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# The Making of a Terrorist: Imagining Combatants' Points of View in Troubles Literature

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes portrayals of paramilitary fighters in Irish literature from the Troubles (1968–1998). While the conflict between Protestant loyalists and Catholic nationalists has provoked many literary responses, most focus on noncombatants. This article reads Edna O'Brien's novel *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) and Anne Devlin's story "Naming the Names" (1986), two texts that succeed in portraying paramilitary characters as complex individuals who are not wholly defined by their violent acts, but each reaches a limit of imagination as well. In *House of Splendid Isolation* the paramilitary character Mac chooses silence over justifying himself to a hostile audience, and in "Naming the Names" the stream of consciousness style becomes increasingly fragmented, suggesting the paramilitary narrator is on the verge of a breakdown. As a result, both characters remain enigmatic, with aspects of their motives and thinking not fully intelligible. Both texts show that it is a struggle for a noncombatant to understand a paramilitary's point of view, but these texts make readers want to engage in that struggle.

**Keywords:** Irish literature; Northern Ireland; political conflict; terrorism; Edna O'Brien; Anne Devlin; fiction

## 1. Introduction: Historical and Literary Contexts for the Troubles

Although Irish writers have responded to the Troubles with astonishing creativity, sympathetic renderings of a fighter's point of view are relatively rare in their work. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews's study of Troubles fiction (2003) shows that it is much more common to focus on noncombatants trying to cope with the violence. While he does discuss some novels that depict a terrorist's mindset, most of those are thrillers, which tend to paint the fighters as uncomplicated villains and monsters. Michael L. Storey's survey of short stories depicting the Troubles also finds them focusing mostly on themes that emphasize noncombatant experiences, including "the devastating physical, social, and psychological effects on innocent people; and the moral decisions and actions that acts of sectarian violence force upon civilians" (Storey 2004, p. 155). In fiction, there are multiple examples of young men who are sympathetic because they struggle to get out of their associations with the IRA, such as Cal in Bernard MacLaverty's novel of the same name or Brendan in Jennifer Johnston's *Shadows on Our Skin*. However, there are few attempts to imagine the mind of a person who does not want to get out of such a paramilitary organization, who is convinced that fighting is the right course of action. This article examines texts by Edna O'Brien and Anne Devlin that tackle this project, analyzing both how they humanize combatants and how they strain to fully account for a paramilitary's motives. As a result, these texts speak to the importance of trying to understand an enemy's perspective and the difficulties in doing so.

The Troubles are not a typical war in key respects; even deciding whether to call them a war is complicated. Scholars use a variety of terms to characterize this event, including "political violence" (Kennedy-Andrews 2003, p. 7), "terrorist campaign" (Dingley 2009, p. 10), and "civil war" (Fitzduff and O'Hagan 2009). Lasting from 1968 to 1998, the Troubles were a period of armed conflict between

Catholic nationalists, who want the entire island of Ireland to be one country independent of Britain, and Protestant loyalists, who want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. In the late 1960s, tensions between Catholic and Protestant communities boiled over into frequent rioting, and the Northern Irish police were unable to control the violence. As a result, British troops were mobilized to help keep the peace in Northern Ireland. The conflict was further complicated by the involvement of paramilitaries, or illegal armed militias, on both sides: the most important nationalist paramilitary group is the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and the two most important loyalist paramilitaries are the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association. The IRA saw themselves in a war for independence while the police and army saw themselves as restoring law and order. While acts of violence by loyalist paramilitaries were deplored by the government, in practice the state's tactics often focused on the nationalist paramilitaries as they were the greater threat to the existing government. For example, under the policy of internment, or imprisoning suspected paramilitaries without trial, 1874 Catholics were jailed as compared to 107 Protestants (Melaugh). Calling the Troubles a "civil war"—which they do resemble in that two factions of Northern Irish citizens were fighting each other—makes the nationalist side seem as legitimate as the government's, which loyalists would object to. But describing the conflict as a police action in response to terrorism denies legitimacy to the nationalist side, which they find unacceptable.

Critics have noted that much Troubles literature reinforces common perceptions of the violence as fundamentally irrational, driven by blind sectarianism and tribalism. As Laura Pelaschiar describes, the typical paramilitary character is "a macho-man in love with guns, naturally violent, sexually disturbed and often connoted by visual defects" (Pelaschiar 2009, p. 58). In this essay, I call attention to some notable attempts to move beyond such familiar stereotypes in order to acknowledge that the motives for violence are more complicated than the "terrorist" stereotype allows. Pelaschiar's description suggests that there is a strong association between masculinity and violence in Troubles literature as well. When women characters appear, they frequently stand for "the sacred realm of private feeling and personal relationships," which is positioned as the opposite of the "macho-man" paramilitary arena (Kennedy-Andrews 2003, p. 17). The texts by Edna O'Brien and Anne Devlin discussed in this essay challenge this gender binary: they feature women characters who have complicated relationships to violence and they are written by women authors who are interested in understanding a paramilitary's point of view, not just rejecting it. Their departure from the general pattern may partially explain why these texts have received limited critical attention, but it is also what makes them relevant for the current moment. Recently, a critical conversation has developed about ways that literary representations of Troubles violence are changing in the "post-conflict" years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998. Critics, including Pelaschiar, are bringing attention to the ways that recent literature is diversifying and complicating its representations of violence. This essay takes another look at literature written during the Troubles in the light of these arguments and finds that some efforts to challenge the prevailing view of the violence as merely irrational and disturbed were already underway in the 1980s and 1990s, adding historical depth to this critical conversation.

The view of Troubles violence as irrational was fostered not just by people outside Northern Ireland, but by the many Protestant and Catholic noncombatants living through the Troubles in their own communities. When thinking about attempts to imagine "the enemy" in Troubles literature, then, we should consider not just divisions between Protestants and Catholics, but also divisions between noncombatants and combatants within the same community. This division between combatants and noncombatants is inflected by class: paramilitary members came primarily from the working classes, for several reasons. Working-class neighborhoods took the brunt of the violence during the Troubles, both in terms of rioting and the police crackdowns in response. Some residents turned to paramilitaries because they saw these organizations as necessary for communities that the police had failed to protect. Segregation was also most pronounced in the working class. Protestants and Catholics lived in separate neighborhoods, sent their children to separate schools, and worked for separate employers, as well as attending separate churches. With so little social contact, the historical

distrust between these communities only became more entrenched, and it was easy to believe that people on the other side of the divide were uniformly hostile to oneself and one's community. Even years after the Good Friday Agreement, "most social integration begins only in adulthood and usually correlates with education level via universities, civil service, and the private sector, which are bound by anti-discrimination regulations" (Knobel 2011, p. 90). Members of the Protestant and Catholic middle classes were more insulated from the violence and more likely to encounter each other professionally. They were much less likely to support the fighting, though they still identified as Catholic and Protestant. For a middle-class Catholic just trying to work and raise a family in the midst of bombings and assassinations, an IRA member could seem as threatening and as responsible for perpetuating the violence as Protestants on the other side.

It is the divide between noncombatant nationalist and IRA paramilitary that is most relevant for O'Brien's and Devlin's work. Both authors come from middle-class nationalist backgrounds and write texts that reach across the combatant-noncombatant divide to imagine complex paramilitary characters. Crossing this divide is more challenging than it might seem at first; as Elmer Kennedy-Andrews asks, "How can the typically middle-class, educated, liberal writer, physically removed from the conflagration, understand the underlying causes of discontent or the need for urgent action?" (Kennedy-Andrews 2003, p. 15). Seamus Heaney examines the ways some middle-class nationalists distance themselves from paramilitaries in his poem "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" (1975). With each news report of another violent incident, noncombatants engage in an elaborate performance designed to show that "we" are not like "them": the paramilitary "terrorists" who keep stoking the conflict. Heaney describes the noncombatants as "Expertly civil tongued with civil neighbors/On the high wires of first wireless reports," trading "sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts" such as "Oh, it's disgraceful, surely, I agree" and "Where's it going to end?" (Heaney 1988, pp. 212–13). This performance is both precarious like a high-wire act and predictable as a long-established custom, and it reassures the middle-class speakers that they and their neighbors are "civilized" enough to know better than to resort to violence. The rest of the poem, however, challenges this self-image, pointing out ways that middle-class nationalists are implicated in the conflict and criticizing the habit of saying elaborate nothings in a vain attempt to keep the peace. "Punishment" (1975) further elaborates on this theme, suggesting that saying nothing may actually make one complicit with the violence one claims to deplore. The poem draws an analogy between modern Irish women who were tarred and feathered by nationalist paramilitaries for fraternizing with enemy soldiers and an Iron Age woman caught in adultery and sacrificed to a goddess. While the speaker feels compassion for the Iron Age woman, he also admits, with painful honesty, that he "would have cast [ . . . ] the stones of silence," just as he "stood dumb" at the sight of the women shamed in public during the Troubles (Heaney 1988, p. 193). Saying nothing to stop such ritual punishment is almost as bad as actively throwing stones, the speaker guiltily acknowledges. This poem also alludes to the performance of civility, this time with the oxymoron of "civilized outrage," suggesting that Northern Irish expectations of civilized behavior prevent the speaker from expressing his emotions more directly. Heaney's poems give insight into the ways that the weight of custom urges middle-class noncombatants not to engage with combatants' perspectives seriously or publicly. In creating nuanced portraits of paramilitary fighters, then, both Edna O'Brien and Anne Devlin are working against this cultural pressure.

## 2. *House of Splendid Isolation*

Edna O'Brien dramatizes the struggle of a middle-class noncombatant to relate to a paramilitary soldier in her novel, *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994). The novel focuses on two main characters: Josie, an elderly woman living alone in a big country house, and Mac, short for McGreevy, a paramilitary who escapes police custody and invades Josie's home while pursuing his next mission. At first, Josie is terrified and thinks Mac will surely kill her before he leaves. As a lady of a big house, Josie belongs to a different class, though we later find out that she worked as a maid as a young woman and only married into the property. More importantly, Josie has the distaste for violence and liberal humanist

values that are characteristic of the middle class, and initially she positions herself as morally superior to Mac. His viewpoint is so unlike hers, she reflects in one memorable passage, that they might as well be speaking different languages: “The saddest bit is that we’re the same stock, the same faith, we speak the same tongue and yet we don’t. . . . Words like justice or love or bread turned inside out or outside in” (O’Brien 1994, p. 87). And yet, as this passage also points out, Josie and Mac have much in common: they are both Catholic, both Irish, and, in fact, they both revere nationalist ideals. Over the course of the novel, Josie abandons her idea that Mac is completely different from her and becomes more and more interested in him as a complex, flawed human being.

One important way the novel shortens the distance between Josie and Mac is by holding Josie’s political views up for scrutiny. At one point, Josie shows Mac the diary of her uncle, who fought in the 1921 war for Irish independence and was killed by the British. When Mac asks why she showed him the book, she explains that she wants him to know that “we are on the same side,” but quickly follows that by saying, “What they did then was different” (O’Brien 1994, p. 85). Like other citizens of the Republic of Ireland in this novel, Josie wants to admire the revolutionaries of 1916 and 1921 while deploring Mac and other paramilitaries for causing the deaths of innocents. Mac immediately challenges her, saying “It’s exactly the same,” and while Josie sticks to her position that harming innocent people is wrong, the novel shows that insisting the revolutionaries were different than the present-day IRA is a flawed argument. Indeed, the main difference is that those previous conflicts are safely in the past, which makes the soldiers that much easier to romanticize: “Politics were one thing when brave men were shot long ago for their beliefs, or brave women hid volunteers in settle beds or churns, but politics had become a racket, hijacking, robberies, mindless assassinations” (O’Brien 1994, pp. 53–54). When Josie thinks of the past, she thinks of sacrifice and bravery, but when she thinks of the present, she sees the collateral damage and mixed political motives that also come with war and that, realistically, were probably going on in 1921 as well. In this way, the novel raises the uncomfortable thought that the difference between a war for independence and pointless acts of violence is primarily in the eye of the beholder. Josie doesn’t believe that the IRA’s ongoing attacks are worthwhile, but Mac believes he is fighting to save his country, just as the revolutionaries of the past did (O’Brien 1994, p. 85).

Josie comes to know Mac better over the course of the novel, but she still struggles to reconcile her experience of him with her knowledge of the violent acts he has committed and plans to commit again. She thinks, “I like everything about him except what he does” (O’Brien 1994, p. 98): he is considerate within the constraints of his mission, bringing her tea and seeing her comfortably settled, though he won’t let her leave the house. More importantly, he comes across as authentic, honest, and unapologetic for his beliefs. Josie has difficulty making this side of him fit with what she knows of his paramilitary career, and indeed indulges in the fantasy that through their conversations, “something would happen . . . A sea change . . . I’d save you” (O’Brien 1994, p. 111). This illusion is shattered when a neighbor snoops around the house and Mac’s frightening reaction—holding Josie against a wall and interrogating her—makes it clear that he puts the success of his mission above consideration for her (O’Brien 1994, p. 110). As Josie tries to make Mac’s different aspects fit together in her mind, she wonders if he is mad (O’Brien 1994, p. 99), if insanity could explain why he has sides to his personality that seem as different to her as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But the novel shows that Mac is rational; he just makes choices to steal, intimidate, and attack that Josie could never imagine herself making.

Josie, and to some extent the novel, never succeeds in synthesizing Mac’s different aspects into one coherent portrait. At the end of the book, there are still more questions than answers about why Mac commits the violent acts that he does, how he reconciles those decisions with his love of “justice” and hope for “peace” (O’Brien 1994, pp. 98–99). But Josie does not need answers to these questions in order to want Mac to live. Simply recognizing that there are different aspects to his character is enough. In the final sequence of the novel, the police track Mac to Josie’s house and raid it in the early morning. As Mac and the police trade gunfire, Josie goes out to “mediate” in hopes of convincing the police not to kill Mac (O’Brien 1994, p. 204). She thinks, “His life has many chapters to it and many evolutions.

They do not know that. But she knows it, because she knows him" (O'Brien 1994, p. 205). Because she has seen another side to Mac, she knows he is capable of more than just fighting and destruction, and she wants him to have that chance for another "chapter" in his life. The other noncombatant characters in the novel refer to Mac and other paramilitaries as "thugs," "sickos," and "psychopaths." Their view of Mac is one-dimensional, as someone who is wholly defined and consumed by the violence that he does. But the novel encourages us to see Mac as a complex human being. It does not deny the fear and damage his violent acts cause, but it insists that there is more to him than just that violence.

### 3. "Naming the Names"

In "Naming the Names" (1986), Anne Devlin's short story about a female paramilitary, there is no middle-class character like Josie struggling to understand a combatant. Instead, because the story is narrated in first person and incorporates stream-of-consciousness techniques, readers are put in Josie's position, trying to comprehend how the main character, a young woman named Finn, could commit a devastating act. Finn's decision to deceive her lover and lead him into an IRA trap is all the more shocking because, at the beginning of the story, she seems like a noncombatant, holding down a job in a bookstore and going about her life. The story seems like it will be about the familiar theme of noncombatants trying to live as normally as possible in the midst of bombings, police actions, and paramilitary retaliation. The first half of the story also relates Finn's growing relationship with a young Protestant man, a judge's son, and because Finn is Catholic, we suspect this relationship will be disrupted by politics and political violence. Such "romance across the divide" stories are also common in Troubles literature (Cleary 2001, p. 112). Our awareness that Finn is a nationalist paramilitary like Mac dawns slowly. After a reunion with her young man in the park that turns into a quarrel, the judge's son turns up dead, and the police take Finn in for questioning. Her responses to their interrogation lead readers to the chilling realization that Finn deliberately took the judge's son to the park knowing the IRA would be waiting: as a judge's son, he makes an appealing political target. In this way, the story transforms Finn from an ordinary young woman into a paramilitary before our eyes.

The story also gives insight into the history behind Finn's eventual decision to join the IRA. The major factor is her grief over what has happened to her neighborhood, the Falls Road, during the Troubles. In her memories of childhood, the street is so safe that when she wanted to go to the park, she could simply stand on the street corner and wait for a passer-by to take her hand and help her cross the street (Devlin 1986, p. 105). But everything changes in the August 1969 riots. Finn sees gangs from the nearby Protestant neighborhood, Shankill, setting fire to buildings and looting. Her main concern is helping any residents to escape, especially her grandmother. Betrayal is added to violence when she sees police in armored vehicles "moving slowly down Conway Street towards the Falls Road with the crowd behind them, burning houses as they went" (Devlin 1986, p. 112). The implication is that the police are indifferent to the harm being done to this neighborhood since they allow the riot to continue behind them. Later, Finn learns that a neighbor with IRA ties carried her grandmother to safety that night and helped many others besides (Devlin 1986, p. 114). It seems that the IRA is better able to protect Finn's community than the police, which helps us understand her decision to volunteer. When the police press her for names of other IRA members after the murder, she responds by naming the streets in the Falls: "'Abyssinia, Alma, Balkan, Belgrade, Bosnia,' naming the names: empty and broken and beaten places. I know no others" (Devlin 1986, p. 118). From Finn's perspective, the real crime is what has been done to the people on these streets: the arrests, gassings, and rubber bullets in the name of law and order, and the home-destroying riots that were tacitly allowed by the police. Just as Josie liked "everything" about Mac "except what he does," there is much to like about Finn as well, including her concern for the vulnerable and her fierce sense of justice.

While anger and grief over such destruction is not hard to understand, Finn's choice to turn another human being into a target is still alarming. In the timeline of the story, the riots in her neighborhood happen years before she meets the judge's son, and there are hints in the story that Finn

viewed the young man as a target from the beginning of their relationship: the first time she sees his name, she recognizes it and goes out of her way to meet him (Devlin 1986, p. 97). The narration of their relationship is carefully crafted so that descriptions imply a budding romance as much as they imply the darker intention of getting close enough to someone to be able to use him for the IRA's ends. For example, when Finn goes to meet him on the night he will be killed, her stomach is in knots, which seems just as likely to be from nervousness at seeing him again after a three-week hiatus in their relationship as it is from the difficulty of maintaining a deception that will end in his death. Both Fiona McCann and Shamara Ransirini see this merging of personal romantic motives with political ones as central to the text's feminist message: there is no separating the personal from the political for Finn (McCann 2012; Ransirini 2015). In this story, though, the refusal to prioritize either the personal or the political over the other results in a terrible realization: Finn both has real feelings for the judge's son and decides to make him into an IRA target.

After the abduction, Finn pays a heavy price in guilt and the increasingly fragmented narrative shows that she is under severe mental strain, possibly even having a breakdown. She sleeps poorly and begins to see and hear things that aren't there, which the story renders through stream of consciousness. These moments are comparable to the way Virginia Woolf represents the consciousness of the shell-shocked World War I soldier, Septimus Smith, in *Mrs. Dalloway*. At points, Septimus hallucinates that the birds are singing in Greek, or that his dead friend Evans is walking towards him. As Vicki Mahaffey points out, the best stream-of-consciousness writing not only depicts subjective experience in the moment but also makes us aware of the viewpoint character's limitations by showing us how their experience relates to larger social realities (Mahaffey 2013, p. 46). In the example of Septimus's hallucinations, the larger social reality is our own understanding of what can plausibly happen in a city park, which allows us to realize that we should read the Greek-singing birds or the reappearance of a dead man as breaks from reality, even though they seem real to Septimus. "Naming the Names" incorporates similar moments. When the police take Finn to the station for questioning, to her it is as if everything in the store and on the street stops dead, like a freeze-frame in a movie, and only she and the police keep moving. This unrealistic effect is immediately preceded by a time jump: suddenly Finn is remembering the previous day when another IRA member came into the store and she told him she would get the judge's son to the park (Devlin 1986, p. 108). Because of the jumps in time, there are two possible larger realities we might recognize behind Finn's perception: the bystanders could have abruptly frozen in astonishment at seeing the police apparently arrest her, or to Finn's guilty conscience, it could be like they stopped at the moment she planned to hand the judge's son over to the IRA, as if they knew the decision she had made and were shocked into immobility.

These abrupt jumps through time continue in the interrogation sequence when Finn answers questions about the present with memories of the past. For instance, when the police press her for the names of her conspirators, she responds with a memory of her father and grandmother (Devlin 1986, p. 116). When her ex-boyfriend Jack comes to see her near the end of the story, he wants to know how Finn could lead someone she knew into a trap and questions his relationship with her: these concerns are exactly what we would expect from someone who cares about Finn. But Finn's responses are fragmentary and disconnected from the present: when Jack says, "I loved you once," her response is "Once, once upon a time" (Devlin 1986, p. 118). The sing-song repetition of "once" and the classic opening to a fairy tale all seem out of step with the serious situation and suggest a mind clutching at single words because the whole truth is too overwhelming. Jack is "puzzled" when Finn says "You should never have let me go!" because, as he points out, she was never very happy in their relationship (Devlin 1986, p. 118). Finn's words make more sense in the context of an earlier passage about a nightmare so disturbing that Jack described it as a "fit" (Devlin 1986, p. 115). On waking from it Finn behaves strangely, asking Jack to cover up all the mirrors so that she can't see anything in them. She also clings to him, having him take her to the bathroom and hold her hand as she falls asleep again. It is at this point that she asks him not to let go of her hand, no matter what happens, but when the nightmare returns and Finn begins to struggle and say, "Let go of me!" he releases her

(Devlin 1986, p. 116). Immediately after Finn recalls this, she blacks out in the interrogation room and loses time, which suggests that the memory is still deeply disturbing to her, but Jack has no way of making this connection when she talks to him at the end of the story. He can only recognize that Finn's mind is somewhere other than the present, watching her and asking "Where are you, Finn?" (Devlin 1986, p. 118).

Finn is clearly experiencing mental strain, which could easily be attributed to overwhelming guilt. Such guilt is important for making her sympathetic to a noncombatant audience. We expect we would be crippled with fear and shame if we were responsible for the death of another human being. But the story also incorporates signs of mental distress from before she met the judge's son, when she was still living with Jack. The nightmare that so disturbs Finn occurs before they break up, and Finn also recalls some extreme outbursts, such as throwing milk or dishes against the walls, locking herself in the bathroom, or running out of the house. Jack's behavior does not seem to cause these incidents, as Finn describes him as always staying calm and giving her space (Devlin 1986, p. 102). Reconstructing the chronological order of events reveals that she first lived through the Troubles riots of 1969, then had several alarming episodes during her relationship with Jack, which ended, and only after that encountered the judge's son. Another possible explanation for her mental distress, then, is that it traces back to her traumatic experiences during the riots. Research has shown that adults in Northern Ireland who experienced conflict-related trauma have a significantly higher rate of mood and anxiety disorders than other adults. In fact, the rate of PTSD among adults is higher in Northern Ireland than it is in most other countries, including the United States (Bunting et al. 2013). However, the story fosters the impression that guilt causes Finn's distress with its manipulation of time: she doesn't recall her most extreme memories until after the police take her in for questioning, so to readers, she seems more and more distraught after we learn of the judge's son's death, which strengthens the idea of a guilty conscience. A second reading, however, reveals the story's artful construction, which both shows that Finn is affected by Troubles-related trauma and includes the signs of guilt that make her sympathetic.

#### 4. The Limits of Understanding in Devlin and O'Brien

While trauma is a historical effect of the Troubles, there is a problematic implication in reading Finn as more mentally troubled than she seems at first. If she is breaking down, the story could imply that madness is the ultimate explanation for her actions. This, in turn, would short-circuit the attempt to imagine a paramilitary actor not as a one-dimensional "sicko" but as a human being with intelligible motives. Resorting to madness as an explanation, then, could indicate that a noncombatant author or reader has reached the limits of her imagination and cannot get any further with the attempt to understand a combatant's point of view. However, the form of this story is also relevant for this issue because stream-of-consciousness techniques invite us to share Finn's experience as much as they enable us to examine it critically. In stream-of-consciousness writing, "individual experience is exposed as incomplete and distorted, but it is not invalidated" (Mahaffey 2013, p. 42). This makes it a very useful tool for writing a paramilitary character: it can take that character's beliefs and experiences seriously, as worth trying to understand from the inside, while still regarding them critically when needed. One such example in "Naming the Names" occurs when Finn gets into a debate with another clerk at work about increasing Protestant-Catholic segregation in the early years of the Troubles: while the co-worker expresses regret, Finn says it's "inevitable" that Protestants and Catholics should form two separate communities (Devlin 1986, p. 100). It seems she cannot imagine much good coming from contact between Protestants and Catholics, which also informs her decision to betray the judge's son despite her feelings for him: she assumes their relationship will have a bad outcome no matter what she does. As readers, we can recognize the flaws in such an assumption without discounting Finn's other experiences or beliefs. So, while it is important to think carefully about the implications of attributing Finn's actions to mental disorder, the story does avoid simply dismissing her perspective.

In contrast, *House of Splendid Isolation* explicitly denies madness as a possible explanation for Mac's paramilitary activities. At one point, Josie wonders if he might be crazy, but that thought speaks to her

difficulties reconciling her different views of him, not to his actual behavior. Later, Mac himself says, “No one in their right minds wants my life and I am in my right mind” (O’Brien 1994, p. 193), indicating a rational understanding of the consequences of his choices. In the place of madness, though, the novel depicts Mac as compartmentalizing his violent acts and avoiding discussion of them: he thinks he has “seen too much and done too much” and admits “some of what he’s done he’s blocked, he’s had to” (O’Brien 1994, p. 13). His conversations with Josie focus on the personal, such as his memories of his wife and daughter. As a result, Josie’s sympathetic view of Mac is based on “personal feeling rather than ideological solidarity. She never accepts the moral legitimacy of the IRA man’s actions but learns respect for his commitment to an ideal and is attracted to him as a man” (Kennedy-Andrews 2003, p. 251). This focus on the personal allows Josie, and readers, to sympathize with Mac as a human being without condoning his violent acts, but the lack of reflection on Mac’s experiences as an IRA member raises the question of how well we finally understand him without much insight into such a significant part of his life. His refusal to speak about his acts as a paramilitary is most extreme at the end of the novel, when Mac is finally captured by the Irish police. They want answers to the same questions that the novel encourages readers to wonder about: “What made him what he is” and what goes on in his mind that allows him to commit bombings and shootings in the name of freedom (O’Brien 1994, p. 209). The detective sergeant who led the manhunt tries to goad Mac into talking: “You could have done a lot for your cause and country, McGreevy . . . but all you done was death upon death upon death” (O’Brien 1994, p. 211). However, Mac remains completely silent, choosing not to react at all. The effect is Iago-like: we know all we are going to know about the thoughts behind his life as a paramilitary, and he refuses to explain himself further. Where “Naming the Names” uses stream of consciousness to understand Finn both from the inside and from the outside, at the end of *House of Splendid Isolation* we are forced to recognize that we are viewing Mac almost completely from the outside.

O’Brien makes a similar narrative choice in her later short story “Black Flower” (2011), which features an older ex-paramilitary character with a history similar to Mac’s. In this story, Shane the ex-paramilitary also refuses to discuss his violent acts, even with Mona, a sympathetic noncombatant woman who met him in the art class she taught to prisoners. The two talk about art, restaurants, and scenery, but Shane only brings up his deeds as a paramilitary one time: “He said once to her and only once that she herself could be the judge of his actions. He had fought for what he believed in, which was for his country to be one, one land, one people, and not have a shank of it cut off” (O’Brien 2011, p. 82). This decision not to enter into debate over why he did what he did could indicate an awareness that there is not a good justification for the IRA’s bombings and assassinations, but the second half of the passage suggests that Shane does have a principle behind his actions: the belief that the entire island of Ireland should be one country, with no part of it “cut off.” The overall effect in this short story, as in *House of Splendid Isolation*, is of withholding: Shane and Mac have more thoughts about the justifications for their actions, but because readers never get access to those thoughts, we are uncomfortably aware that our understanding of each character is partial. Both texts register how unsatisfying this situation is by describing each man as wanting to say something he can’t articulate: Josie thinks that Mac looks at her “as if there is something he especially wishes to say” (O’Brien 1994, p. 193) and Mona thinks Shane’s message is “unfinished, as if he had wanted to say more” (O’Brien 2011, p. 78). Given that the texts never reveal what that something more would be, these lines describe our desires as readers as much as they describe Mac and Shane. We want there to be more explanation because we still don’t understand how these characters can justify killing innocent people.

Both Edna O’Brien and Anne Devlin engage in the project of imagining a combatant’s point of view, but both their texts reach limits of understanding, marked by the signs of breakdown in “Naming the Names” and the refusal to discuss in *House of Splendid Isolation*. While coming up against such limits is unsatisfying for a reader, the fact that limits are present should not surprise us. Joe Cleary finds signs of “imaginative failure” in many Troubles narratives and argues that they are tied to assuming that any resolution will have to entail “acceptance of the already established state order, something which

means that the militant nationalist will eventually either have to repent his opposition to the state or be eliminated and incarcerated by the state security forces" (Cleary 2001, p. 111). O'Brien's and Devlin's characters diverge from this pattern somewhat, because while they are in police custody at the end of each narrative, they do not renounce their politics or their decision to fight. *House of Splendid Isolation* begins with Mac escaping police custody and straightaway planning another bombing; at the end of the novel, there is no reason to believe he won't attempt the same again. At the end of "Naming the Names," Finn takes responsibility for her act, but her tone is neither approving nor regretful: "I only know for certain what my part was, that even on the eve, on such a day, I took him there" (Devlin 1986, p. 119). Even more importantly, Mac and Finn are still the most compelling characters in these final scenes: they do not forfeit our interest or our sympathy simply because they remain in opposition to the state. Rather than achieving closure by having Mac and Finn renounce violence, these narratives leave us with enigmas that at least make us aware that our understanding has reached a limit. This reflects the reality that during the Troubles, the social order was not transformed enough for more common ground between combatants and noncombatants. Thus, while both texts cannot fully account for a combatant's mindset without resorting to the devices of madness or silence, they nevertheless represent those viewpoints as worth struggling to understand and do not force them to conform to the status quo.

Such efforts to understand a combatant's point of view, then, are important beginnings even if they are partial. In the twenty years since the Good Friday Agreement brought an official end to the Troubles, scholars have investigated what we can learn from the peace process that might apply to other conflicts perceived as "terrorism." Many stress how important it was to involve the IRA in negotiations, leading to the principle that "it is always, or nearly always, a good idea to talk to the enemy, even if they are or have historically been seen as terrorists. After all, if those who are engaging in violence are not included in a peace process, is there any hope for peace?" (White 2013, p. 7). The first step in opening such a conversation is to imagine the "enemy" as a human being who can be understood and reasoned with. It is also significant that these literary efforts to imagine IRA characters come from authors with Catholic nationalist backgrounds, mirroring the role that noncombatants, including clergy and non-governmental organizations, played in building trust and keeping channels of communication open to the paramilitaries during the peace process (Knobel 2011, p. 94). The ultimate goal is for nationalists and loyalists to understand each other's perspectives well enough to negotiate and work with each other, but because this is so fraught, nationalist noncombatants can provide an important intermediate step by working to understand the perspectives of nationalist paramilitaries and convey them to others. In many ways, the peace process in Northern Ireland is still not complete, as indicated by recent concerns that Brexit will re-inflate tensions over the border. Both "Naming the Names" and *House of Splendid Isolation* leave readers feeling that more work needs to be done to understand where paramilitaries are coming from, but both texts succeed in presenting that project as worthwhile.

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