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VIOLENCE AND VIGILANTISM IN
MODERN IRISH LITERATURE

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This work is dedicated to my husband John
and our son Adam.

Thank you for your love, for your support, and
for always believing in me.

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ABSTRACT

Many authors of modern Irish literary works challenge the rhetoric used to justify the continuation of conflict in Northern Ireland. One effective method used to accomplish this challenge is the dramatic depiction of violence. The depictions are notable in that they are designed to fall outside of, run counter to, or exceed the normative frameworks perpetuated by the dominant ideologies. They are formulated to promote social change by attacking the foundational fallacies used to validate the structural hegemony. Eoin McNamee and Kate O'Riordan use graphic depictions of violence and human destruction in their novels to expose some of the fallacies used to promote and sanction the continuing struggle. In *Resurrection Man* Eoin McNamee focuses on the role of those who commit the violence in the name of cultural preservation. He portrays a society beset by madmen committed to ethnic purification and cultural glorification. Kate O'Riordan's *Involved* is a discussion of the true nature of sectarian paramilitary vigilantism as a corruption of the innocence and a subversion of the order that it supposedly protects and sustains. Each of the two novels is essentially a literary abattoir designed to complicate the conceptual descriptions by which one might attempt to define violence in order to keep it at a safe distance. They are dialogues created to attract attention to the destructive nature of the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland and to clarify any misconceptions about the nobility of the struggle.

Violence and Vigilantism in Modern Irish Literature

In his book, *Literature, Rhetoric, and Violence in Northern Ireland, 1968-1998*, Patrick Grant states that sustained violence survives through oversimplifications and equivocations (47). Propagandists use narrow certainties, false clarities, double talk, confusion, and contradiction to minimize violence's destructiveness. Grant contends that only literature can expose these devices of pretense, educate the imagination, and open the door to discernment and perspective. He states that only literature can "challenge and complicate the conceptual descriptions by which we might contrive to define violence in order to keep it at a safe distance" (3).

One conceptualization of art and literature is that it can affect social change or further the control of the dominant ideologies and social structures. In literature, the regular balance between challenges to and the maintenance of social values and structures enables a writer to serve as an agent of both social control and change. Ideologically appropriate depictions of violence are considered more acceptable because they can influence attitudes to support the structural hegemony. For example, it is perfectly acceptable for filmmakers to depict violent scenes of war in their movies to show heroic behavior or to support the ideological justification for the conflict. These depictions are frequently used to explain and/or promote socially sanctioned incidents of violence. It is when depictions of violence fall outside of, run counter to, or exceed the normative

frameworks perpetuated by the dominant ideologies, that the acts begin to mount cultural challenges and abridge distance.

One of the most persistently violent societies in the modern world is that of Northern Ireland. The continued animosity can be traced back to the seventeenth century when the English plantation enterprise began to exhibit some success. In an effort to finally suppress and rule the Irish, England imported its laws, its culture, its language, and its people. Most of the early efforts at plantation were unsuccessful, because few people were willing to trade English civilization for Irish warfare and chaos. To transplant one's family into an area rife with native animosity and inconsistent governance would be a daunting endeavor indeed. In point of fact, the venture never did manage to catch on in Ireland as a whole. Most of the land offered to settlers ended up in the hands of speculators whose primary interest was in capital gains, not in civilizing the nation.

The most successful efforts of plantation occurred during the reign of James I. He attracted business interests to the process, thus making it a more lucrative proposition. Scot planters moved into the northern areas of Antrim and Down that had been abandoned when Elizabeth I sent in the English army to suppress local uprisings. The Scots, who were predominantly Protestant and were loyal to the crown, took over the lands of the Irish who were killed by the English army. Their lack of local opposition and their formation of a dynamic market and industrial network allowed them to establish a strong society and ensured their continuance in the region. In the end, the south of Ireland was plagued by

speculators and absentee landlords who cared only for their continuing profits, and, in the north, by socially and religiously intolerant settlers taking over whatever land was left.

Within the span of one hundred years, the English had transplanted their law, their culture, their language, and some of their loyal subjects into Ireland, all at the expense of the native legal system, society, and citizenry. They also introduced religious diversity to the Irish, and then went on to attach societal significance to it. Religion became an indication of social standing with the Roman Catholics on the bottom end of the list. The ensuing controversy laid the groundwork for all of the following political tension and violence to afflict the island, particularly the North. The Irish were forced to live in a new world, a world not of their own making, one both foreign and inhospitable. It was only a matter of time before rebellion ensued and formal systems of vigilantism were born. Local groups of citizens, such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, banded together to protect their families and their lands. Indeed, the real life situation in Ireland came to be characterized by continuing rounds of violent rebellion and suppression. Each succeeding generation witnessed its own particular addition to the seemingly never-ending conflict. The struggle for Irish independence has always been marked by organized violence, but beginning in the 1960s sectarian paramilitary violence and vigilantism became the rule rather than the exception.

The modern continuation of these early antagonisms has resulted in an "ethnic conflict in which religion is a principal marker of identity (religion as an indicator of one's lineage, regardless of whether or not one is a believer)" (Grant

25). Violence in Northern Ireland has evolved into a system of mutual recriminations where original acts become lost in a cycle of injury and retribution. As a result, both sides of the conflict have developed "explanations" for their positions. A great deal of modern Irish literature strives to dispel these explanations by revealing the central fallacies employed to legitimize the use of sectarian paramilitary violence and vigilantism within the society. Two such writers to challenge the equivocations, oversimplifications, and conceptual descriptions used to perpetuate the cycle of violence in Northern Ireland are Eoin McNamee and Kate O'Riordan. Each attacks a central deception used to excuse the continuing use of force. In so doing, McNamee employs a clinical, impersonal style, while O'Riordan sticks to the more emotional and sentimental methods.

In *Resurrection Man* (1994) Eoin McNamee steps outside of the accepted parameters of literary practice, such as honoring the pursuit of conflict and its advocates, by adopting an intensely unsympathetic stance toward the subject of sectarian violence. To emphasize his examination of violence in Northern Ireland he purposely does his best to concentrate all attention on the exact nature of those who commit such atrocities. Throughout the novel, his style of storytelling is cold and clinical. It is this steely precision and detachment of method that actually makes his story so horrifying.

Resurrection Man is a fictionalized account of events that actually occurred in the 1970s when a gang of loyalists, who came to be known as the Shankill Butchers, terrorized the Catholic population of Belfast in a series of brutal

murders. The gang operated on the premise that they were being *forced* to defend their place in Irish society because of the continual agitation for civil rights by the Catholic minority and the inability of the British to control the situation. They felt justified in their efforts and proceeded to kidnap, torture, and kill several Catholics in a bloody campaign to ensure Protestant supremacy in Belfast. In the novel, McNamee dramatizes these events to attack the notion that sectarian violence in Northern Ireland is justifiable, even necessary, because it is the only way for each side to protect itself and preserve its culture and way of life. In his narrative, he reveals that the only culture actually preserved by this violence is one that promotes depersonalization and mechanized force. It is a society where violence has become so commonplace that it has mutated into ritual. It is also a society that has become scarred by lunacy as a result of the continual strife and turmoil, a lunacy that has twisted the conflict into a warped pursuit of justice.

While it is certainly common for specific enemies to be targeted by political violence, just as often, innocents are sacrificed. Random destruction and terror are, after all, the lifeblood of paramilitary enterprises. It is the constant threat of indiscriminate violence and the willingness to commit any number of atrocities that make these organizations so intimidating. It is the very fact that anyone can be attacked at any time that promotes the climate of fear so necessary to violent intimidation. Such violence is essentially impersonal; no effort is made to know or understand the poor innocent targeted for this type of "justice." This is a violence that depersonalizes its victims, stripping them of their individuality, turning them into symbols of hate.

Throughout *Resurrection Man* McNamee dramatizes this type of impersonal victimization, which is consistent with vigilante violence. Victims are chosen simply because of their ethnic association. McNamee's protagonist, Victor Kelly, and his band of killers believe that they are justified in their bloody endeavors because "the Protestant people have had enough so they have. There's a question of birthright being sold out here" (151). In addition, the " Catholics were plotters, heretics, casual betrayers" (9). After careful consideration, the killers choose a local pub as the ideal venue for several of their public executions. To select their victims, Victor and his crew drive around Belfast to find a Catholic who has strayed into Protestant territory. They bundle him into their car and retire to Maxies to exact their punishment. During these sessions it is quite common for the boys to call a break in the festivities for a libation and to critique their performances. Meanwhile, "The victim was ignored. There was blood on the ground, bits of scalp. Victor would wander over with a drink in his hand, stir the victim with his boot and stare blankly at him as if he were a specimen of extinction" (29). The unfortunate young man is left lying on the floor, abandoned like a broken toy. The only attention paid is the occasional poke and cold stare. There is also a conspicuous lack of attention to detail concerning the victim's suffering, which further emphasizes the brutal and impersonal nature of the violence. McNamee's observations are cold and clinical and do not extend to any description of the young man's pain or terror. The detachment adds a horror to the proceedings; the lack of any real personal involvement in the torture is such a frightening possibility to consider.

The Resurrection Men, Victor in particular, see themselves as latter day syndicate men. Modeling themselves after Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney's movie personas, the crew has turned the Hollywood B Movie genre into an entire way of life. They literally walk the walk and talk the talk. They structure their lives around violence, terror, and cruelty. Like the characters that they emulate, they give free reign to their violent natures. Following standard gangster procedure, they frequently take their abductees "for a ride." During one such incident, Victor's man, Big Ivan, goes so far as to turn the situation into a game. After stopping at an isolated spot,

Big Ivan gets out with the hatchet and does this hop
skip around the car like a Red Indian waving the hatchet
and busting a rib to himself. Rain dance. Biffa lifts the
Taig out of the car dead gentle, Big Ivan still laughing fit
to bust. It would have froze you in that alley. (133)

From big Ivan's perspective there is no political motive guiding his actions. He is not beating a young man with a hatchet because he disagrees with his politics, or out of some deep commitment to the Ulster Defense League. There isn't even a personal agenda at play here, only violence for its own sake. His cruelty is gleeful and mocking. The victim is objectified and degraded, and his misery is trivialized by the inappropriate merriment. After allowing Big Ivan his bit of mischief, Victor is all business at the moment of execution, asking for a knife, "like it was a 'scalpel' in an operation" (133).

In the first situation discussed, McNamee emphasizes the dehumanizing nature of the violence by concentrating on the killers' perspective and by deflecting attention away from the victim. In this passage, he actually projects the victim's reactions onto the killers, offering only their perspective on the event, and this further distances the violence from any emotion.

Your man was still unconscious, Willie noticed.

Half his head beat in and he sat there in the back

dead calm like he's won first fucking prize, a trip

to Glencairn gardens with the Nolan sisters depart

8:00 a.m. sharp. (133)

Even at the moment of his death, McNamee depicts, "your man on the ground watching the whole go, not saying nothing" (133). According to the killers, nothing appears to be taken personally; torture and death are apparently just sad facts of life in the young man's world. The violence is not political, it is not personal; it is a violence born of madness, designed to provide a sense of power and autonomy. That McNamee neglects the victim's suffering in this scene, actually makes the situation even more frightening. His one-sided perspective on the part of the killers makes their behavior more loathsome. Their ability to completely ignore the suffering they cause adds a frightening dimension to their violent natures. It provides them with a callous sensibility usually reserved for the truly amoral.

In addition to the specific illustrations of the depersonalizing aspect of vigilantism, McNamee also comments on societal contributions to the situation.

In Northern Ireland there is such an occurrence of violence that there exists the very expectation of violence.

Somebody gets shot they don't mind so much. It's like the poor fucker could've got out of the road if he'd had any sense and not stood in front of guns going off. Or maybe it's like he must have done something to deserve it. There's something official about getting shot with a gun. It's like the gas chamber, fucking guillotine. It's kind of legitimate. Like once you got a gun you got to have somebody to shoot at. Load the magazine, pull the trigger and whatever your having yourself. (36)

Victor and his gang are the personification of this violent expectation. Capable of horrific actions, their destructive pursuits are almost a foregone conclusion. There is no question as to whether or not violence will occur, and with a gun, there isn't even a doubt about the form that it will take. Extending the analogy, the incidence of violence has become so routine that a protocol has evolved to suit every scenario. Actions and reactions have become practically automatic and take precedence over any collateral damage. From official channels on down to the lone insurgent, there is an understanding that individuals are secondary to the outcome. As such, access to the tools of violence, more often than not, governs actions over any personal consideration.

In the novel, the one agency that could influence and affect the depersonalizing aspect of this vigilant culture actually perpetuates and reflects it. While the media has been instrumental in showing Northern Ireland's troubles to the world, its position as spokesperson has clouded its objectivity. In his history of the Northern Irish conflict, *The Troubles* (1996), Tim Pat Coogan reports that, to compensate for statutory obstacles such as publication gags, the Irish media frequently pushed the envelope of journalistic objectivity. Starting in the early 1980s, accusations arose that the Irish media might even be partially responsible for advocating terrorist activity in Northern Ireland. Reporters were holding interviews with various terrorists, thus providing paramilitary groups with a platform for propaganda. The reporting of shootings and bombings was sensationalized, which advanced a glamorized image of the perpetrators and their activities (298). As a result of this cooperation, integrity becomes compromised. "Paramilitaries escorted journalists to secret locations where they posed with general purpose machine guns and RPG7 rocket launchers. Car bombings were carried out to synchronize with news deadlines" (58). As a result of this cooperation, each side's integrity is compromised. The media thus becomes an asset worth cultivating because it offers exposure and a public forum. The appearance of things far outweighs any personal experience. Any individual focus is contrived for effect or emphasis rather than to elicit any actual attention or association.

Even the very modes of news reporting reflect depersonalization.

The violence had started to produce its own official

literature...with an emphasis on the visual. Photographs of bombs at the moment of detonation, riot scenes, men in balaclavas displaying heavy machine guns, burnt out vehicles, moments of numbness and shock. (92)

Stock pictures permeate the "official literature" of the violence. Photographic compositions are repeated with every new confrontation. Hooded figures have become virtual trademarks, and in the very centers of Irish commerce and industry, fires and explosions have become common sights. Reporting on the violence has become a standardization of images that has, over time, bred a public complacency. In *Resurrection Man*, McNamee destroys any such complacency with his terrifying images. He forces the reader to see the carnage at every turn of his tale.

In addition to the pictorial glut of rote images, the pictures of the victims of the violence have also been duplicated in the public's eye.

There was the inevitable photograph of the civilian victim. The photograph was always of the same man taken from different angles. The same shabby grey suit, the ill-matched socks and pale shins revealed by trouser legs which weren't long enough. The same uneven pavement. You never see the man's face. The photographer had gone to great lengths to avoid the possibility of

identification. Neither was the man named. (93)

One more dead body lies abandoned in the street. One more casualty of war in a long line of such victims. Deaths have become so common that the pictures of the bodies all seem the same. One picture bleeds into another, just as the blood from both sides of the conflict continues to flow. McNamee's description of this sad portrait without a name is further evidence that sectarian violence destroys everything in its path, including individuality and humanity. McNamee's cold literary style satirizes this endless duplication, illustrating the faceless, nameless aspects of sectarian violence. In an effort to preserve their culture, the paramilitaries of Northern Ireland are slowly but surely destroying the very souls of which the cultures are comprised. Victor and each member of his gang is evidence of this cultural corruption and destruction. They are the offensive side effects of their diseased culture, contaminating the very air they breathe.

In addition to his discussion of the depersonalizing aspect of paramilitary violence, McNamee also steps outside of acceptable discourse by showing how this same violence has actually become ritualized and that it is hardening its practitioners to the deaths they cause. Repeated violence, especially that committed with a specific purpose in mind, can become ritualized. Each violent confrontation provides valuable lessons on which tactics are the most effective. With time, these lessons become formalized and the specific methods become convention. Even though their efforts are basically sadistic exercises designed to satisfy their brutish needs to inflict pain and fear, McNamee's Resurrection Men are firm believers in the benefits of ritual. Their public executions at Maxies

involve, "maintaining a ceremonial pace with pauses and intervals for reflection"

(28). Indeed the killers,

See that these events had formal structure. The

men settled down after the first round of drinks.

They took their jackets off and precision became

important. A whole range of sounds could be

extracted from the victim. The third stage came

around 3 a.m. No one spoke. (29)

Rituals are comforting because they are familiar territory. There is no risk involved, because each aspect has been validated as effective and productive. However, ritual can also become a cold, mechanical process, which can be performed automatically, without much thought or consideration. It is this characteristic of ritual that McNamee emphasizes. He depicts Victor and the members of his crew as surgeon-like instruments of death. They perform their "operations" with precision to affect the maximum desired result, which is the methodical debasement and destruction of a human being. The exercise is conducted in specific phases designed to elicit shock and terror from the reader.

In the process of conducting violence for effect, as with vigilantism, the violent frequently become unconscious of the actual damage they cause. Their violence is a dissipation that inflicts devastation impersonally and is justified by people who refuse to admit to the harm they cause. Throughout *Resurrection Man*, Eoin McNamee illustrates this resistance to awareness that develops through

continued exposure to the violence and hatred. The sectarian movements are filled with victims of this callousness. Even the youngest members are jaded.

"They bring these wee bastards in. Seventeen, eighteen years old. They've already spilled the beans and you get this detective reading out their statement. They all say the same thing, 'It was like a film.' 'It was like something out of the pictures.' Like they're not really shooting anybody.

"They're absolving themselves of blame. Like as soon as they run away, the victim's going to stand up, dust himself off." (79)

From one incident to the next, Victor and the members of his crew become increasingly violent and more cold-blooded. They start out by killing "the enemy," any Catholic who crosses their path. While in prison, Victor calmly stalks and murders an informer, a man already broken and destroyed. The final irredeemable act is Victor's public execution of Flaps, the pub's mascot and runner. In a heightened state of paranoia, Victor becomes convinced that Flaps is informing on the crew to the police, " 'We got a traitor,' he began quietly, 'an informer in our midst, a Judas. Our aim's been betrayed and our most inner thoughts made known' " (164). He drags Flaps up onto the stage in the bar,

Victor was walking round him now, studying him as if this were a matter of promising angles, and solvable by degrees. Victor placed the barrel of the Browning

against the side of Flaps' head and fired a single shot, flat and undramatic, and Flaps fell sideways off the chair. "Get rid of this fucker," he said, then walked off the stage towards the door to the back room.

(165-166)

McNamee's very description of the event emphasizes Victor's callousness. Victor does not investigate his suspicions, he simply decides that Flaps is guilty and carries out his sentencing. He drags Flaps up in front of all of the patrons in the pub, calculates the best angle for his shot, and pulls the trigger. There is no hesitancy; nor is there any regret. Victor's parting shot is to "Get rid of this fucker." His entire demeanor is cold, calculating, and totally indifferent to the consequences of his act. Flaps' public execution is evidence of Victor's deepening paranoia and dependence on drugs. The murder is symptomatic of his bitter decline into madness.

McNamee's most daring departure from the party line glorifying the conflict is his defamation of the combatants in the paramilitary organizations. His Resurrection Men are not soldiers in a war, but vicious killers. The absurdity lies in the fact that the members of the crew see themselves as heroes of the people. Willie sees himself as an elder statesman, a man admired for his faithful service to his people. "He imagined himself in later years being interviewed in front of the camera. He would admit to dark times, lean periods when he struggled with despair but then explain the benefits of an optimistic nature and share insights gained through hardship. He would praise the role of family life" (40).

Willie is also a man who takes comfort from the set of knives he carries in a case in his car. He thinks about them all the time, and sees them as "proof of his part in the events of the city and their bright singular virtue enable him to think of himself as equal to the world" (188).

Big Ivan also sees himself as a public figure.

He longed to have his picture in the paper again. He thought it would reveal hidden public qualities. He imagined the paper being passed around the bar in the Pot Luck, his enigmatic expression pondered, men trying to recall words that he had spoken. People would look at his face on their way home from work or over an evening meal, feeling strangely stirred, saying here is a leader for society. (189)

Like Willie, Big Ivan sees himself as an object of fascination for the media, as well as a local hero. He is just as oblivious to the fact that their publicity is the result of their reprehensible crimes, not a glowing review of their activities. Big Ivan even goes so far as to imagine conversations and the appropriate adoration he feels is his due. This is also the member of the crew who beats in the side of a man's head with a hatchet and does a war dance around his inert body as he lay in the middle of a filthy alley.

Victor Kelly sees himself as a leader of "men on a mission, a handpicked team working under the noses of the law" (173). He believes that he is a man who conducts "individual acts of bravery," a man who cherishes his victims and

nurses "them towards a growing awareness of their wasted years" by killing them and removing them from their supposed dissipation (173-174). Victor is secure in his war against the "whore of Rome" (9). After all, "There were barbarous rites, martyrs racked in pain. The Pope's cells were plastered with the gore of delicate Protestant women. Catholics were plotters, heretics, casual betrayers" (9). Victor clearly believes it is his duty to cleanse the world of this undesirable element. Being a natural "leader of men," Victor feels very comfortable guiding his crew of fellow patriots to destroy the Catholic menace. In reality, he is a man who destroys the lives of innocent strangers, and in so doing, he destroys his own life as well. As McNamee's story progresses, the heinous nature of Victor's crimes increases, and his mental stability deteriorates. In the end, this petty gangster, this leader of men, is so out of control that he becomes a liability who is destroyed by his own compatriots.

McNamee's portrait of these violent men reveals a collection of vicious and depraved killers. They are prime exemplars of the sadistic, the psychopathic, and the criminal who are frequently attracted to such activities and organizations. Despite all efforts to legitimize their actions as patriotic attempts to defend their people and their culture, McNamee makes it clear that they are common murderers and nothing else. His characters perpetuate a careless violence with an arbitrary consideration, and their violence is their only vocation.

In this novel, McNamee debunks any notion that sectarian violence is a valiant effort to protect and preserve a society. He shows the true nature of such activities to be horrific and wasteful. He makes it clear that the participants are

not heroes of the people but madmen who have become completely inured to the violence they commit. They are purveyors of a capricious destruction, randomly and ritualistically exercised. His examination of the situation is conspicuously unconventional and is designed to challenge any and all accepted explanations or justifications for these indiscriminately cruel activities.

In *Involved* (1995), Kate O'Riordan also makes every effort to violate acceptable artistic tenets, to deviate from the conventional heroic depictions of sectarian violence. Her particular methods are to direct her violence toward sympathetic targets and to fashion her villains from figures normally considered to be protective. Her purpose is to take on the contention that vigilantism in Northern Ireland is the only way to protect the innocent, and the only way to establish and maintain order.

The British presence in Northern Ireland was initially tolerated in the hope that they would provide some stability and consistency. However, it soon became clear that the British did not always share either partisan opinion as to what would best serve the interests of Ireland's Protestants and Catholics. With no protector to count on and a mortal enemy on the other side of the door, internal systems evolved to ensure some semblance of security. However, as these efforts have no centralized authority, determining just exactly what constitutes justice, protection, security, and order becomes a subjective exercise at best. As a result, no one can count on reliable security or stability. There are many separate organizations, and each has its own opinion. As a result, an anarchic

milieu has developed, one in which violence has become the chosen solution to most problems.

In her novel, O'Riordan offers an alternate reality, one that shows vigilantism as a corruption that actually destroys innocence and subverts every system of order that it supposedly sustains. While telling her story of relationships challenged by divided loyalties, O'Riordan exposes the true nature of sectarian paramilitary vigilantism, that its protective cloak is actually a façade that disguises a callous villainy.

Nothing is ever quite as shocking or as sad as the destruction of innocence, especially when it is the result of violence. In addition, it could be said that any subversion of purity is inexcusable, no matter the reason. What's more, the damaging effects of the destruction are magnified when it comes at the hands of those in a position of trust, those responsible for safeguarding it.

In *Involved*, O'Riordan spares nothing or no one in her exposure of the cruel realities of vigilantism. One of the novel's central characters, Eamon O'Neill, is a man whose innocence was torn from him when, as a young child, his father died in his arms, the victim of an informer. The bloodstains that remain on the hall carpet have seeped into every fiber of the family, twisting the entire dynamic. Eamon grows up to take on a personal quest to seek out and punish those who refuse to abide by the established social mores, those who choose to betray their own. He is ruthless in fulfilling his mission, but he is no common thug.

O'Riordan's novel begins with Eamon conducting an object lesson at the home of Martin Fogarty, a suspected informer for the Special Branch. To make

his point, Eamon decides to terrorize Martin's son rather than Martin himself. He does this by killing the child's beautiful spaniel puppy, right in front of him.

He held the blade to the dog's throat which provoked yips of delight. The yip turned into a high-pitched scream, almost human in its unearthly tone as the blade sliced through soft folds of neck down its full fat belly, through small furry testicles to come out dripping at the other side. The pup shuddered. For a moment, the flailing legs pawed the space between them as the wail pierced through its open frothing mouth: high, shocked, and confused, then the resonance of agony. The scream subsided. A moment passes as the languid eyes clouded and glazed. A quiver and the hot bloody entrails poured out of the cleft. The animal was still wriggling, slightly, though silent in its death throes as its long gut followed by various dark red, bluish and bright orange viscera slapped onto the carpet in a steaming, spreading puddle. (14)

In constructing this passage, O'Riordan takes her time. She plays it out practically in slow motion, graphically describing each moment of the horror. Her imagery is such that the reader experiences the scene just as the child sees it and hears it. There is the sight of the gleaming knife piercing and slicing through the small, furry body. There are the colors of the blood and spilled organs.

There are the sounds of the poor animals agonizing screams. Finally, there is the vision of the small thing's excruciating struggle to its final release.

Eamon's merciless savaging of the puppy has several ramifications and allows O'Riordan to present a more comprehensive and sentimental view of the corrupting influence of vigilantism. Eamon commits a truly heinous act; he kills a guileless, trusting animal. He kills a small, soft, sweet puppy right in front of the child who loves it. The murder is slow, punishing, painful, and extremely messy. That Eamon could be so vicious in delivering his warning reveals the awful capabilities of unchecked vigilantism.

In turn, the child, Liam Fogarty, is forever scarred by the horror he is forced to witness.

The boy, though speechless with shock, understood the message. His lower lip trembled. He wanted to cry out, to scream, yet managed to contain himself. His pup. His beautiful pup, Rusty. He could not hate this man more if he had done that to his father. (14)

In this brief passage, O'Riordan shows how terror can twist innocence into hatred, irrevocably damaging the psyche and the soul. Later on in the novel, Martin Fogarty is indeed killed for his informing; he dies in his son's arms. Liam, the boy who loved his family and his puppy, turns to stealing and is rewarded with a "silver cross," a bullet through each elbow and each knee. The boy is left a virtual cripple with nothing but his hatred and desire for revenge to sustain him.

O'Riordan's Belfast is filled with lads such as Liam. "Hoods were the problem. The real problem in Belfast. Young lads and not so young lads. Joyriding no-hopers brought up on crime; surviving on grabbing and glue and cider and the contents of old ladies' PVC handbags" (89). How ironic and telling that O'Riordan depicts the victims as "the real problem."

"Most of them aren't involved in anything but crime. Half the lads over fourteen will have had their knees done by now but they still go on - what else is there? You can see it in their eyes around the age of three, maybe three and a half - it's like a light goes out - it's as if they know it's not going to get any better. The Provos try to keep some sort of order here so that people won't turn to the cops, but they take no notice of them either. Ma and Da are pissed all the time and the sight of older brother Tommy with his thigh bone sticking out after encountering a Provo gun, aye and maybe his elbow too, isn't going to stop Young Jimmy from going down the same road. The spoils of war eh? The poor misbegotten gobshites." (91)

Within this paragraph lies the true crux of the matter. Vigilantism, employed for any reason, be it protective or preemptive, is ineffective, and actually perpetuates further violence. Innocence is sacrificed in the name of order and

control. The innocent are victimized by the "patriots," and are then condemned for their inevitable rebellions. They become living expressions of every admonition about the inefficacy and impracticality of suppressive violence that has ever been composed. The incredible tragedy is that no one ever learns the lesson, and the destruction of innocence continues to thrive and the slaughter continues. As Eamon so succinctly puts it, "There are no innocents" (180).

At its most ineffective, vigilantism subverts the very "order" it allegedly promotes. Throughout *Involved*, O'Riordan illustrates just how pervasive this subversion is in Northern Irish society, and she begins at the most basic level, the family. The O'Neill family is like many other Catholic families in Northern Ireland. They are involved in their community, they are devout, and they are traditional. They have also been touched by the violence that so characterizes the region; their Da was killed because of an informer. They diverge from the mainstream in that they have decided to seek revenge for their loss.

That Eamon might want vengeance for his father's murder is perhaps understandable. His father did die in his arms, and in practically every patriarchal society a son is *expected* to compensate for his father's loss. This quest for redress has long been the stuff of literary legend. Eamon does indeed strive to live up to this expectation. O'Riordan's twist on this age-old convention is the immediate source of that expectation, Ma O'Neill. Instead of guarding her family from any further contact with the violence, she actually encourages her eldest son's participation in the turmoil. She washes the blood from Eamon's coat while he drinks his tea. She does the ironing while refereeing a

conversation between her son and her brother about Eamon's activities. She offers encouraging looks while folding clothes.

That Ma O'Neill is the impetus behind Eamon's activities is obvious. It is clear that she is the silent partner in everything he does. However, her participation is depicted in an extremely subtle manner. Her subornation of violence is tangled up in a combination of glances, pointed looks, and thinned lips, nestled within the everyday trappings of domesticity. Her promotion is practically unspoken, but with every thump of her iron and swish of her feather duster, she is in control. That a mother could be capable of wielding her own child as a weapon is monstrous. That she would encourage him to hurt others, whatever the reason, destroys every recognizable image of motherhood known to man. That O'Riordan dares to locate all of this hatred and violence within a mother's soul is quite possibly the most effective indictment of sectarian violence found within the novel. It is an indictment of "Mother Ireland," who unrelentingly demands the very lives of her sons. This convolution of values and priorities shows how damaging the effects of vigilantism can be. It has the power to warp even a mother's love.

Elsewhere in the novel, O'Riordan broadens her scope to examine the effects of vigilantism on societal order in Northern Ireland, particularly that of the business community and the Church. In a deviation from the normal state of affairs, it is the vigilantes who are often called upon to keep the peace. It isn't that the local constabulary is incompetent or inept. They are simply not allowed

into the equation to begin with. Dealing with the local enforcers is the only alternative for those with a complaint.

In many modern societies, business owners frequently need protection from criminals. Northern Irish entrepreneurs are no exception. The uniqueness of their situation lies in the fact that they protect themselves by setting one criminal element against another. Eamon's brother, Danny, offers an explanation for the partnership between the owners and the vigilantes. "They don't have anyone else to turn to - they can't go to the cops, it's just not done that way, so we have to look out for our own... Eamon and others, they sort of keep an eye on the local hoods... It's the only way" (133). So when Mrs. McGlashen, an off-license owner, has problems with a shoplifter, she goes looking for Eamon to handle the problem.

This time he took the bloody till and all. Bad enough the
booze and fags and whatever bit of cash is lying about,
but this time the little fucker took the till, the receipt pad,
Jesus Christ he even took the toilet paper from the bog.
Something will have to be done. Something serious.

(129-130)

Eamon will have to deal with the young offender, because he can no longer be reasoned with. "You couldn't shoot the fuckers enough I tell you" (130). Teen-aged boosters and shoplifters are dealt with severely; they are given no consideration for their youth. If they step out of line they must be reminded of their responsibility as lawful citizens.

The ultimate irony is that all of this "discipline" is less a deterrence than a stimulant. The only lesson violence teaches is how to commit more violence. If vigilantism *were* effectively dissuasive, lessons would be learned and repeated violence would be unnecessary. More often than not, the violence pushes its victims over the edge right into the center of the maelstrom. Mrs. McGlashen's shoplifter's brother "got the silver cross and all - you'd think it would make him think twice but oh no, not at all, they're only laughing. Only laughing" (130). The "silver cross" is not a medal of valor, it is a "back of the knees, back of the elbows job," a lesson taught with bullets (131). Obviously a lesson that produces an unexpected result, a proclivity for an even more violent response.

In addition to subverting natural law and civil order, vigilantism in Northern Ireland has even compromised the refuge of the Church. The initial accusations against Martin Fogarty result from an unpardonable betrayal. Eamon learns about Fogarty's "touting" to the Special Branch from his uncle, Father Joseph MacGinn. Father Joe got the information from Fogarty's confessor, Father Mulcahy. "Confessional secrets passed from one priest to another, neither above a little touting themselves" (27). Father Joe continually tries to use his kinship to Ma O'Neill, he is her brother, to ingratiate himself with his nephew. He likes to think of himself as just as "involved" as Eamon. To Eamon, Father Joe is "the worst, but he had to be tolerated" (26). Allowing him to "pretend" keeps him "happy and quiet;" permitting him to feel as if he is a member of the "inner circle" makes him willing to share even the most secret information (26).

Even the sanctuary itself is polluted by the passing on of those confessional secrets. Just prior to his visit to Martin Fogarty, Eamon stops off at church for a quick prayer. While there, Father Bennett tells him the whereabouts of a fourteen year old who has "done the whole area in the last couple of weeks" (3). Of course, Father Bennett is only doing this for the boy's own good because, "He's a danger to himself that boy" (3).

Everyone seems very committed to protecting people from their baser instincts. Eamon's brother firmly believes that Liam Fogarty "would be in his grave if it weren't for Eamon - he's looked out for him, kept an eye on him" (177). Ironically, his way of seeing that the "lad turns out alright" is to administer a silver cross (177). In reality, what has been created is a society where vengeance is an acceptable response to aggression, where children have their knees and elbows "done" for their crimes, and where surrender to the inevitable comes early in life. It is a place where killers such as Eamon are "looked up to," where people "come to him - with problems they might be having" (133). A place where only the violent are protected.

The final transposition of order that O'Riordan examines is the never-ending cycle of violence inherent in the sectarian vigilantism of Northern Ireland. *Involved* is composed of circles within circles. It presents the tragedy of an unlearned lesson, a time warp of revolving calamities. Eamon's "involvement" is predicated on his father's murder. Dying in his son's arms, Eamon's father becomes the impetus for a caustic hatred that devastates all it touches. With his

mother's encouragement, Eamon's lust for revenge becomes vitriolic and tragically destructive.

Eamon's attentions to the Fogartys result in the disintegration of their family and their chance at any semblance of a normal life. In other words, he puts them squarely in a position he knows only too well himself. That he actually believes that he is accomplishing some good shows just how insidiously deceiving vigilantism can be. Even when Liam confronts him with the truth of the situation, Eamon refuses to accept *any* responsibility. In words that Eamon himself could have spoken years before, Liam says, "My Da... he - him - that fucking cunt there - he killed my Da. In my arms - in my own two fucking arms" (173). After his father's death, Liam falls in with the wrong crowd and becomes involved with crime in the neighborhood. As a result, he must be brought back into line. He is awarded a silver cross. Eamon's response to Liam's attack is, "Liam, whatever has happened to you - you've only got yourself to blame" (172).

The irony here is that Eamon is allowed to trace his "involvement" to the tragic loss of his father, while Liam is left to bear the total responsibility for his scars. The suggestion is that if believing that one is right can sanction any action, then feeling lost, confused, and deprived are automatically incriminating. It would seem that being right is a matter of strength and one's perspective. Eamon is strong and believes himself to be right and justified in all that he does. Liam, on the other hand, is weak and knows nothing for sure. As such, his rebellion is wrong, and therefore must be punished.

Perhaps having an unswerving belief in one's prerogative is how vigilantism is perpetuated despite all evidence that it does not accomplish anything. However, when strength and belief are sanctioned as the sources for what is right, and when frailty and uncertainty are considered inherently wrong, then any form of oppression can be justified. This is the ultimate subversion of order, twisting "might for right" into "might is right."

O'Riordan's final testimony to the awful legacy of sectarian vigilantism lies in Eamon's answer when he is asked what he saw in Liam's eyes when the boy confronted him about his father's murder and his own hardship. " 'The boy, as long as I live I don't think I'll ever forget his eyes. What was in them...What - What did you see... ?' 'My own - I suppose,' he said and quickly left the room" (180). This disturbing reflection is the very essence of vigilantism. It is an eternal echo of attack and counter-attack, a continual creation and recreation of violence and hatred. It simply never stops.

Involved is an incredibly violent novel designed to focus attention on the lies perpetrated by sectarian violence and vigilantism in Northern Ireland. In an effort to elucidate the horrors that man can inflict on his fellow man in the name of political and religious animosity, O'Riordan invades the most sacred aspects of civilized life. She culls her villains from among those usually considered trustworthy and safe. Her perpetrators include a local shop owner, parish priests, a teacher, and a mother. Her victims are among the most innocent and vulnerable. In *Involved*, she does the unacceptable, she shows the horrible damage committed in the name of virtue and discipline, and she refuses to look

for someone else to blame for the carnage. There is no whining or crying about unfairness or oppression, only a sad display of unending violence. O'Riordan's candor is unexpected, and her literary risks, her sentimental excesses and graphic depictions of violence, add validity to her message.

Involved is a novel without either hope or redemption. Eamon himself falls victim to his own informer, his brother's lover and the mother of his nephew. Because of his "involvement" he is protected and manages to escape unscathed. Kitty, however, is doomed to pay for her efforts to stop Eamon's reign of terror, as is made clear by the novel's conclusion. Returning home for tea one afternoon, Eamon utters the last spoken word of the novel, "Seskatchewan," thus signifying that he has at last found Kitty's hiding place (202). Ma O'Neill raises her eyebrow to show that "She had heard him. She did not look up again. But nodded her head. Once" (202). Another child is bound to lose a parent. Another set of young eyes will reflect the horrors of vengeance; another young life will be stained by the lessons that only violence has to offer.

Artists and writers who remain safely behind the walls of accepted discourse may very well have a point to make; however, it usually gets lost in the morass of approval. Monochromatic works can be interesting because of their surface manipulation of one color, but they rarely invite a more detailed examination of their subject. To attract a longer and closer look, a work must offer a novelty, and unexpected feature. It must step outside of the comfort zone of the known and recognizable.

Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man* and Kate O'Riordan's *Involved* are two such artistic works. McNamee's icy technique and cold emotion are brutally affective. His clinical simplicity and economy of passion actually enhance the dreadful nature of the story. O'Riordan's efforts take her to the opposite end of the emotional spectrum. She practically wallows in sentimentality in her examination of Northern Ireland's sectarian vigilantism. Through the haze of disturbingly violent depictions they create, cold or heated, both strive to clarify any misconceptions about the nobility of the Northern Irish troubles.

In these novels, the conflict loses its patriotic façade and becomes a matter of psychotic obsession and depraved vengeance. The extent to which McNamee and O'Riordan are willing to go in their observations validates the seriousness of their concerns. To read these novels is to experience a kind of loss of innocence and naivete. One can never again pretend that there is any real value in choosing violence as a solution to a problem. One can never again say that one has not been told. Reading each novel is practically a traumatic event. The stories are horrific and dreadful and incredibly sad. Neither leaves any room for hope, if things continue as they are. The violence depicted in each is way out of bounds of what is socially acceptable, and its vivid nature marks the reader with each succeeding graphic display. There is a definite purpose to their excesses. It is their way of giving voice to the silent screams that warn of more anguish to come. Unless the people of Northern Ireland begin to listen to these dreadful predictions, the troubles will continue, and the innocent will continue to fall.

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