Nonetheless, Nicholas Taylor explored in 2022 how Steinbeck, though American himself, was deeply and openly influenced in the writing of *Letters to Alicia* by Irish humour,[22] and a popular, mythic long-form poem, *The Midnight Court*, utilises it to tell a racy and complicated story about fairies, all in a lively criticism of failing societal structures in 18th-century Catholic Ireland under British rule.[23] A contemporary writer known for this trademark witticism is Paul Muldoon.

An Ulster poet who frequently covered the political atrocities of NI before emigrating, it is asserted in "Humour and the super-ego: A case study of Paul Muldoon's poetry" that he was not the only poet to employ this sense of humour. Ciaran Carson is mentioned, with a reference to the line, "We thought it was time he bit off more than he could chew. / Literally," referring to a terrorist in Belfast jokingly discussing a murder. Nonetheless, Muldoon remains a prominent and rather well-liked example in what some consider to be the *Ulster Renaissance* (Sykes, 2013: 360). His third collection, and the final before he moved from the country, *Quoof*

[22] "Steinbeck's Debt to Irish Humour", 2022: 131-140
[23] Ó Conchubhair, 2016: 243

is noted as his most serious to date. In a poem speaking about terrorists, wordplay juxtaposes dark imagery with intentionally lyrical or bouncy poetic rhythm, emphasised through the addition of theoretically funny details. Consider this small passage:

> The driver's blethering
> his code name
> over the Citizens' Band
> when someone ambles
> in front of him. Go, Johnny, Go, Go, Go.
> He's been dry-gulched[24]
> by a sixteen-year-old numb
> with Mogadon,
> whose face is masked by the seamless
> black stocking filched
> from his mum. (Muldoon, 1983: 52)

In light of the societal conflict occurring at the time, this poem paints a grim picture. And yet, a popular, lively song is referenced in the use of "Go, Johnny, Go, Go, Go," and Muldoon makes a point to note that the stockings masking the attacker's identity are stolen from his mother. These two details leech some of the seriousness from the interaction, making it almost impossible for the reader to truly grasp the gravity of the situation. To consider that a potential violent terrorist would have to steal his disguise from his mom is, simply, inherently funny.

Moving away from literary examples, many would consider television and film the primary source for displaying Irish humour. With the ability to visually showcase more about intent, mannerisms, and timing, this form of media thrives comedically. TV shows like *Father Ted* or, more recently, *Frank of Ireland* convey this dry, sarcasm-riddled style of comedy in no small amount, but one of the most popular films is *The Guard*, released in 2011. Written and directed by Martin McDonagh (who will be further discussed in 3.3), this movie is a buddy-cop (or enemies-to-buddies cop) film about an Irish policeman with a questionable sense of humour, Boyle, who is paired with a no-nonsense American FBI agent, Wendell, to solve a drug-related crime in Connemara, rural west Ireland. They get off on the wrong foot, to put it lightly, when Boyle welcomes him with racist jokes, given that Wendell is a black man. When scolded by his superior for his comments, Boyle explains that "racism's a part of

[24] To be "dry-gulched" is to be approached with the intent to seriously harm or kill.

my culture" (Goff, 2017: 41). This raises one of the most common critiques of Irish humour: its proclivity for prejudiced remarks.

Loretta Goff explored the national and racial identities that influenced this film in comparison to another film about a black man in Ireland, *Irish Jam*, and broke down a primary motivator for said proclivity. Primarily, Irish people have been made to feel like a lower caste or oppressed group, both in their home country and in one of the primary countries to which they've emigrated: America. In the US, they were received in the late 19th century with hostility and degradation, and in Ireland, they were put under the heel of British citizens or loyalists and Protestants. In order to bolster a sense of confidence or strength, Irish immigrants in the US, for example, took to denigrating black citizens to ensure there would be a demographic on a lower rung than them, a further oppressed class in order to spare Irish people being the worst-treated. Goff writes:

> This racist behaviour, effectively distancing themselves from other poor groups, thus became part of the conscious move of Irish Americans towards upwards mobility. Decisions such as these established an either/or situation of cultural identity recognition and classification that would later facilitate flexibilities of humour and the generation of comedy. (2017: 33)

This behaviour was limited neither to the US nor to the 19th century. As Ireland has become increasingly cosmopolitan over the last century, particularly amidst the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s to the '00s, the tendency to lean towards harsh or prejudiced jokes has come under question. Why does this instinct exist? Ó Conchubhair discussed the generally accepted four theories of humour: (1) Disparagement Theory, (2) Superiority Theory, (3) Relief Theory, and (4) Incompatibility Theory. Focusing on the first, disparagement allows one to establish and solidify a bond by othering the object of the joke: those who find it funny are allowed to feel in-touch with the community while those who are the object (or don't understand the joke) are isolated or threatened. The urge to joke in this manner "often emerges when a collective social identity is threatened," and following Irish independence and the national plight to recover from the impact of colonialism, Irish identity has been vague and uncertain, theoretically in need of definition (2016: 242). As the country has gained affluence and global standing, becoming in recent decades one of the wealthiest nations in Europe, the idea of the subjugated Irish citizen—while not forgotten or ignored in a post-colonial lens—has lost

strength in its use as a justification for offensive humour. Writer Roddy Doyle wrote in his 1987 story *The Commitments* that Irish people "are the niggers of Europe"; he has since stated that he would change this line in a rewriting of this story because, as he sees it, the statement is simply no longer true (Cronin, 2013: 188).

In *The Guard*, Goff provides a thorough critical analysis that concludes that McDonagh was not blindly partaking in such disparagement, but rather showcasing it ironically with a self-aware intention to note its more ridiculous qualities. Notably, Boyle's coworkers don't object to the racist remarks, but they *do* object to the idea that they are racist, which is inherently absurd. It also serves as a springboard for deeper discussion or reference in the film to the sense of *othering* that both Boyle and Wendell feel, with the former being looked down upon for being "a knacker from the country" and the latter being both black and American in a commonly Irish-speaking, traditional area. Despite this, she notes, irony and self-conscious writing only go so far; if the audience is never outright made aware of the intent to *mock* the humour, rather than to *partake* in it, it is uncertain they will have an outward enough perspective to acknowledge the faults in the humour at all. It requires an audience that can pick up on notes of sarcasm and likely already have an inclination towards the idea of disparaging Irish humour being harmful and representative of deeper social ailments. Many viewers may simply find it funny or agree with the idea that it's just "part of their culture." *Derry Girls*, with its aforementioned preference for diversity, avoids this issue not only through positive representation, but also through a rather strict method of only joking about things that the white Irish writers could theoretically claim close social, literal, or hypothetical distance from (such as day-to-day life during the Troubles or queer identity, which is not visible and thus cannot elicit immediate prejudice).

3.3 Authenticity and the Martin McDonagh problem

One of the biggest concerns when it comes to the use of Irish humour is that of authenticity. This is an issue which largely arises from within the Irish community (and, in fact, is based on discourse on where the boundaries of the *Irish community* lie in the first place). Referring back to the Carlsberg ad: questions could be raised about the levels of quintessential "Irish-ness" that would apply to a viewer. Is an Irish speaker more *Irish* than a non-speaker? What are the boundaries of national and cultural identity that will enable people to, theoretically,

make authentic jokes without being subject to controversy? With *Derry Girls*, is it only Lisa McGee's close social and literal distance to the Troubles that allowed her to make such scalding and sensitive jokes without any notable backlash from audiences—would someone without her childhood have had the same success?

These are the type of questions that dark or gallows humour easily evokes, and there aren't always clean answers. One of the best individuals to pit McGee and *Derry Girls* up against is, in fact, Martin McDonagh. A successful writer of both plays and films, McDonagh has gained recent acclaim for his Academy Award-nominated film, *The Banshees of Inisherin*. A slow, dark meditation on a broken friendship between two men on a fictional island off the Irish coast, the film incorporates a hefty amount of the Irish humour the filmmaker has become known for, having used it as the formative structure for most if not all of his plays and films. Since the inception of his career, he has been subject to heavy speculation on the subject of his nationality and upbringing: he's English.

Born and raised in London, his parents hail from west Ireland—the setting of many of his works—and while he visited frequently in the summers, he remained in London even after his parents returned to Galway.[25] His plays have received waxing and waning reception in the mere fact that his *distance*—socially, temporally, hypothetically, and literally—to their subject matter has been decidedly limited. Extensive discourse exists: can his humour come off as extreme, cliché, or put-on because he is from England and cannot understand *real* Irish humour, or do Irish viewers merely see it that way because they know of his nationality and are subconsciously excluding him based on it? Following the massive popularity of *Banshees*, a film review was published by Mark O'Connell discussing the complexity of the issue, and taking a hard look at the imagery and plot points that have been lauded around the globe:

> Landscapes of ravishing desolation. Donkeys, and occasionally other livestock, inside cottages. People wearing thick woollen clothes that look like they would be horribly scratchy. Auld fellas drinking loads of pints. Stoic and long suffering women. People talking in poetically inverted syntax, and committing acts of unfathomable savagery. You know: Ireland. Or rather, "Ireland," because—as McDonagh knows as well as anyone—this version of Irishness has always had an uneasy relationship with the actual country and the people who live in it. (O'Connell, 2023)

[25] O'Connell, 2023

O'Connell refuses to make a firm point on whether McDonagh's claim to Irish humour is "wrong" or "right" so to speak, but he introduces many nuanced points on how Ireland is perceived from outside its borders, and who is entitled to an authentic opinion (what *is* authenticity?). Is it enough that McDonagh has Irish parents, or is he merely reinforcing tired or negative stereotypes?

Looking back at other artists mentioned, Paul Muldoon exhibited a close social distance with his subject matter in the fact that he, in addition to other popular Irish poets such as Seamus Heaney, John Montague, and Tom Paulin, all lived in areas hit by escalating levels of violence: "Each was directly affected by British troops arriving in Ulster in the wake of increasing sectarian violence back in 1969—the year usually seen as the beginning of 'the Troubles'" (Sykes, 2013: 360). Like in chapter one when discussing the direct relationship between humorous "distances" and controversy, some may respond warmly to Muldoon and coldly to McDonagh on this basis. Even though the former emigrated in 1986, he lived and formed poetry collections there consistently preceding this, unlike the latter, who never lived in Ireland but paid visits annually. Returning to *Derry Girls*, there are archetypal characters and plot points that could be construed as overdone or misrepresentative of the various experiences of Irish people—*if* they were spoken by a different writer. But McGee being Northern Irish and writing from her own experiences offers not only a literal authenticity to the show, in that writing from her past would obviously make plot points or setting details accurate, but it also offers a psychological authenticity for the viewer in knowing that the humour is being directed from "within" the Irish community. Whether or not this is a productive or healthy approach has no conclusive decision, but it's an important complication to remember when considering the prevalence and impact of different pieces of media that claim to use *Irish humour*.

4. Black humour as a coping mechanism

4.1 Lingering trauma after peace

Numerous potential uses for and perspectives about black humour have been listed—but what are its primary benefits?

In short: to cope. In Sykes' breakdown of Paul Muldoon's poetry, he explored Freudian theories on humour:

> [Freud] takes humour to be a more sophisticated phenomenon than simple joke-telling. He sees it as a defensive process that performs a task 'of preventing the generation of unpleasure from internal sources.' In this context, it could be linked with other defensive processes which ultimately lead to mental illness. … He argues that humour 'can be regarded as the highest of these defensive processes' on the grounds that it 'scorns to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention as repression does, and thus surmounts the automatism of defence.' (2013: 359)

The way this humour comes about and either hinders or helps the process of *healing* (as opposed to simply *coping*) can be fluid, and its role amidst and following the clashes in NI is unique. Adrian Little explored the different processes for reconciliation for three different nations in the 1990s, including NI, South Africa, and Australia. The natural emotional reactions in any reconciliatory process would include fear, hope, and disappointment, but they found that this emotional development was impeded in Ireland by the unique nature of the peace process.[26] It didn't set false expectations; it set few expectations.

It is generally assumed that the Troubles ended, and the triad of forces (Catholics/Nationalists, Protestants/Loyalists, and the British State) came to an agreement, due to a stalemate—after decades of rising and ebbing violence, it became clear that nobody was making notable headway. There have been arguments against this theory, as the treaties of peace towards nationalists or the IRA, in their final details, did not promise much more in the late 1990s than they did in the 1970s, and there had been impactful acts of violence that continued to gain media attention for the republican cause. However, due to routine mutual introspection on behalf of these individuals, in conjunction with long stretches spent in prison, many 'foot soldiers' so to speak enacted gradual ideological shifts, believing that a military

[26] Little, 2017: 200-212

game should become a political one.[27] For many, whether directly involved or indirectly affected, this eventual yearning for new forms of problem-solving was a relief.

However, the swift political end to a decades-long, very physical conflict incorporated into the daily lives of citizens presented a disparity: while theoretical safety and peace had been achieved, the need for reconciliation, a sense of safety, and/or an acknowledgement of mistreatment had not. Several generations at different points in their lifetime, some for the entirety of their development into adulthood, had been shaped by this strife, and "for all its undoubted attributes and achievements, an essential flaw in the Good Friday Agreement was the absence of any mechanisms for addressing the complex afterlives of 'the Troubles'" (Coulter, 2022: 423). What "peace" looked like in political terms did not fully address the psychological impacts. It may not have been intentional, but after years of warring, those in control of the process approached its legacy as an issue to be taken up later, prioritised second to an official agreement.[28]

The problem is that the legacy was not addressed in a clear, linear, productive, or particularly healing way. One of the contributing factors in this was the media representation of NI. In the 1990s, research existed on the explicit bias in British media regarding the portrayal of the events in Ireland, all leading to a media blackout initiated by Margeret Thatcher in order to "starve the terrorists and hijackers of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend," an implicative statement in its own right (Condit, 1997: 283). The matter of representation persisted beyond the Good Friday Agreement, though, from American blockbusters[29] to, once again, British news stations.

Years later, Lesley Lelourec investigated how the media had categorised the factions of the conflict into "the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," being the British State, the IRA, and the loyalists (who were better for remaining loyal to the UK, but still unpleasant for partaking in the troublesome behaviour nonetheless). English public opinion, derived through these reports, had no other option than to be driven to the conclusion that Northern Irish people were, at best, generally "irrational and unreasonable," and, at worst, "evil" (2009: 33). This outside pressure, confining these people to misconceptions derived from propaganda, only intensified the need to move forward, to not be defined by ongoing disruption. NI has had to

[27] Tonge et al, 2011: 5
[28] Little, 2017: 203
[29] Meaney, 2010

battle to be seen as more than radicals. This villainization, by reducing the north and its people to the strife and violence that occurred in a particular time frame, only steeps people further in the trauma incurred by it. Furthermore, when not all coated in a sweeping description like *evil*, many were at best afforded simple and unrealistic terms such as *bystanders* or *perpetrators* or *victims*, limiting how they could be viewed, how they could feel comfortable reacting, and ultimately how they felt.

Between the single-minded political advancement, outside demonization, and a general (not unreasonable) desire to move forward from an exhaustive battle, little room was left for the intergenerational trauma that had been accumulated. As Paul Muldoon said in an interview, "I think that one of the ways in which we deal with trauma is to put it to one side, is to smother it, is to pretend it's not there … That's something that really has to be explored much more … And we're all traumatised. We're living in post traumatic stress" (Sykes, 2013: 362). Returning to comedy, when one feels as if they're not given the space to work through their emotions in an open, productive way, much of the aforementioned research on gallows humour indicates they will find quick, socially acceptable manners of expressing this internal conflict.

An additional contributor to the topic of unresolved trauma is the fact that the tension may have dulled, but never disappeared.

> Experts in Peace and Conflict (Hayward and McManus, 2019) describe NI as a post-Agreement society rather than post-conflict because of the fluidity of the transition from conflict to peace, and, as discussed later in the article, there remain areas of NI that are still very much impacted by conflict. (Long, 2021: 4)

Outbursts of violence, as well as prejudice and harmful structures (such as socioeconomic disparities), have lingered since a political peace was ushered in, further solidifying many people's inability to completely process their pasts and move forward. It is, perhaps, because of this gap in emotional care and treatment, coupled with the scarcity of accurate media representation, that *Derry Girls* reached such success.

4.2 Humour as a coping skill in *Derry Girls*

These breakdowns of the residual trauma due to the Troubles help reframe earlier discussion about the focuses and motifs of the show. Striking a balance between acknowledging the individual to revoke stereotypes while still acknowledging the nostalgic, uniting experiences of the time is a delicate process, and it takes an overwhelming dedication to the concept of a *normal person*. The one-dimensional media presentations of the "men of action" grew tired and receded. Long-standing gaps in the market for representations of "ordinary people" and their everyday concerns became apparent, and "that turn toward the private proves emblematic of a wider public ambition to leave the past behind signified in the portrayal of the regional capital as newly dynamic and cosmopolitan" (Coulter, 2022: 423). As it was said normal people who developed and harnessed *Irish humour* in order to deal with what they had experienced, it stood to reason that the show operated primarily within the realm of comedy—particularly as it fits a specific need of those dealing with repressed trauma, which is the inability to be vulnerable.[30]

Humour does not commonly reveal a vulnerability such as fear or sadness might; it is an easy, relieving way to unite people who have suffered a mutual wrong. This inability to be vulnerable and to instead revert to quips or sardonic wit is apparent time and again in the show, where characters often shrug off moments of emotional intensity. Some of the harshest characters when it comes to "slaggin'" people off, an idiom for tongue-in-cheek teasing, can be Granda Joe, who has seen more of the region's tumultuous past than anyone else in the core cast, and Michelle, the friend whose brother in the IRA committed murder. The person least likely to partake in it is likely Da Gerry, who is from the Republic. Whether or not this was intentional, it speaks to the need for those who often felt the brunt of conflict to revert to jokes in times of crisis. It takes Michelle's cousin threatening to move away, or the eventual political move to free prisoners (including her brother), to truly move Michelle to tears. Granda Joe's most noticeable moment of sincerity is in the season one finale while watching the news about a bombing, during which he somberly places a hand on Gerry's shoulder.

The aforementioned acts of cutting between the bombing and the talent show, and later between the ceasefire and the prom in season two, in and of themselves speak to the

[30] Gubanov, 2018: 379-383

shakiness—caught between humour and sincerity—in approaching the tumultuous few years preceding the transition to peace. As Coulter put it:

> Those intercutting images disclose quite explicitly the counterpoint at the centre of the series, namely the disjunction between the experience of an older generation forced to live through the Troubles and the expectation of their (grand)children that their own lives might be rather better. (2022: 433)

The widely felt sensation communicated by, for example, these scenes helped appeal to many potential demographics, and the humorous engagement from characters of all backgrounds emphasised this.

Nonetheless, the writers don't allow the show or its characters' development to be hamstrung by its need to make a joke out of everything. The first season finale couples humorous imagery with the news of the bombing, but the scene is more so meant to be representative of the silly, unburdened experiences of youth, ones that Erin's generation had more chances to experience than the last. Sister Michael noticeably watches the friends purposely make fools of themselves with a yearning expression, implying her desire to return to that more innocent age, if she was able to experience it at all in the first place. The act of terror is, pointedly, never made into the object of a joke, placing a respectful line between it and the pilot episode wherein a bomb threat (that never comes to fruition) is lightly mocked. The show's humour refers to the way in which those affected by the Troubles had to incorporate it into their everyday attitudes and experiences, but the benefit of hindsight in writing of it is that some of those most hurtful or relatable moments of pain and vulnerability can be given their moment.

Conclusion

One of the stranger and most hotly debated forms of communicating, dark humour found a place to take root and thrive in a decades-long clash, as well as in the years that followed. Though it had existed long before that, rearing its head amidst all forms of localised or global suffering, such as during WWII, the combination of cultural elements present in Ireland over time led to a specific brand known as Irish humour. One of the defining traits of media depicting the nation, the way in which it is responded to can depend on the intended audience, who is excluded from the joke, the identity of the person making the joke (or perceived cultural authenticity), and more.

Seen in writing, television, and film, this style of comedy has helped provide an outlet for dealing with the darker aspects of the country's history, both centuries-old and recent. It is not specific to Northern Ireland—the Republic is also recognised for it, as it has had to recover from colonial occupation and being robbed of their culture and language—but the Troubles provided the right conditions for it to pervade conversation ever more. When conflict becomes a part of life, spread out over decades, there isn't always room for brutal, open looks at the grief of a situation; a joke offers a quicker solution, and that tendency towards a more shallow coping mechanism is passed down until it is widely accepted as a common cultural trait. Considering that, even after an official, political peace was instated, deep-seated trauma has not been largely dealt with, it's no surprise that a piece of media meant to represent a historical turning point in this conflict would use humour as a framework for the story.

Derry Girls hits many of the right notes: its balance of the "distances" of humour, considering the authentic perspective of Lisa McGee; its ability to intermix realistic, consequence-free shenanigans with genuinely impactful or scathing observations about life at the time; and its implicit desire to not fall victim to the common vulnerabilities of Irish humour, such as offensive or disparaging remarks. The cyclical manner in how Irish people are viewed, and how they view themselves, because of this sense of humour is complicated and not always healthy, but the framing of life in Northern Ireland in this way steals some of the power from harmful common narratives and reassigns it to more genuine, empathetic, distinctly human narratives. *Derry Girls* allows people to reflect on a transformative era that never received the collective emotional processing that it warranted. It recalls hallmark experiences and struggles through a familiar, endearing lens, but it doesn't allow its subject

matter to become smothered by its humour. Moments to breathe, so to speak, come in the form of sincere moments of emotional complexity and grief, proving that while black humour is helpful, it is most impactful when balanced with introspection.

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