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Ongoing Challenges in Everyday Life after the Northern Irish Conflict: An Analysis of Owen McCafferty's *Quietly**

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Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (2012), a two-hander set in an Irish pub, explores how the Troubles continue to shape everyday life in Northern Ireland—an aspect often overlooked in official narratives that celebrate the success of the peace process. The presence of an immigrant character and modern communication devices in the traditional Irish pub setting signifies a new phase of Northern Irish society following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. However, the tense and fragmented conversation between the protagonists, along with their sense of disorientation, reveals the persistence of sectarian divisions and the paralysis of everyday life, which, in turn, reinforce narrow conceptions of identity and lead to the ongoing cycle of violence. By bringing the two protagonists together to confront their past and jointly recount the most devastating day of their lives under the witness of a third party, McCafferty presents the possibility of transcending decades of division at the everyday level, suggesting that true peace requires not only political agreements but also open dialogue between opposing sides and a renewal of values through the enrichment of individual lived experiences.

Keywords: everyday life, Post-conflict Northern Ireland, Irish theatre, Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*

Everyday Life in Post-conflict Northern Ireland

Beyond the Peace Process: Discrepancies between Everyday Life and Official Narratives in Northern Ireland

The Troubles, also known as the Northern Ireland Conflict, plunged the region into decades of sectarian violence and political instability. The signing of the 1998 Belfast Agreement (also called the Good Friday Agreement) was hailed as a turning point, paving the way for police and judicial reforms, demilitarization, and the establishment of commissions to promote equality. These milestones in "high politics" were widely celebrated by the government and media as significant achievements, to the extent that Northern Ireland was internationally regarded as having transitioned "from being a conflict resolution 'pupil' to becoming an exemplar for those trying to achieve peace elsewhere" (McGrattan & Meehan, 2012, p. 4). However, the Agreement has generated as much disappointment as optimism. One of its key shortcomings is that it is largely grounded in a progressive ideology, prioritizing future development over a comprehensive reckoning with the traumas of past

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conflicts. It offers no clear framework for addressing historical grievances, instead relying on a strategy of "prescriptive forgetting"—a form of state-imposed amnesia driven by the fear that revisiting past injustices could reignite cycles of violence (Alcobia-Murphy, 2016, pp. 84-85). While this approach has facilitated the peace process, unresolved historical wounds continue to fester, particularly for those who have endured loss and suffering. The early release of paramilitary prisoners, coupled with the failure to ensure accountability, has further reinforced a pervasive sense of victimhood in Northern Ireland. As a result, many individuals struggle to reconcile themselves with the socio-political changes ushered in by the Agreement and find it challenging to redefine their relationships with religious and political others (Kurdi, 2022, p. 340). All in all, in the everyday life of Northern Ireland, community relations, sectarian demographics, and shifts in public attitudes have lagged behind the proclaimed successes at the level of high politics, revealing persistent challenges of post-conflict reconciliation.

The significance of Everyday Life

The maintenance of the Northern Ireland peace process extends beyond institutional adjustments, requiring the rebuilding of social relationships and a fundamental transformation of values at the everyday level. Previous studies have demonstrated the close connection between everyday life and social change. To understand how improvements in everyday behaviors can contribute to social reform in post-conflict Northern Ireland, it is essential to first examine the development of everyday life studies.

Although everyday life had long been overlooked in academic discourse, late 19th- and early 20th-century philosophers such as Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and György Lukács (1885-1971) drew attention to its significance. In different ways, these philosophers viewed everyday life as independent of conscious intellectual activities such as science, art, and philosophy, and distinct from organized social activities like politics, economics, and social management. They laid the philosophical groundwork for the study of everyday life.

Building on these foundations, philosophers such as Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991), Agnes Heller (1929-2019), and Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) further developed a systematic approach to everyday life. They argued that everyday life is not merely shaped by broader social, political, and economic structures but also possesses its own agency. While critiquing the alienating effects of modernity and capitalism on everyday life, they emphasized that everyday practices contain inherent subversive potential, making everyday life a critical site of resistance and transformation.

Although these philosophers did not specifically examine everyday life in the context of ethnic and sectarian conflicts, their work highlights its existential and political significance. This perspective is particularly valuable for sociologists studying how to rebuild a peaceful society after ethno-nationalist conflicts. Rogers Brubaker, for example, challenges the notion of ethnic groups as fixed entities, instead conceptualizing them as dynamic, fluid, and context-dependent constructs. In *Ethnicity without Groups* (2004) and *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (2006), he argues that ethnicity, race, and nationhood are not tangible realities but ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the world: "They are not things in the world, but perceptions of the world" (2004, p. 481). His fieldwork in Transylvania, a historically contested region, reveals that ethno-nationalist conflict is not always instigated from the top down by political nationalists, as is often

assumed. Instead, it is frequently reinforced and perpetuated through everyday interactions and exchanges. However, just as everyday life can sustain division, it can also resist and redefine it, breaking the cycle of conflict.

In 2009, the Institute for British-Irish Studies (IBIS) also researched the underexplored area of everyday life in Northern Ireland and published a report titled *The Impact of Devolution on Everyday Life: 1999-2009*, which examined how devolution has shaped daily life in Northern Ireland. Building on these findings, Cillian McGrattan and Elizabeth Meehan edited the essay collection *Everyday Life After the Irish Conflict: The Impact of Devolution and Cross-Border Cooperation* (2012). This work not only explores the persistent effects of sectarianism, division, exclusion, and trauma in everyday life but also calls for moving beyond the Troubles' lingering legacies through improving daily practices. The authors emphasize the importance of studying everyday life, arguing that it is inseparable from high politics. They highlight that the Northern Ireland peace process extends beyond institutional adjustments, requiring the rebuilding of social relationships and a fundamental transformation of values at the everyday level (11-12). The destructive legacy of the Troubles inevitably permeates everyday activities and interactions, shaping people's behaviors and thought patterns. These behaviors and thought patterns, in turn, are likely to reinforce ideas of opposition and conflict, creating a vicious cycle. To break this cycle, changes must begin at the level of everyday life.

While sociologists use social surveys to illustrate how the legacy of conflict continues to shape daily experiences and reinforce social divisions, writers and artists can, through imagination and storytelling, explore possibilities for transcending opposition by fostering communication, self-examination, and mutual understanding. A compelling example of this is Owen McCafferty's play *Quietly*.

Textual Analysis of Owen McCafferty's *Quietly*

Presenting Post-conflict Everyday Life Through an Irish Pub Theatre

Owen McCafferty is a revered Belfast playwright and is also believed to be the most important post-conflict playwright in Northern Ireland. Most of his plays are set in his native city, where he has lived in the Ormeau Road area since the 1970s. Throughout the Troubles, this was a place where the communities of Catholic nationalists and Protestant loyalists were separated by the River Lagan. His plays often explore the complexities of life in Belfast, but instead of directly addressing religion or political issues, he focuses more on the impact of social division on ordinary people and highlights the universal human experience.

The play *Quietly* examines the long-lasting impact of the Troubles on the individual's lives and the potential for reconciliation on the level of everyday life. It premiered at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on the Peacock Stage, as part of the Great Irish Writers Season, in November 2012. It was acclaimed as a "well-written, powerfully performed, close-to-the-bone play about violence and forgiveness"[1] and had won many awards.

The play is set in a pub on Ormeau Road in Belfast in 2009, during the period just after the end of the economic boom. It features three characters: Robert, a Polish immigrant who works as the barman, and two men, both 52 years old—Jimmy, who comes from a Catholic background, and Ian, who is from a Protestant background.

[1] http://itmarchive.ie/web/Reviews/Current/Quietly.aspx.html

The pub theatre tradition in Irish theatre begins with J. M. Synge's most famous play *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). McCafferty carries on such a theater tradition but uses it to explore a new situation. Since the pub is a central space for social interaction in Irish life, focusing on the interactions that take place there effectively highlights the changes in Northern Ireland's everyday life in the post-conflict period. It also underscores the ongoing impact of the conflict's legacy on daily life, aspects that are often overlooked in the official narratives of progress.

In McCafferty's pub theater, contemporary elements emerge from the very beginning. First, the development of modern communication technology is highlighted: The barman Robert is texting with his wife and his lover at the same time. The texts are projected on the mirrors behind the bar. The second new element is the appearance of immigrants. Robert's immigrant identity highlights the wave of immigration that emerged following the peace process. The addition of these new elements in the "peaceful" bar appears to validate the progress of the peace process, which is also confirmed by Jimmy's words:

> Jimmy: more money here—peace process—when i was a kid no one came here—only people in belfast were belfast people—an british soldiers—the only black men here had uniforms on them (McCafferty, 2017, p. 10).

However, it is only when the conversations take place that the harsh realities of everyday life in Northern Ireland are revealed to the audience.

Uncover the Complexities of Everyday Life Through Dual Narratives

The play consists almost entirely of dialogue, with minimal physical action—the only notable exception being Jimmy's headbutting Ian upon their first encounter. The staging is deliberately sparse, with little drama or props; even the football match on the television remains unseen. Once again, McCafferty is following the tradition of Irish theatre, where speech, talk, and conversation are the essence of the dramatic experience. This play's emphasis on orality is particularly significant within the context of Northern Irish society, where decades of conflict have made physical violence a defining aspect of everyday life, as pointed out by some sociologists:

> Many people… do not live in the war zone, but all are also affected by the custom of violence. This does not mean that large numbers of people become engaged in violent actions. It does not even mean that they acquiesce in those actions. It means that violence and its effects have worked their way into the very fabric of society and become part of normal life so that they become accustomed to the routine use of violence to determine political and social outcomes. (Darby & McGinty, 2000, p. 260).

In such a context, a theater that emphasizes orality becomes even more effective in intervening in real-world conflicts. The abundance of dialogue defuses the potential for physical violence between the characters, allowing them to take turns narrating their stories, listening to one another, and collaboratively reconstructing the memory of trauma—the process, the cause, and the aftermath. This approach also invites the audience to participate in the process as a third party like the barman Robert in this play, encouraging a collective examination of the conflict and its legacy.

As the dialogue unfolds, we come to realize that behind peace and prosperity, people's daily lives are haunted by unspoken traumas, which lead to paralysis in their everyday communication, and potential conflict seems to be on the verge of erupting at any moment.

First, the unremarkable pub was once a slaughterhouse. Ian, then a lad of sixteen, commanded by the leaders of the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) hurled a canister bomb into the bar, killing 6 persons who were watching football on TV. One of them is Jimmy's father. This atrocity is based on a real-life incident that occurred in May 1974 in the Rose & Crown Bar on the lower Ormeau Road, though the World Cup is modified by McCafferty.

Second, despite their different experiences, as they reconstruct their memories together, a common ground emerges between these two individuals who grew up in a divided and conflict-ridden society. Both were nurtured in the communal belief that the religious/political other was an enemy. Such a belief doesn't arise from real-life conflicts, but rather from the need to establish their identity. They saw violence as a way to prove their manhood. In Jimmy's words, his hatred and anger towards the protestant boy with whom he played football "came out a nowhere" (McCafferty, 2017, p. 18), in other words, it had become a culturally acquired instinct. As for Ian, he admitted that back in those years when he was a 16-year-old boy, he believed that doing what he was told by the men from UVF was a way to gain his identity (McCafferty, 2017, p. 22).

As a result, the implantation of such antagonistic views ultimately led to acts of violence in their everyday life, and the violence they witnessed or conducted during their teenage years haunted them into adulthood, to the extent that they failed to manage their daily lives. The portrayal of the daily life in the pub is almost paralyzed, providing an ironic contrast to the official narrative of progress. For Jimmy, the victim has become his sole identity and core personality. He is perpetually reliving the moment of his father's murder. For Ian, he was too guilt-ridden to even look at himself in the mirror.

People around them also became victims: Sheila, the woman Ian had sex with as a reward for his "good fight" has been haunted all her life by the horrible memory, and Jimmy's mother, who lost her husband and failed to receive emotional support from her son, died of cancer. Everyone has almost lost the simple pleasures of everyday life. They can no longer engage in normal conversation, resorting instead to shouting, and they are even unable to fully enjoy sports because not even sport is neutral. The insidious nature of sectarianism infiltrates every aspect of the daily life and even people's outlook. The only focus of people in their daily lives is nothing else but violence and politics, which in turn continuously reinforce divisions as the dialogue between the three characters reveals:

> Robert: … everyone shouts here—it's the national sport
> Jimmy: we all need to be heard at the same time… (McCafferty, 2017, p. 9)

> Robert: you watch the football
> Ian: not really
> Robert : nobody watch the football – nobody support their country (McCafferty, 2017, p. 13)

To Go Beyond Conflict by Transforming Everyday Life

Although the dialogues between the characters in the play are filled with awkwardness and interruptions, McCafferty, in command of the emotions he releases, still ensures they complete their conversations. After reconstructing memories together, Jimmy and Ian shake hands, with Ian being told never to return to the bar again. This outcome is not a sentimental reconciliation, for the victim may never fully forgive the perpetrator. However, at the very least, they have had an honest conversation and reached a mutual understanding.

McCafferty does not let the play fall into a simplistic narrative of reconciliation but instead guides people to imagine the possibility of breaking the cycle of violence and achieving lasting peace through communication in everyday life.

Additionally, by examining violence, revenge, and conflict within the microcosm of the pub, the playwright highlights the region's inherently limited perspective. In an interview, McCafferty once said that:

> It has to do with the notion of people not travelling; of people being insular, seeing no outside world—just their own and that's it. Of being locked into a certain aspect of your life that takes over everything else, and that's all you see. They don't see the bigger picture, they just see the small thing. Nobody cares—the outside world, nobody. If people could only get a grasp of this! Nobody outside of here cares about us and our issues. They have issues of their own, especially in this economic climate. World poverty's a genuine problem. Constitutional politics are just people arguing about some fucking type notion of something. 'X' amount of children die every day because they don't have enough food, whereas here we prefer to think about what flag we should hang, or who owns what street. All of it is ridiculous. (McCafferty, 2012 as cited in Parr, 2017, p. 544)

In this play, McCafferty lets Robert, the outsider, pinpoint the crux of the problem and offer a solution:

> Jimmy: we're not very good with foreigners
> Robert: you always live in Belfast then
> Jimmy: all my days—never left—belfast man through an through
> Robert: you should travel
> Jimmy: fuck travel (McCafferty, 2017, p. 10)

Through the voices of the characters, McCafferty urges people to look beyond political conflicts and to see the bigger picture. Only by transcending these daily constructed divisions and enriching their lived experiences can individuals update their inner values, freeing themselves from narrow perspectives and unlocking the potential of everyday life to drive meaningful social change.

Near the end of the play, just after the tense relationship between Jimmy and Ian has eased and understanding is reached, this brief peace is shattered by racist slurs from outside. Children, incited by a football match between Northern Ireland and Poland, attack Robert's pub. The play ends with Robert holding a baseball bat, ready to defend his pub against attack. This pub, which has witnessed bloody violence and hard-won reconciliation, now faces a new threat, with its fragile peace potentially jeopardized by the emergence of racist intolerance:

> Robert starts to clear up. The kids in the street start beating on the window shutters.
> They shout abuse:
> Voices: three-two—three-two—fuckin polish bastard—dirty smelly fuckin bastard—go back to where you come from and shite in the street you fucker—polish wanker—three-two—three-two—three-two
> Robert gets a baseball bat from behind the bar and stands waiting.
> Lights fade to dark. (McCafferty, 2017, p. 34)

Through this scene, the playwright is offering a warning: if we fail to save our everyday lives from the grip of divisive thinking, violence will persist and evolve. The sectarianism with which Ian and Jimmy grew up would continue to seek new outlets. This is not only a warning for post-conflict Northern Ireland, but also a caution for many people in today's volatile political climate where racial violence and sectarian strife are on the rise.

Conclusion

The signing of the Belfast Agreement ushered in significant institutional changes and, to some extent, heralded a new chapter for Northern Ireland. Yet, despite this progress, deep-seated divisions and conflicts continue to permeate everyday life. In its pursuit of advancing the peace process, the government has often emphasized amnesty and amnesia, leaving ordinary individuals to grapple with the weight of historical legacies on their own. As actor Patrick O'Kane, who portrays Jimmy in *Quietly*, poignantly observes, "There is no genuine leadership from the top… People are having to go into quiet corners of pubs and sort it out for themselves."[2] Against this backdrop, McCafferty's *Quietly* offers an unflinching portrayal of Northern Ireland's everyday realities—long obscured by official narratives—inviting audiences to critically engage with national history and confront historical trauma. The play creates a space for individuals from different political and religious backgrounds to share their experiences, illustrating how ongoing dialogue in daily life and enrichment of individual life can help transcend entrenched divisions.

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[2] https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/patrick-o-kane-thoughts-on-acting-belfast-and-a-head-butt-1.1750578