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Irish Art and Literature During The Troubles (1968 – 1998)

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"...But my tentative art his turned back watches, too:
He was blown to bits
Out drinking in a curfew
Others obeyed, three nights
After they shot dead
The thirteen men in Derry.

PARAS thirteen, the walls said,
BODGSIDE, NIL. That Wednesday
Everyone held
His breath and trembled.

It was a day of cold
Raw silence, wind-blown
Surplice and soutane:
Rained-on, flower-laden
Coffin after coffin
Seemed to float from the door
Of the packed cathedral
Like blossoms on slow water."

--*Casualty*

Seamus Heaney [\[Full poem\]](#)

Why such harsh words? Why such harsh drawings, paintings and photographs from the time period (1960s – 1990s) in Ireland known as *The Troubles*? Beginning with the situation that inspired this type of protesting expression, a troublesome period arose in which the constitutional status of Northern Ireland became an issue. Along with this, clashes erupted between the mainly-Protestant Unionists and mainly-Catholic Nationalists. This gave way to violent times. The violence included political, military (and paramilitary) groups, as well as British Security Forces. Three decades of violence and terror reigned, in which individual citizens of Ireland were personally affected.

Fear, activism and anger were emotions felt by the people of Ireland. Injustice and death became part of everyday life. When any nation comes under such circumstances as these, it evokes a culture that becomes focused on political issues; a people that talk about government, religion and politics. People are affected by these matters personally. It becomes the focal point of life and conversation. This is opposite of what would occur in a prosperous, safe nation where

neighbors might tend to talk mostly about leisure activities, wealth, entertainment, food and shopping. Those who live with daily bombings, shootings and terror experience a shift in their thinking, one that goes into survival mode. A frightened, defensive mentality takes over. Life and survival become a very dominant matter.

One can imagine walking down a street and fearing the explosion of any of the parked cars they pass by. One can think about shopping for clothing in a department store and being overcome with fear of a bombing. One can sleep at night, but keep their face turned away from the window and placed far enough away from any flying, broken glass.

Garbage cans are removed from railway stations (in case bombs are placed in them). Bags are never to be unattended. Signs are posted everywhere to report unattended luggage. Certain neighborhoods are avoided at certain hours. This becomes the life of a country in such turmoil.

The opening poem, entitled *Casualty*, was written precisely about daily life shortly after Bloody Sunday in 1972, when thirteen people were shot to death by British security officers. 1972 saw the most violence in Northern Ireland, with 500 deaths in total, mostly civilians. *Casualty* was written about a curfew imposed on the Catholic neighborhoods of Bogside. Yet, one man who loved to drink, decided to go out to a pub that was brutally blown up. This is one of several of Seamus Heaney's blunt, yet heartfelt descriptions of life on the very streets of these frightening times.

Literature and art continued to be brought out and shown to the world, arts that purge outrage and passionate statements about Ireland's misfortunes. The country's economy had been adversely affected, as well. This lends further melancholy and sadness to the creations coming from people's pens and paint brushes. Ireland's long, past history of invasion from the British, famine and poverty connected a long line of despair into its writing. Literature about this time period, namely *Eureka Street* in the more modern part of it, details much of the politics and experience of Northern Ireland. *Eureka Street's* main character, Jake, encounters a nationalist poet he fictionally named Shague Ghinthoss who carries a set of followers and fans around with him. In the book *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories* (which is priced at \$110!), it states that Wilson described Ghinthoss as a 'hypocritical, Janus-faced tosspot' (p. 186). Wilson is here continuing his vendetta against an art form which he has attacked earlier in his career, associating poetry not just with nationalist thinking, but also with an outmoded, predominantly rural vision unable to countenance the changing realities of the new Ireland. Again, as with all that is condemned in *Eureka Street*, poetry is seen to be clouded by ideology and thus, is unable to see events as clearly as fiction.'

In *Contemporary Irish Fiction*, writer Glenn Patterson "has characterized the northern Irish novelist as typically Janus-faced (or two-sided), finding a certain freedom in duality of imaginative wisdom".

'As writers, we are often pulled in seemingly contrary directions, looking inwards and appealing outwards. In reality, though, there need be no contradiction for...in trying to understand one place very well, it might just be possible to understand many other places, at least in part.' –Glenn Patterson



Lost Lives: The Stories of Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles by David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Christ Thornton and Daniel McVay, reveals many of the tragic stories experienced by victims and fighters themselves. Careful research was done by these journalists to document lists of each death and the unique story that fell behind each one. Witnesses were interviewed and studies were conducted. Some had even died of their own blunders, such as premature bomb detonations. This book has been compared to the memorial wall of Vietnam Veterans in Washington DC, with all named and affiliations documented.

Riots and uprisings also marked the times of The Troubles in Ireland. A notable riot was called the Battle of the Bogside, which lasted from August 12 – 14 of 1969, in Derry. The riot started in a confrontation between Catholic residents of the Bogside police, and members a subgroup called The Apprentice Boys of Derry who were due to march past the Bogside along the city walls. The following mural was painted on a wall in Derry, regarding this riot and the use of petrol bombs.



Mural depicting the Battle of Bogside.



A republican mural in Belfast commemorating the hunger strikes of 1981.

The table (at the end of report) shows the effects of The Troubles and a breakdown of the various groups involved and the loss of lives that occurred within them. Each region is represented and a total of 3,524 deaths occurred in the period between 1968 and 1998. Narrowing these statistics down into the real lives and the streets that are crossed by adults and children in any of these

towns, we find further expressions of poetry, prose and paintings that depicted scenes of protest and a crying out for peace and justice.

Irish Murals and Their Significance

An entire study could be done on the many murals of Ireland in themselves. Northern Irish murals have become symbols of Northern Ireland, depicting the region's past and present divisions. Northern Ireland contains some of the world's most famous political murals. Almost 2,000 murals have been documented in Northern Ireland since the 1970s. The murals more often than not represent one side's political point of view. Why were murals so common (and still exist today), and what role did they play in art and politics? Beginning with the first known painted mural, entitled *Free Derry Corner* (by John Casey in Bogside, 1969), we see this as a marked entryway for a declared autonomist nationalist of Derry. The area was secured by community activists after an incursion by members of the police force. Its members even carried clubs and weapons to prevent them from entering.



Basically, Ireland's walls became a canvas for expression of views and thought; spaces large enough to share these views (in an almost territorial way) so that they became an art gallery in themselves. Political standing was not always the case with murals, though. Of the many thousands, their themes range from history to religion to children's literature. Irish mythology is common in murals, yet some mythological images have been incorporated into the political themes. The "You Are Now Entering Free Derry" mural inspired other murals to become gateway welcomes to other areas, such as "You Are Now Entering Loyalist Sandy Row" or "You Are Entering *Derry Journal* Country" (Derry's newspaper). Some of these bold statements and identities are "answers" to others, or a rebellious response to another mural supporting another cause.

"The barometric pressure of Belfast's moods is measured in graffiti," said the inside cover of Robert McLiam Wilson's famous *Eureka Street*. "Everybody recognizes IRA and UVF, and FTQ (F---k the Queen), as well as FTP (it concerns the Pope)." Then the mysterious OTG appears on the walls, sending all of Belfast into a wild, political goose chase, all due to a vague joke.

"The local kids would write things there for bravado or initiation," the book continues, "but it was no big deal—the cops were too bored to hassle them. Every month or so, some civic-minded old guy who lived nearby would come and paint over it. And then the kids would start all over again. It had become a ritual and it was how I told what time of the month it was. It was an epic and somehow touching battle, very Belfast."

Regarding an area called Beechmount, Wilson describes, "The walls were painted with a variety of crude scenes depicting how much nicer Catholics were than Protestants and a series of

inventive tableaux in which large numbers of British soldiers were maimed and killed. These were the Belfast mean streets, the internationally famous and dreaded West Side jungle."

Wilson also writes, "Under the street-lamps by all the city's walls, writing gleams: IRA, INLA, UVF, UFF, OTG. The city keeps its walls like a diary. In this staccato shorthand, the walls tell of histories and hatreds, shriveled and bleached with age. *Qui a terre a guerre*, the walls say."

Novel and movie themes have also been introduced to some wall murals, as well as peace and hope messages painted by school children. Some neutral paintings exist, as well, for the sake of art itself. *The Titanic* is pictured on one wall mural as a dedication to the lives lost in its sinking (many of which were Irish, plus the ship itself being built by many Irish workers). Others feature sports figures regarding soccer or rugby.



A Republican area mural.

Interestingly, three Bogside artists were invited to Washington DC to recreate their murals in the Washington Mall in 2007. Recently, the harder-edged murals of Northern Ireland were decommissioned so fewer of them exist and more of the neutral ones are displayed.

Besides poetry, writing and mural painting, another form of Irish talent used to express their troubled thoughts is music. Lyrics and music videos have shown the world how distressing it can be to live in Ireland during its upheavals. People, perhaps, turned to these forms of entertainment for comfort as well as to support their views. Besides the well-known band, U2, and their world-popular words of *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, many artists came onto the scene. Sinéad O'Connor, Boy George and Bananarama are among several Irish musicians who rose to popularity in the 1980's. Music from all around Great Britain became extremely popular in the MTV era of the 80s and gave Irish performers a grand arena to express their words, both my music and video.

Zombie, by the Cranberries, is by far one of the most stunning videos to portray Irish life during the troubles. Go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJEySrDerj0> to view this dramatic piece. Its colorful production along with the lead singer's shrill Celtic voice also reveals many of the wall murals discussed earlier. Its lyrics also come into play to tie together all these arts which came together as a style; a style of the times of The Troubles.

Another head hangs lowly
 Child is slowly taken
 And if violence causes the silence
 Who are we mistaking?
 But you see it's not me
 It's not my family
 In your head, in your head
 They are fighting

Zombie

--By The Cranberries [\[Lyrics and video\]](#)

Endless material can be found within the borders of Ireland, and especially the conflicted North. Ireland's rich culture and history lends much to its arts, but the unique time period of The Troubles gave it a depth and an emotion all its own.

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