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***Anna Burns's No Bones and Milkman: Bildungsroman and Trauma***

**Romány Anny Burns *No Bones* a *Mlíkař*: Bildungsroman a trauma**

**BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE**

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## Abstract

Despite the term Bildungsroman being associated mainly with novels of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, this genre, or at least its features, persists in contemporary literature. Manfred Engel defines three main assumptions for the definition of the Bildungsroman: one central figure who undergoes development, which usually commences in childhood and ultimately reaches maturity, with *Bildung* referring to the formation of identity.

The Bildungsroman is intertwined with society since it features rebelling or conforming to it. The genre, which originated thanks to the changes in society, developed with societal changes and several variants of the genre appeared. Critics eventually began to recognize female and feminist Bildungsroman that introduced a female protagonist, which was not usual in the earlier novels of the genre. The rise of new female protagonists in the twentieth century was partly caused by the fact that women were able to gradually obtain the same opportunities formerly available exclusively to their male counterparts.

The Bildungsroman in Irish literature follows the general tradition of the genre in many aspects. Nevertheless, there are some recurring features typical of the Irish tradition. One of the frequent themes is leaving as a means of finding one's identity or potential. Unlike in the classical Bildungsroman, the protagonists often do not conform to the societal norm, which brings up a notion of inner exile: they do not physically leave the community, yet they are estranged from it.

Anna Burns's novels *No Bones* and *Milkman* might be considered representatives of this genre. *No Bones* is a more typical example of the Bildungsroman as it follows Amelia Lovett through 25 years of her life, from childhood to her mid-thirties. The question of time span is more complicated in *Milkman* as the events occur during several months, but the protagonist-narrator tells her experience after twenty years. This distance creates a broader scope of the protagonist's life, and it is possible to follow her development.

The common theme of these two novels is a main female character who grows up during a long-term conflict that impacts their development and identity formation. Whilst *No Bones* setting is evident from the beginning – Belfast, mainly Ardoyne, from the late 60s to early 90s, the time and place of *Milkman* are less apparent. In many ways, it resembles the Belfast of the late 70s; however, no place, name, or specific political term is ever mentioned since middle sister coins her own expressions, although analogical to the Troubles.

Apart from the collective trauma caused by the conflict, the thesis also outlines a theme of personal trauma as it is central in both *No Bones* and *Milkman* and how it is connected to forming one's identity. Both protagonists, Amelia and middle sister, had traumatic experiences, and Burns describes their different coping mechanisms. Amelia tries to regain control over her life by starving herself. At first, middle sister attempts to escape from the conflict through her habit of reading-while-walking. After her traumatic experience of being stalked and threatened by Milkman, she cannot address it and only after decades does she find the language to do so, which is then her way of therapy. They both attempt to leave, which is one of the aspects of the Bildungsroman, although in different ways: middle sister through her reading, Amelia leaves for London. However, it turns out they are unable to escape the trauma since both the conflict and the people engaged in it seem to follow them.

Key words: Anna Burns, Bildungsroman, trauma, Northern Ireland, Milkman, No Bones

## Abstrakt

Přestože je pojem Bildungsroman spojován především s romány 18. a 19. století, tento žánr, nebo alespoň jeho rysy, stále přetrvává v současné literatuře. Manfred Engel definuje tři hlavní předpoklady pro vymezení Bildungsromanu: jedna ústřední postava, která prochází vývojem, jenž obvykle začíná v dětství, a nakonec dosáhne dospělosti, přičemž *Bildung* odkazuje k utváření identity.

Bildungsroman je provázán se společností, jelikož se v něm objevuje rebelie proti ní nebo naopak přizpůsobení se. Žánr, který vznikl díky změnám ve společnosti, se vyvíjel spolu se společností a objevilo se tak několik variant žánru. Kritici postupně začali používat termíny ženský a feministický Bildungsroman, který představuje ženskou protagonistku, což v dřívějších románech tohoto žánru nebylo obvyklé. Vznik nových ženských hrdinek ve dvacátém století byl částečně způsoben tím, že ženy dokázaly postupně získat stejné možnosti, které byly dříve dostupné výhradně jejich mužským protějškům.

Bildungsroman v irské literatuře v mnoha ohledech navazuje na obecnou tradici tohoto žánru. Přesto se v něm objevují některé specifické rysy. Jedním z častých témat je odchod jako způsob nalezení vlastní identity nebo potenciálu. Na rozdíl od klasického Bildungsromanu se hrdinové často nepodřizují společenským normám, což otevírá otázku vnitřního exilu: ačkoli fyzicky hlavní hrdina neopustí komunitu, přesto se jí odcizí.

Za zástupce tohoto žánru lze považovat romány Anny Burns *No Bones* a *Mlikař*. *No Bones* je typičtějším příkladem Bildungsromanu, neboť sleduje Amelii Lovett od dětství po dobu 25 let. V *Mlikaři* je otázka časového rozpětí komplikovanější, poněvadž události se odehrávají během několika měsíců, ale hlavní hrdinka-vypravěčka vypráví své zážitky až po dvaceti letech. Tento odstup vytváří širší záběr života hlavní hrdinky a je tak možné sledovat její vývoj.

Společným tématem těchto dvou románů je hlavní ženská postava, která vyrůstá během dlouhodobého konfliktu, který ovlivňuje její vývoj a utváření identity. Zatímco prostředí románu *No Bones* je patrné od začátku - Belfast, především Ardoyne, od konce 60. do začátku 90. let, doba a místo vzniku *Mlikaře* jsou méně zřetelné. V mnoha ohledech připomíná Belfast konce 70. let, nicméně žádné místo, jméno ani konkrétní politický termín není nikdy zmíněn, protože prostřední ségra si vymýšlí vlastní výrazy, byť analogické k Troubles.

Kromě kolektivního traumatu způsobeného konfliktem je v práci nastíněno také téma osobního traumatu, které je ústřední jak v *No Bones*, tak v *Mlíkaři*, a to, jak souvisí s utvářením vlastní identity. Obě protagonistky, Amelie i prostřední ségra, měly traumatické zážitky a Burns popisuje jejich rozdílné mechanismy vyrovnávání se s nimi. Amelie se snaží získat kontrolu nad svým životem tím, že hladoví. Prostřední ségra se zpočátku pokouší uniknout před konfliktem prostřednictvím svého zvyku číst za chůze. Mlíkařovo pronásledování a výhrůžky ji způsobí trauma, o kterém není schopna mluvit. Teprve po mnoha letech k tomu nachází jazyk a vyprávění je pak jejím způsobem terapie. Obě se také pokoušejí odejít, což je jeden z aspektů Bildungsromanu, i když každý jiným způsobem: prostřední sestra prostřednictvím četby, Amelie odjíždí do Londýna. Ukazuje se však, že traumatu uniknout nedokážou, protože jak konflikt, tak lidé v něm zapojení jako by je pronásledovali.

Klíčová slova: Anna Burns, Bildungsroman, trauma, Severní Irsko, Mlíkař, No Bones



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## 1 Introduction

Up until today, Burns has published three novels, all of which revolve around characters caught up in the middle of a violent conflict. The change in the author's approach towards this subject can be perceived as a scale in these novels. *No Bones*, published in 2001, follows the adolescence of Amelia Lovett, who grows up in Ardoyne, Belfast, during the most turbulent years of the Troubles. The nameless narrator of *Milkman*, who is also the main character, lives in a nameless city during a conflict, which strongly resembles the Troubles. *Little Constructions* bridges the gap between the two novels as it takes place in the fictitious town of Tiptoe Floorboard and tells the story of various members of the Doe clan.

This thesis aims to discuss *Milkman* and *No Bones* in the context of the tradition of the Bildungsroman. Both novels feature a female protagonist who undergoes a development, which includes trauma or traumatic experience. They are both set in an ongoing conflict, which can be considered the same if we recognise *Milkman* as a novel set during the Troubles. Burns's second novel, *Little Constructions*, is not discussed in the thesis. Although the setting is similar to the other two novels, it focuses on a family and various family members, contrary to *Milkman* and *No Bones*, which centre mainly on one character.

Another aspect that was considered when selecting the novels was the contrast in specificity. While *No Bones* is concrete in time, place, and characters' names, *Milkman* omits these aspects. The time is vaguely determined, the places, characters and historical circumstances remain anonymous, or the narrator makes up her own terms. The contrast between the specificity in these two novels was one of the reasons why I chose them for my thesis.

To analyse these novels in relation to the Bildungsroman, the traditional aspects of the genre will be examined, mainly based on Franco Moretti's work. As Moretti focuses on the genre in a more general and broad sense, the thesis also provides a survey of female Bildungsroman, mainly based on the work of Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, and Soňa Šnircová. Attention will also be given to the issue of trauma since in both novels, it is a prominent theme closely connected to the subject of arriving at maturity. In addition, the thesis will address themes of family and society as they are common for both novels and associated with the genre of the Bildungsroman and the issue of trauma.

The first chapter of the thesis will outline the origins and development of the genre, and it is based mainly on the critical work by Moretti. The more general introduction of the genre

is then followed by discussing the female and feminist Bildungsroman, based on the work of Abel, Hirsch, Langland and Šnircová, as Moretti initially describes it mainly as a genre with a male protagonist. The last part of the first chapter then surveys the Bildungsroman in Irish literature.

The second chapter discusses trauma, traumatic experience and coping mechanisms with trauma. It introduces the question of personal and collective trauma and the problem of communicating traumatic experiences. After the general introduction, I describe the role of addressing trauma in the peacebuilding process in Northern Ireland.

The following two chapters then analyse the novels *No Bones* and *Milkman* in relation to the Bildungsroman genre, as examined in the first chapter. Apart from the aspects of the Bildungsroman, I discuss trauma in the novels, how Burns portrays it and how it is connected to the Bildungsroman notion of maturation.

## 2 The Bildungsroman

The Bildungsroman is generally defined as a coming-of-age novel or novel of formation, the term coming from the German word *Bildung*, which can be translated as education, shaping or forming. The term was coined by Karl Von Morgenstern in 1820 in his *Über das Wesen des Bildungsromans*<sup>1</sup> and later re-invented by philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey in his biography *Das Leben Schleiermachers* (1870), almost a century after the first novels of this genre were published.<sup>2</sup> The Bildungsroman originated in German literature at the end of the eighteenth century. The first example would be *The History of Agathon* (1766-7) by Christoph Martin Wieland. It was followed by Karl Philipp Moritz's *Anton Reiser* (1785), the first negative Bildungsroman, a variant of the genre in which the protagonist is destroyed by society or abandons their ideals.<sup>3</sup> In the last decade of the century, the most-known example of the genre was published – Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship Years* (1796).<sup>4</sup>

The plot of the Bildungsroman typically revolves around a protagonist who encounters various events that influence their development and shape and define their identity. Manfred Engel proposes three main assumptions for the definition of the Bildungsroman.<sup>5</sup> It has one central figure, which gradually and continuously develops and changes, with the process commencing in childhood, although not necessarily. However, its essential point is adolescence. In his last point, Engel focuses on the question of *Bildung* within the Bildungsroman, which is not mere education but rather the formation of an individual personality,<sup>6</sup> as suggested by one of the possible translations of *Bildung*. Engel also adds that a positive ending is not a necessary part of the Bildungsroman.<sup>7</sup>

The changes in society enabled the birth of the Bildungsroman. It was a symbolic form of modernity emphasising its instability and dynamism. As Franco Moretti argues, “Youth is [...] modernity's essence, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past.”<sup>8</sup> The Western culture abandoned the classical epic image of a hero as an adult man and chose Hamlet as the first symbolic hero, embodying the youth, even though he is thirty

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Redfield, *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the “Bildungsroman”* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Manfred Engel, “Variants of the Romantic ‘Bildungsroman’ (with a short note on the ‘artist novel’),” in *Romantic Prose Fiction*, ed. By Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel and Bernard Dieterle (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), 263. <https://doi.org/10.1075/chlel.xxiii.20eng>.

<sup>3</sup> Engel, “Variants,” 289.

<sup>4</sup> Engel, “Variants,” 263.

<sup>5</sup> Engel, “Variants,” 265.

<sup>6</sup> Engel, “Variants,” 266.

<sup>7</sup> Engel, “Variants,” 266 – 7.

<sup>8</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in the European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000), 5.

years old, and alters his picture as that of a young man.<sup>9</sup> Although often read as a drama of revenge, Hamlet is also a story of development from a young prince to a determined politician. The play is even included in Goethe's novel, and Wilhelm plays the role of Hamlet. The picture of Hamlet as a young man gave rise to many heroes, who are defined mainly through their youth, and youth becomes the period to which the 'meaning of life' is attached.<sup>10</sup> Youth symbolised the change in society at the turn of the eighteenth century when the expectations of an individual started to be altered. The circumstances one was born into did not necessarily determine their life and limited their potential. It began to be possible to abandon the tradition of apprenticeship in the sense of a son following the path of his father. Such a disruption of continuity between the generations was also enhanced by the rise of capitalism, which provided unexpected opportunities, almost impossible until then.<sup>11</sup>

The mobility enabled by that, together with an interiority (or inner restlessness), were the two essential aspects in which the Bildungsroman is interested.<sup>12</sup> Due to a depiction of these two attributes within the genre, the Bildungsroman conveys “a specific image of modernity.”<sup>13</sup> However, the genre is necessarily contradictory as the youth faces its own temporal limits since it “does not last forever,” which opposes the notion of dynamism ascribed to it as the symbol of modernity.<sup>14</sup>

Moretti distinguishes two models in the Bildungsroman genre based on plot differences. They correspond with the conflicting nature of the genre as one is the novel of marriage, and the other is the novel of adultery. In the first case, marriage denotes the definitive act, and it can include marrying not so much a person but even a more abstract concept, such as normative culture in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*.<sup>15</sup> The latter type of the Bildungsroman turns adultery, traditionally considered a disruptive or sinister relationship, into an act embodying instability. Similarly to the first type, adultery does not inevitably include a relationship with another person.<sup>16</sup> Upon entering the world of adulthood, the main character might either conform to the status quo of society, represented in the marriage, or reject the societal rules, symbolised by adultery.

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<sup>9</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 4 – 5.

<sup>13</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 7-8.

The greatest achievement in the classical Bildungsroman is happiness as the highest value, yet it is also typically connected to a loss of freedom. While Goethe and English novels of this genre tend to depict youth as an imperfect state and the transformation leading to “a stable and 'final' identity,”<sup>17</sup> French novelists perceive maturity as a conclusion in which the protagonist betrays their individuality and which withdraws the meaning of youth.<sup>18</sup>

Generally speaking, the Bildungsroman portrays the theme of development and change of the main character, who typically overcomes various challenges on their way to maturity. The meaning, whose triumph over time is the highest form of the happy ending,<sup>19</sup> is in the protagonist's effort to establish themselves both as an individual and as a part of society. In the classical Bildungsroman, the reader usually perceives the plot through the protagonist's eyes, which might lead to identification with the hero while following their inner turmoil. The instability of the hero is mainly caused by the contradiction between the aim of self-determination, establishing one's identity, and the strains posed by society.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned above, mobility was an important aspect of both the Bildungsroman and the era it originated in. Nonetheless, it faced certain limits, similarly to youth. The Bildungsroman concerned the border between two social classes: the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. Members of these two groups share much of their leisure while being distinguished by work. The Bildungsroman reflects some of the reestablishing of the aristocratic ways by the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie in order to form its own identity and culture. Novels of this genre reflect the question of what the bourgeoisie is outside of work if that is what distinguishes it from the aristocracy, and the answer echoes throughout the genre – a synthesis of the old and the new with fluctuating identity.<sup>21</sup>

Moretti claims that the Bildungsroman declined or almost disappeared in the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> He comes up with two possible explanations of what, in his opinion, weakened the tradition of the genre and caused the literary turn away from the youth's successful development into adulthood to narratives of individuals stuck in adolescence, estranged from the society and culture of the adulthood. The first tendency he describes is the altering general view on the relationship between an individual and society. This led to the “anthropological reversal from

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<sup>17</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 55.

<sup>20</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Moretti, *The Way*. viii – ix.

<sup>22</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 229-30.

the individual as an autonomous entity to the individual as a mere member of a mass.”<sup>23</sup> He also argues that this change was partly a result of the First World War, which revealed the insignificance of an individual.<sup>24</sup> The second tendency is the emergence of “new reality – the unconscious, taken in a broad sense – which will play a crucial role in the constitution of twentieth-century subjects.”<sup>25</sup> With recognising the function of the unconscious in social integration, the unity of self, one of the foundations of the Bildungsroman, disintegrates.<sup>26</sup>

Despite Moretti’s argument about the disappearance of the Bildungsroman in the twentieth century, many novels of the past century have been discussed within the genre as they feature several aspects of the Bildungsroman. While Moretti describes it as a decline, it could be argued that it is rather a development of the genre as the authors have presented different variations. Moreover, during the twentieth century, scholars began to focus on the female Bildungsroman, which was not particularly addressed before since the Bildungsroman’s emblematic protagonist tended to be a man.

## 2.1 The female Bildungsroman

The social mobility and certain social privileges were the main reasons the Bildungsroman's typical protagonist used to be mainly a west European middle-class man<sup>27</sup> as “even the broadest definitions of the Bildungsroman presuppose a range of social options available only to men.”<sup>28</sup> Moretti discusses Austen or Brontë, but ultimately, he understands the Bildungsroman as a genre mainly associated with a specific historical period – modernity, one class – middle class, and one sex – male.<sup>29</sup> According to Soňa Šnircová, one of the crucial factors was the period of the Enlightenment in which the Bildungsroman originated. The Enlightenment emphasised the importance of personal and social development; however, this progress heavily depended on gendered beliefs about knowledge, reason and education. Women were traditionally tied to the domestic, private sphere, which hindered their involvement in education and the public sphere to which the notion of maturity was closely connected. This

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<sup>23</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 232.

<sup>24</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 229.

<sup>25</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 236.

<sup>26</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, 236 – 7.

<sup>27</sup> Moretti, *The Way*, ix.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Soňa Šnircová, *Girlhood in British Coming-of-age Novels: the Bildungsroman Heroine Revisited* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) 13.

limitation constrained women's possibility significantly to undergo the *Bildung* as their male counterparts did.<sup>30</sup>

Novels like *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss* or *Little Women* begin with the heroine's childhood; however, the development usually comes after fulfilling the conventions of marriage or motherhood and finding these insufficient. While the nineteenth-century heroes' education broadens their possibilities, contemporary heroines seldom benefit from their education.<sup>31</sup> The setting also differs as the hero gains his independence in the city, the heroine is often somewhat stuck in the countryside, and her aim tends to be learning to take care of herself and others. By the same token, female protagonists usually preserve family ties rather than sever them as their male counterparts do.<sup>32</sup>

Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, whose collection of essays *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development* (1983) is the first systematic attempt to examine the female Bildungsroman, identify two main narrative patterns in the female version of the genre: narrative of apprenticeship and the awakening. The narrative of apprenticeship resembles the linear structure of the male Bildungsroman with its chronological order and following the development from childhood to maturity. Development in the narrative of the awakening is not gradual. The protagonist first reaches the supposed fulfilment of the societal expectations and then realises it is not the ultimate satisfaction. It can be a novel of adultery as they often defy marital authority. The development may also be realised in several moments of epiphany, and these short episodes might substitute a continuous narrative. Abel, Hirsch and Langland argue that "female fictions of development reflect tensions between the assumptions of a genre that embodies male norms and the values of its female protagonists"<sup>33</sup> and tensions between "autonomy and relationship, separation and community, loyalty to women and attraction to men."<sup>34</sup> These shape female development, often resulting in a disparity between a surface plot affirming social conventions and a concealed plot encoding rebellion.<sup>35</sup>

New heroines emerged in the twentieth century, whose possibilities of self-realisation were beyond what their predecessors of the last two centuries could have imagined: equal access to formal education, involvement in politics, and explorations of female sexuality. The genre

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<sup>30</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 9 – 10.

<sup>31</sup> Abel, Hirsch and Langland, *The Voyage In*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Abel, Hirsch and Langland, *The Voyage In*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Abel, Hirsch and Langland, *The Voyage In*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Abel, Hirsch and Langland, *The Voyage In*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Abel, Hirsch and Langland, *The Voyage In*, 12.



varies more, both thematically and formally.<sup>36</sup> Šnircová states that, “Major studies on the female Bildungsroman have so far concentrated mainly on two major phases of the generic tradition, classic and feminist.”<sup>37</sup> These two approaches might reflect the development of the genre itself and illustrate the two main types of the female Bildungsroman.

As for the classic female Bildungsroman, critics such as Abel, Hirsch and Langland focus mainly on the difference between the male and female Bildungsroman, discussing the impediments of female development and attempts of emancipation portrayed in the early novels. The female development in these novels tends to be “either incomplete or interrupted by the premature death of the heroine, who cannot cope with the constraints imposed on her by patriarchal society.”<sup>38</sup> *Jane Eyre* creates important links between the male and female Bildungsroman as conforming to the conventions and defying them is combined in the main female character. Jane is in the public sphere, achieves a certain degree of independence while accomplishing the conventional goal of marriage and possibly even control over Mr Rochester, which might even make her seem manipulative.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike the classic female Bildungsroman, the feminist Bildungsroman does not draw on the differences between male and female development but aims to achieve “the status of an independent genre, developing the narrative about female maturation.”<sup>40</sup> Rita Felski introduced the term feminist Bildungsroman in 1989 to describe a novel of development that share some aspects with the male Bildungsroman – historical and linear structure, the connection between the movement into the public sphere and the process of self-discovery.<sup>41</sup> Feminist Bildungsroman rejects marriage as the ultimate achievement of the protagonist's development and focuses more on the heroine departing from the traditional role of wife and mother, abandoning the domestic sphere.<sup>42</sup> Šnircová concludes, “the feminist Bildungsroman appears to be a useful umbrella term for various twentieth-century narratives of female Bildung.”<sup>43</sup>

Šnircová argues that another genre rooted in the female Bildungsroman tradition is the female coming-of-age novel.<sup>44</sup> According to her, the term coming of age, generally used for

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<sup>36</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 127.

<sup>42</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 25.

reaching maturity, can also be used in the context of the Bildungsroman for “the last stage of the classic *Bildung* process.”<sup>45</sup> The main factors considered when comparing coming-of-age novels and the classic Bildungsroman are the protagonist’s age, the time span, different endings and the socio-historical context. A coming-of-age novel’s scope is usually limited to a few months or years, which include the crucial moments of the journey to adulthood. It also includes an open ending, and Šnircová argues that compared with the classic Bildungsroman, “twentieth- and twenty-first-century adolescents feel less sure about the need and/or ways to integrate with society.”<sup>46</sup> The different approach to the ending and the protagonist’s conformity and willingness to follow the societal conventions result from the socio-historical context in which the *Bildungsroman* and the coming-of-age novel formed.

## 2.2 The Bildungsroman in Irish Literature

The novel has been a stable part of Irish literature since the eighteenth century, and it has become a prominent genre due to its ability to accommodate social, political and historical change.<sup>47</sup> Gerry Smyth claims that post-colonial Ireland “is characterised by insecurity and a constant need for self-identification.”<sup>48</sup> This prompts questions about one's identity concerning the political connections and beliefs to the past and the future. Smyth points out that this constant search for identity in such an environment and the resistance to colonialism led to establishing terms of similarity (Irishness) and difference (Englishness).<sup>49</sup> The stories of *us* and *them* remain even in some of the recent novels, as these terms became rooted in Irish literature and culture. Even though the novel is established within Irish literature and connected to many emblematic terms and themes, the 1980s brought about the so-called ‘new Irish novel’ which Smyth describes as “the new Irish novelists combining a willingness to confront the formal and conceptual legacies of a received literary (and wider social) narratives in mediating modern [...] Ireland's changing circumstances.”<sup>50</sup> Harte and Parker comment on contemporary Irish fiction that it is common for the novelists to attempt “to reimagine Ireland as a syncretic space, thereby interrogating established narratives of identity and otherness.”<sup>51</sup> The prominent theme in Irish fiction is a collective identity, which has often been regarded as a legacy of colonialism.

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<sup>45</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Šnircová, *Girlhood*, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>48</sup> Smyth, *The Novel*, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Smyth, *The Novel*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Smyth, *The Novel*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Liam Harte and Michael Parker, “Introduction,” in *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*, ed. Liam Harte and Michael Parker (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 4.

As for Northern Irish fiction, the clash within the duality of *us* and *them* preserves its importance in definitions of identity, although many contemporary writers maintain this tension whilst aiming to reach beyond.<sup>52</sup> Harte and Parker point out that “in their overt and oblique attempts to address issues of violence, justice and moral responsibility as they [writers] pertain to individuals, communities and agencies of the state, novelists have continually had to negotiate a series of ethical, aesthetic and ideological difficulties.”<sup>53</sup>

The beginnings of the Bildungsroman in Irish literature can be traced to mid-eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish writing. Probably the first Irish Bildungsroman, and also the first novel set predominantly in Ireland, was *The History of Jack Connor* by William Chaigneau, published in 1752, even preceding Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.<sup>54</sup> Jack Connor is a young Irishman who runs off to London and Paris and becomes John Conyers in order to get rid of his Irish origin but eventually realises that he can obtain stability only in Ireland. There he receives education and moral guidance from Lord Truegood. *Jack Connor* attempted to counter English prejudice about Ireland and to establish the Anglo-Irish novel as a specific genre.<sup>55</sup>

A similar plot of a young man and a moral guide is found in Henry Brooke's *The Fool of Quality* (1765-70), although it resembles more an educational novel, offering a moral lesson, unlike Chaigneau's novel.<sup>56</sup> The storyline of a young man spending some time abroad, in this case in England and Paris, and realising that one's true identity can be found only in Ireland also appears in Maria Edgeworth's *Ormond* (1817). Edgeworth also employs the character of a moral guide.<sup>57</sup> Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Charles Johnstone parodied the Bildungsroman in his novel *The History of John Juniper* (1775-81), in which he, in contrast with Chaigneau, enhances the stereotypical image of a stage Irishman. While the Irish Bildungsroman shares many features and patterns with the English counterpart, the focus is shifted from "the big city as the place of fulfilment" to the rural environment.<sup>58</sup>

According to Moretti, one example of the late Bildungsroman is James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Cahalan argues that George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) prefigures *A Portrait*: Alice Barton, a Catholic turned into an agnostic, is a would-be writer and an exile who aims to overcome the obstacles posed by religion, nationality,

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<sup>52</sup> Harte and Parker, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>53</sup> Harte and Parker, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>54</sup> James M. Cahalan, *The Irish Novel: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 11.

<sup>55</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 11 – 12.

<sup>56</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 24.

her gender and family. Even though Alice differs from Stephen Dedalus in many aspects, Moore's influence on Joyce is apparent.<sup>59</sup> Moore also introduced a female protagonist to a genre that was dominated by male heroes. While in the early Bildungsromans, marriage often symbolizes conforming to the societal norms and tends to be followed by the protagonist's realization that it is not the ultimate satisfaction, Alice's marriage is a part of the development since it is against the conventions and Alice's mother renounces her husband.<sup>60</sup>

In *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* (1941), Henry Levin was the first to argue that *Portrait* is a Bildungsroman as he points out some characteristics of the genre - the theme of the character's formation, education, in this case that of an artist.<sup>61</sup> According to Levin, the novel is "constructed around intimate crises of Stephen's youth,"<sup>62</sup> which corresponds with the basic structure of the Bildungsroman. Joyce describes Stephen as a child and follows him into early adulthood while depicting his struggle and confrontation with education, religion, and society. Ultimately, he concludes that to become an independent individual and obtain the maturity and freedom as an artist that he strives for, he must leave Ireland for good. This realisation opposes the preceding novels where the heroes left Ireland only to realise that they must return to reach their personal fulfilment. The idea of leaving in order to establish one's artistic freedom is later repeated in Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn* (1948), a novel banned by the Irish Censorship Board for obscenity and indecency, in which the main character leaves rural Ireland for Dublin, claiming that "The best way to love a country like this is from a range of not less than three hundred miles."<sup>63</sup>

Cahalan argues that in the 1960s and 70s, "the bildungsroman remained a common fictional testing ground," and Joyce's influence remains noticeable.<sup>64</sup> A prominent example of this period's Bildungsroman is John McGahern's *The Dark* (1965). It narrates a story of "a sensitive young Irish boy"<sup>65</sup> struggling to escape his father's influence and attend university. After the novel was banned under the Censorship Act for "graphic descriptions of the boy's masturbatory fantasies and suggestions of homosexuality,"<sup>66</sup> McGahern lost his teaching job and left to exile.<sup>67</sup> McGahern's aim to avert the possible bias of the protagonist's narration is

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<sup>59</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 107.

<sup>60</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 107.

<sup>61</sup> Henry Levin, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 41.

<sup>62</sup> Levin, *James Joyce*, 53.

<sup>63</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 197.

<sup>64</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 262.

<sup>65</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 271.

<sup>66</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 273.

<sup>67</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 271.

reflected in employing a nameless hero and shifting among various points of view by referring to the protagonist as “I”, “he”, or “you”.<sup>68</sup>

Another example of the Bildungsroman is Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* (1996). Deane’s only novel follows a nameless narrator, a Catholic boy living in Derry, searching for his identity within the society while facing the reality of the colonised. Trying to learn about the secrets of his family, thus resolving his future through comprehending the past, he becomes estranged from them and the community, which resembles the notion of leaving in some of the earlier Bildungsroman novels. Even though he continues to live with his family, he is somewhat ostracised by them,<sup>69</sup> which brings up a question of a sort of inner exile as the protagonist does not have to leave for another country, or a city, yet he becomes a stranger within the community.

Similarly to the first Bildungsromans reflecting the changes in society, Roddy Doyle’s *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993) follows a protagonist whose development mirrors the building of new housing estates in the 1960s and 1970s in Dublin’s suburbia. As the estates represented almost a new form of living, their uncertain position is echoed in Paddy’s, the 10-year-old narrator, anxieties about fitting in. Even though it covers only a year of the protagonist’s life, it might be considered a Bildungsroman. It depicts the development of a young boy who is forced to mature as his childhood is disrupted by his parents’ marriage breaking up.<sup>70</sup>

Joyce’s *Portrait* is echoed in Kate O’Brien’s *The Land of Spices* (1941), one of the first Irish female Bildungsromans. The novel, banned under the Censorship Act for including a homosexual act, follows a relationship between the English Superior of an Irish convent Helen Archer and a young student Anna Murphy. Due to similar personalities, intelligence, and shared experience of loss, they are drawn together. *The Land of Spices* is considered a Bildungsroman since it follows the parallel development of Helen and Anna, and also because of Anna maturing, leaving for Dublin to acquire her identity and “an artistic consciousness.”<sup>71</sup> In Helen, as the character of an English educator, O’Brien switches the nineteenth-century trope of a male English hero who travels to Ireland.<sup>72</sup>

Deirdre Madden’s *One by One in the Darkness* (1996) could also be discussed within the Bildungsroman genre. Unlike Deane, Madden employs female protagonists – three sisters

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<sup>68</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 273.

<sup>69</sup> George O’Brien, *The Irish Novel: 1960-2010* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), 129 – 132.

<sup>70</sup> Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 268.

<sup>71</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 211.

<sup>72</sup> Cahalan, *The Irish Novel*, 211.

and their mother during a week in the summer of 1994, who re-examine not only their present lives but also their childhood in the 1960s and 1970s. This re-evaluation of their identity is prompted by their father's death, who is murdered after being mistaken for his brother, a Sinn Féin member. The novel emphasizes how private development is intertwined with "the wider political process of identity revisioning [...] in Northern Ireland."<sup>73</sup> The re-evaluation of one's identity during a conflict, disrupted narrative, and chronology are prominent features also in Burns's work.

Written in the same period, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's novel *The Dancers Dancing* (1999) follows a female protagonist Orla Crilly and her pursuit of identity. Orla navigates between public and private, inner and outer space. Apart from exploring one's identity, the novel also addresses the supposed divide between city and rural Ireland and the mutual misconceptions. Derek Hand argues that *The Dancers Dancing* "extends the possibility of the [Bildungsroman] genre within a culture that has usually figured growth and development solely through sexuality."<sup>74</sup> Unlike typical Bildungsroman that ends with maturation and finding one's identity, the novel's ending suggests that the "project of self-creation" is still in process.<sup>75</sup>

As it has been outlined above, the Bildungsroman in Irish literature follows the general tradition of the genre in many aspects. Nonetheless, it displays some original features as every author tackles the subject of development with innovation. One of the recurring themes is leaving. Abandoning the community or society and later reconciliation with it seems necessary to find one's identity and potential. Struggle with family, community and institutions appear in many of the novels, and unlike the classical Bildungsroman, the protagonists often do not conform to the societal standards but rather remain more or less outcasts. This suggests the notion of inner exile as the protagonist might not leave the community, but they are still considered an outcast, physically living in the community yet estranged. This is also connected to a frequent open ending, which almost goes against the finality of reaching maturation or adulthood and the social integration of a self-determined individual that is typical, especially for the classical Bildungsroman.

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<sup>73</sup> Liam Harte and Michael Parker, "Reconfiguring Identities: Recent Northern Irish Fiction," in *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*, ed. Liam Harte and Michael Parker (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 234.

<sup>74</sup> Hand, *A History*, 279.

<sup>75</sup> Hand, *A History*, 278-9.

### 3 Trauma

Trauma is a central theme in *No Bones* and *Milkman*. Both protagonists had traumatic experiences, and they face the consequences; and in both cases, their trauma is connected to the ongoing conflict. Burns also depicts different coping mechanisms with the traumatic experiences in these novels.

The term trauma was coined by Pierre Janet in the mid-nineteenth century, and it described “the idea of bodily hurt and the healing that must take place after an extreme accident.”<sup>1</sup> The term has shifted from the traumatised body to the traumatised mind, and nowadays, in general discourse, trauma is considered primarily psychological damage or injury rather than a physical one, even though in medicine, the term is still used in the physical sense as well. Although Fiona Barber points out that trauma can refer to the consequences of either physiological or psychological injury or threat, it can be argued that it is often a combination of both as both can affect memory and ability to cope with the effects of the event. The word ‘traumatised’ is used to describe that the traumatic experience still haunts us.<sup>2</sup>

According to Jenny Edkins, much contemporary work on trauma stems from the First World War period and the epidemic of shell shock that followed the conflict. Susannah Radstone traces the origins of ‘trauma theory’ to clinical work with survivors of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> The Second World War drew the civilian population into the conflict, and after Vietnam War and talks with the veterans, the term ‘post-traumatic stress’ was written into the American Psychiatric Association’s manual.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, APA defines PTSD as “an anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic events, such as combat, crime, an accident or natural disaster.”<sup>5</sup>

Oona Frawley claims that the impact of trauma is seen between the silence, “linked to the notion of forgetting,” and the inability to forget, linked to revisiting trauma.<sup>6</sup> The inability to either forget or remember is a frequent outcome of a traumatic experience. We ascribe significant meaning to what is forgotten. On the one hand, trauma can cause forgetting, but on

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<sup>1</sup> Oona Frawley, “Introduction: Cruxes in Irish Cultural Memory,” in *Memory Ireland. Volume 3, The famine and the troubles*, ed. Oona Frawley (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Frawley, “Introduction,” 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Dawson, “The Meaning of ‘Moving On’: From Trauma to the History and Memory of Emotions in ‘Post Conflict’ Northern Ireland,” *Irish University Review* 47, no. 1 (2017): 82.

<https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2017.0258>.

<sup>4</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-3.

<sup>5</sup> American Psychological Association, “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” accessed May 18, 2022.

<https://www.apa.org/topics/ptsd>

<sup>6</sup> Frawley, “Introduction,” 6.

the other hand, it can also induce recurrence of trauma, which is also of great significance, similarly to forgetting.

For an experience to be called traumatic, it seems to be important to “involve a betrayal of trust.”<sup>7</sup> Edkins claims that trauma takes place when the authorities and powers that we trust to protect us and which give us a sense of security become the very ones that torment us: “the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger.”<sup>8</sup> This is devastating because we build our identity, among other factors, on our social context, be it friends, family, religious or political community.<sup>9</sup> Frawley agrees with the notion of trauma disrupting identity formation, and she claims that “it disturbs that coherence of self, defies narrative expectations, and does not follow convention.”<sup>10</sup>

Edkins argues that according to some feminists, the relations between sexes are like a war, “with the casualties being rape victims, battered wives and sexually abused children.”<sup>11</sup> The analogy between women and war veterans was brought up in the 1970s and 1980s to highlight women struggling with being exploited by patriarchal society. Edkins draws a parallel between the treatment of civilians during war and the treatment of women in families, claiming that analogical exploitation compels citizens with political authorities and their demands. Edkins argues: “In both cases, what has happened is beyond the possibility of communication. There is no language for it. Abuse by the state, the fatherland, like abuse by father within the family, cannot be spoken in language, since language comes from and belongs to the family and the community.”<sup>12</sup> I believe this notion of exploitation of women and traumatic experience is relevant for the present thesis since both novels discussed feature a female character who faces a traumatic experience within a community or family that abuses her.

When considering the community and the social aspect of trauma, Frawley distinguishes individual and collective trauma. An individual experiences trauma either as “a blank space” or “repetition of the past”, preventing the narrative of their life from moving forward.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the individual attempts to assign meaning to the event and construct a narrative according to it. But trauma studies have also focused on the collective experience of trauma, and as

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<sup>7</sup> Edkins, *Trauma*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Edkins, *Trauma*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Edkins, *Trauma*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Frawley, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>11</sup> Edkins, *Trauma*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Edkins, *Trauma* 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> Frawley, “Introduction,” 7.



Frawley puts it, “we now speak, and write, of the trauma of a culture.”<sup>14</sup> Fiona Barber also mentions traumatic experiences in the community’s memory as, according to her, public and social aspects should be recognised, while not only an individual but also family, friends and carers might be affected by the experience,<sup>15</sup> which corresponds with Edkins’ claim that witnessing violence done to others may be as traumatic as enduring it oneself.<sup>16</sup> Frawley adds that “trauma studies demonstrate how forcefully what are perceived to be traumatic events can influence cultural contexts for generations.”<sup>17</sup>

As Slavoj Žižek argues, “The essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe. All we have to do is repeatedly mark the trauma as such.”<sup>18</sup> Frawley agrees with trauma resisting symbolisation and argues that it is an essential characteristic of trauma. But how to communicate trauma if it resists representation and thus communication,<sup>19</sup> and how is it expressed?

There seems to be no language available to articulate the experience. According to Edkins, community and communication of trauma are intertwined. Language is social, not individual, and the structure of the unconscious mind can be compared to that of language. Our notion of ourselves is similarly fluid, and the structure imposed by the social context limits the fluidity. However, this notion of fixed structure is merely an illusion for a trauma survivor, and since the social order breaks apart, so does the language. This is the dilemma survivors face: what they can say no longer makes sense, yet they are unable to say what they want to as there are no words for it.<sup>20</sup>

Edkins claims that the state aims to normalise and reinstitute the survivor into the power structure again by helping to “verbalise and narrate what has happened to them”<sup>21</sup> hence it seems she is cautious about narrating the experience. However, storytelling has been advocated as a therapy for an individual, but it was also seen “as a step toward the emergence of a more multifaceted account of the conflict – particularly for those who felt their experience of the

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<sup>14</sup> Frawley, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>15</sup> Fiona Barber, “At Vision’s Edge: Post-Conflict Memory and Art Practice in Northern Ireland,” in *Memory Ireland. Volume 3, The famine and the troubles*, ed. Oona Frawley (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 233.

<sup>16</sup> Edkins, *Trauma*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Frawley, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 272-3.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Malone, “Measures of obliviousness and disarming obliqueness in Anna Burns’ Milkman,” *Textual Practice* (2021): 6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900357>.

<sup>20</sup> Edkins, *Trauma*, 7-8.

<sup>21</sup> Edkins, *Trauma*, 9.

conflict had been ignored.”<sup>22</sup> When considering peacebuilding and storytelling, it is necessary to recognize the essential role of an audience who has to be “respectful, understanding and sympathetic to the tellers” in order to make the process effective.<sup>23</sup>

The effects of traumatic experiences are “a kind of psychic wounding,”<sup>24</sup> so extensive and overwhelming that the individual cannot realise its full extent at the time, which can cause repression, and it can later recur, not always resembling the original occurrence, yet similarly distressing. Cathy Caruth proposes that poetry and literature might help understand how traumatic memory works.<sup>25</sup> Storytelling is not limited only to oral or written forms; it can be expressed in visual arts. However, oral and written forms are essential for people with traumatic experiences, as has been proved by the Holocaust survivors as well as those who experienced the Troubles.<sup>26</sup> According to Maingwa and Byrne, “the survivors of violent conflicts who share their stories may find relief from the burden of the past and may become channels and instruments of peace in their communities.”<sup>27</sup> These stories might function as counter-narratives to the violent ones in the process of peacebuilding.<sup>28</sup>

The practice of storytelling faces many challenges as people surviving traumatic experiences often do not want to share their stories as the recollection might be too painful for them. They might be afraid of society’s reaction, which is connected to the fear of being shamed or blamed for what happened to them. In the case of ongoing conflict, there is a risk of endangering themselves or people close to them.<sup>29</sup>

To bring the discussion to the context of Northern Ireland, I would like to introduce a report by Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation and the Psychology Research Institute at the University of Ulster from 2008. It studied the impact of the civil conflict on the mental health of the adult population in Northern Ireland. The research found that while men are more at risk of being exposed to traumatic experiences, women seem more prone to developing PTSD, even “to the degree that PTSD in women could be considered a gender-

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<sup>22</sup> Barber, “At Vision’s Edge,” 234.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Maingwa and Sean Byrne, “Peacebuilding and Reconciliation through Storytelling in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland,” *Storytelling, Self, Society*, vol. 11, no. 1 (spring 2015), 88-9. <https://doi.org/10.13110/storselvesoci.11.1.0085>.

<sup>24</sup> Barber, “At Vision’s Edge,” 235.

<sup>25</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Maingwa and Byrne, “Peacebuilding,” 90.

<sup>27</sup> Maingwa and Byrne, “Peacebuilding,” 90.

<sup>28</sup> Maingwa and Byrne, “Peacebuilding,” 90.

<sup>29</sup> Maingwa and Byrne, “Peacebuilding,” 91.

related health need.”<sup>30</sup> However, the report acknowledges that the results might be influenced by the fact that men are less likely to talk about their experiences or seek help. People in the study who met the criteria for lifetime PTSD were also more likely to have an additional mental health disorder. In spite of the complications, as some acts of violence and traumatic experiences cannot be easily attributed to the Troubles since the perpetrator of the violence is unknown, or it is hard to decide whether the incident was Troubles-related, the study concluded that around 50% of traumatic events were related to the conflict, thus establishing the significant impact on the adult population in Northern Ireland.<sup>31</sup>

Stefanie Lehner argues, “In its approach to trauma, the Northern Ireland peace process endorses a combination of amnesty and amnesia.”<sup>32</sup> Within the context of Northern Ireland, Graham Dawson focuses on trauma and memory in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland in the public discourse. According to Dawson, “trauma has become established as a pervasive trope in discourse and practice concerned with the affective legacies of the Northern Ireland troubles, providing a popular as well as a critical framework for understanding the effects of political violence during conflict and memories of that violence during the peace process.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the concept of trauma as recurring, being the haunting past, challenges the distinctive break between the past and the present proposed in the Agreement. The linear narratives are disrupted as trauma creates repetitions and cycles.

Dawson points out the problematic aspect of the linear relation between past and present, as indicated in Allan Young’s “architecture of traumatic time” when considering ‘transitional’ societies like Northern Ireland.<sup>34</sup> He argues that such a view is simplistic and obscures more complex temporalities. The recovery of the victims does not necessarily align with the peace process, which might pressure them to keep pace with it and move to closure with the national or political processes.<sup>35</sup> The peace process within the context of the Troubles concerned storytelling as a means of therapy that has grown alongside the public debate about “dealing with the legacies of the conflict in terms of truth, justice and reconciliation.”<sup>36</sup> According to the

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<sup>30</sup> Ferry et al., *Trauma, Health and Conflict*, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Fionaly Ferry et al., *Trauma, Health and Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Study of the Epidemiology of Trauma Related Disorders and Investigation of the Impact of Trauma on the Individual* (Ulster: Psychology Research Institute University of Ulster, 2008), 63-5.

<sup>32</sup> Stefanie Lehner, “The Irreversible and the Irrevocable: Encircling Trauma in Contemporary Northern Irish Literature,” in *Memory Ireland. Volume 3, The famine and the troubles*, ed. Oona Frawley (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 276.

<sup>33</sup> Dawson, “The Meaning,” 82.

<sup>34</sup> Dawson, “The Meaning,” 86.

<sup>35</sup> Dawson, “The Meaning,” 86-7.

<sup>36</sup> Dawson, “The Meaning,” 88.

concept of ‘healing is revealing’, those sharing their stories could undergo a certain healing process if listened to emphatically, influencing the development of storytelling practices.<sup>37</sup>

One of the projects focused on storytelling as a way of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland was run by the organization Toward Understanding and Healing. The THU project aimed to offer a cross-community dialogue; thus, it connected people who experienced the conflict within different contexts. The THU forums then offered a diverse and inclusive environment for sharing stories that could eventually help create a sense of shared identity.<sup>38</sup>

Another often discussed aspect of trauma is closure, which people suffering from trauma long for, be it sought through storytelling or “campaigning for truth and justice in unresolved cases of killing from the conflict.”<sup>39</sup> Dawson argues that the concept of closure might contribute to the issue of the pressure to move on and leave the traumatic past behind, as it is often presented that one is not able to move forward without closure.

If we follow the conventional theory of trauma and its temporal linearity, emotion and affect might be perceived as originating in an event to which emotions are attached. In one way of understanding this issue, these past emotions, or emotion, then persists into the present, always prepared to be expressed again.<sup>40</sup> Another perspective suggests that the emotion connected to the event is overlaid by succeeding emotional development, and according to Dawson, “it becomes progressively distanced in time while retaining the potential to be reconnected to the present.”<sup>41</sup> This then brings the phenomenon of returning and re-experiencing an event which has not been processed, and the experience never ends.

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<sup>37</sup> Dawson, “The Meaning,” 88.

<sup>38</sup> Maingwa and Byrne, “Peacebuilding,” 92 – 101.

<sup>39</sup> Dawson, “The Meaning,” 88.

<sup>40</sup> Dawson, “The Meaning,” 95.

<sup>41</sup> Dawson, “The Meaning,” 95.

#### 4 No Bones

Conforming to the conventions of Bildungsroman, *No Bones* presents a relatively broad scope as it follows 25 years of the protagonist's, her childhood, adolescence and early adulthood and how the ongoing conflict has impacted it. The novel is a distorted Bildungsroman in which the search for one's identity is affected by traumatic experiences. Although some of them stem directly from the conflict, others are examples of abuse within the family or community. *No Bones* sets the reader in a specific time and place: Ardoyne, a Catholic part of Belfast, in 1969. The novel opens with a scene in which young children playing in the street are warned by their friend that something dangerous is coming. One of them is Amelia Lovett, the novel's protagonist.

As established earlier, the Bildungsroman often includes conflict with an institution, family, school or church. Apart from the evident abuse of Amelia by her family, *No Bones* features the struggle with school, even including a tyrannical teacher. The chapter 'In the Crossfire' about Amelia and her classmates writing a poem about peace demonstrates how unimaginable the possibility of peace is for them. Amelia's classmates Mary and Mary would instead think about what age they would be in year twenty hundred. Roberta wants to write about stairs because she loves them, and Amelia is desperate to know what happened to Ethelred, a character from a poem she read. They think about the future, past or present desires and peace does not play a role in any of these. It could be argued that it is a concept too abstract for a nine-year-old, but Amelia claims that there is nobody she could ask: "What did she know? Who could she ask? Nobody. Nobody she knew knew anything about peace."<sup>1</sup> This chapter might also be read as a play on the Bildungsroman theme of artistic freedom being restricted. Peace is apparently a dangerous topic to write about as specific phrases and statements are expected as the children are horrified what would happen "if they wrote a poem about peace that was wrong."<sup>2</sup> After being scolded for writing about Ethelred and not on the set topic, thus being limited as an artist by an institution represented by Miss Hanratty, Amelia starts to write a poem about peace out of spite and rage, achieving some freedom, although it turns out to be "the biggest mistake" as she writes "her own little war poem about peace."<sup>3</sup> The poem is not in the novel, but it is described as featuring a "very angry, tetchy, touchy, paranoid, on-the-defensive river that killed people by pulling them apart."<sup>4</sup> The supposed peace poem reflects

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Burns, *No Bones* (London: 4th Estate, 2018), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 36.

the violent environment at school where Amelia and her classmates are treated cruelly by their teachers while, somewhat ironically, expected to write a poem about peace and also the context of the conflict during which they grow up.

Most of the twenty-three chapters, the names of which often resemble the political language, such as 'Safe House', 'Peace Process' or 'Troubles', focus on Amelia, except for three that are told from different perspectives, two of which also feature aspects of a story of maturation. The first of the chapters told from a different narrative perspective than Amelia's is 'An Apparently Motiveless Crime.' James "Jamesey" Tone, Amelia's cousin, is of Irish origin but grew up in London, and as a British army soldier, he is stationed in Belfast. As mentioned in the chapter concerning trauma, identity is often based on the social context, and James lacks such a social network due to growing up in a dysfunctional family with an abusive father. Unsurprisingly, he is rather enthusiastic about building connections with his mother's family and attempts to gain safe space within a community. I would argue that his travels to Ireland resemble the Bildungsroman notion of leaving in order to explore one's identity, even though he is primarily sent there on a post. Another aspect of the genre can be found in James's effort to establish his identity, to belong somewhere in society whilst struggling with the social strains. Although seemingly oblivious to the conflict, he actively participates in it, and his family rejects him for being a British soldier. If happiness is the highest value in the Bildungsroman genre, James surely does not achieve it. His story parallels Amelia's and offers a different point of view on the conflict from the other side of the barricade while indicating that the division is not always straightforward and ultimately demonstrates the impossibility of overcoming the chasm, at least during the first years of the conflict.

The second exception from the main narrative is 'Mr Hunch in the Ascendant', which focuses on Vincent's point of view. It could be argued that this is another story of maturation within the novel, even more distorted. Like Amelia and James, Vincent is abused by a family member – his mother being the culprit; and together with an absent father, it is a similar family setting to the other two characters. The first prominent aspect of the Bildungsroman in this episode is the scope since it follows Vincent from childhood to adulthood, and additionally, he appears throughout the whole novel, even in Amelia's perspective. Abandoned by his family and ostracised by the community as he is severely mentally ill, he comes up with the imaginary Mr Hunch, who is his guide, though not always helping him.

It is debatable whether the reader can follow Vincent's development or search for identity, which is the most typical feature of the Bildungsroman. Most of the time, it seems that

he only wants to survive, first being locked up by his mother and later being interviewed by doctor Parker. The character of the psychiatrist could fit the genre as a representation of an oppressive institution that the protagonist struggle against. While doctor Parker assumes Vincent lives in an imaginary world with imaginary friends, there is only one, Mr Hunch. Even though Vincent's stories appear to be bizarre products of his imagination, they are his traumatic memories and experiences, not hallucinations, but rather flashbacks from his past. Unlike most Bildungsroman protagonists, Vincent does not conform to the norm of society, he remains in his own world, and Mr Parker is convinced he is beyond cure. The surreal world he creates for himself is his way of coping with trauma as he fails to find a way to express it. It is only in the last chapter, told from Amelia's perspective, that Vincent starts to belong somewhere as he is accepted by the group of friends, even though he probably remains excluded by the majority of society due to his illness.

The majority of the novel is told by a third-person narrator with the narrative perspective oscillating between their or that of Amelia. Six chapters are told in the first person by Amelia. The first one is 'Babies', in which Amelia encounters her friend Mary Dolan, raped by her father, pushing a pram with what appears to be a baby at first. As a patrol approaches the girls, Amelia begins to panic as the baby suddenly appears to be a bomb. However, as she looks into the pram again, she realizes it is a dead baby in a bag. Lehner argues that "Amelia's disturbing discovery distances us at the same time as it makes us empathize with this traumatic encounter."<sup>5</sup> The first-person narrative in such a story emphasizes how the political trauma is interwoven with the personal one. Similarly, the other chapters told in the first-person by Amelia, that is 'The Least Inattention', 'Something Political', 'Echoes', 'No Sign of Panic', and 'Battles' often include the direct influence on Amelia, the impact of the political conflict on the personal trauma. It can be argued that as these chapters occur throughout the book, they serve as a reminder of the connection between the political and the personal.

The narrative of *No Bones* seems to be a clash of what is characteristic of Bildungsroman and trauma. As outlined in the first chapter, the Bildungsroman typically follows a linear narrative. Trauma, on the contrary, usually defies linearity as it is something recurring. Hence the linear narrative of the chapters is sometimes distorted by a haunting past. Stefanie Lehner argues that traumatic memories, repetitions, haunting the present, and confounding narration become the way of encircling the trauma, as was also suggested by Edkins and Žižek, while to

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<sup>5</sup> Lehner, "The Irreversible," 288.

encircle the site of the trauma is all we can do so as not to neutralise it by remembering it “as something that took place in time.”<sup>6</sup> The changing viewpoints also enhance this disruption as they alternate between first- and third-person narration, which according to Lehner, undermines the idea of narrative and personal development and “enmesh us more deeply in the experience of trauma.”<sup>7</sup> Lehner also points out how Burns intertwines political and individual trauma when she describes Amelia as a “hunger striker.”<sup>8</sup>

All three characters that can be considered the protagonists of a story of maturation, Amelia, Vincent and James, appear to be unreliable narrators due to their trauma. Amelia’s voice is questionable from the very beginning since the third sentence of the novel is “At least that’s how Amelia remembered it,”<sup>9</sup> and her unreliability is later repeated in ‘The Least Inattention, 1975’ at the end of which she says, “I can’t remember the order of things much after that day.”<sup>10</sup> James’s memory is also disrupted after being assaulted by his father, and everyone considers Vincent to be mad. This brings up the problem of another coping mechanism – trying to forget the traumatic memories. In ‘Sinners and Souls, 1982’, Amelia and her friend narrowly escape being killed in the Shankill on their way from a nightclub, but Danny Megahey is murdered. Amelia realises it was a close call: “Nothing had happened to her, she said. [...] She’d forgotten about Danny Megahey. They’d all heard and forgotten about Danny Megahey. Already, he was not remembered. Already he was gone.”<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, this chapter begins with: “Somethin’ happened political. Now, what was it? Was it the hunger-strikers? No, not yet. Was it a Butcher killing? No, not this time. Was it someone shot in the area? Oh, that’s right. It was someone shot in the area.”<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, the plot is perceived through the protagonists’ eyes, another feature of the Bildungsroman, which might enable the reader’s identification with them. On the other hand, their unreliability contradicts that, although it emphasises their instability.

Anthe Corder argues that trauma is already reflected in Amelia’s name as her first name is a reference to Amelia Street, once at the heart of the red-light district of Belfast and known

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<sup>6</sup> Lehner, “The Irreversible,” 278.

<sup>7</sup> Lehner, “The Irreversible,” 285.

<sup>8</sup> Lehner, “The Irreversible,” 287.

<sup>9</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 183.

<sup>12</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 78.



for violence.<sup>13</sup> Lehner adds that her last name suggests a reference to the case of the tragic death of fifteen-year-old Ann Lovett in childbirth in 1984 near a grotto to the Virgin Mary In Langford.<sup>14</sup> This event sparked a debate about reproductive rights and what was considered a traditional, therefore acceptable, image of a female.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Amelia is often in conflict with the patriarchal society.

Despite living during a conflict, Amelia's struggles often come within her home and her family, disrupting the supposedly safe space. As mentioned in the previous chapter, trauma often involves a betrayal of trust, especially from those who are supposed to protect us. This betrayal is more than evident in Amelia's life. Her family is far from being a safe space. On the contrary, many traumatic events happen within it, and the perpetrators are family members. Aligning with previously mentioned Edkins' argument, the father figure here is the agent of trauma. Amelia's father is mainly absent, and his role is assumed by Amelia's older brother Mick, who appoints himself as the head of the family. He follows the patriarchal pattern of dominance and a tendency to use violence. Mick oppresses not only Amelia or their mother but also his wife Mena, one of the proofs being the statement that "Mena never ventured an opinion unless Mick has given it to her before."<sup>16</sup> However, it would be simplistic to label her as a mere victim as Mena is also the perpetrator of trauma. Amelia and Mick seem to be following the path of their parents with a dominant, borderline abusive male figure and oppressed female figure as Mrs Lovett seems very practical, taking care of everyone's needs but neglecting their emotions and her passivity towards the domestic situation enables the traumatising environment.

Amelia's trauma is mainly reflected in her eating disorder. The beginning of it might be associated with a scene in which her father lies beaten up in their living room, and Amelia and her sister think: "If their da was lying there, and he was, unbreakable and yet broken, what chance was there going to be for any of them in the world."<sup>17</sup> As her desires to be loved and understood are not fulfilled, she mirrors the similar shortcomings in her physical needs and comes up with the straight discipline of starving herself. It might be argued that by exercising

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<sup>13</sup> Anthe Cordner, "'Anything neurotic, exotic, experimental or new': Trauma and Representation in Women's Writing on the Troubles," in *Voicing Dissent. New Perspectives in Irish Criticism*, ed. by Sandrine Brisset and Noreen Duddy (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012), 171.

<sup>14</sup> Lehner, "The Irreversible," 285.

<sup>15</sup> Angela Bourke et al., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume V: Irish Women's Writings and Traditions* (Cork University Press, 2002), 1411.

<sup>16</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 64.

power over her body, Amelia supposes she would regain control over her life and overcome all her issues. Yet contrary to her belief, it makes Amelia more vulnerable and less likely to seize control over her life, as is established several times. The most prominent evidence of her vulnerability is in the chapter ‘Troubles’, in which Mick and his wife attempt to rape Amelia. Her thin body contrasts with Mena and Mick, all-consuming, them being a bizarre depiction of gluttony “because they couldn't eat like normal people.”<sup>18</sup>

Her “arm-swinging vigour” induces “spasms of hatred” in Mick’s groin and causes “whirls of desire” in his brain.<sup>19</sup> Similarly to ignoring her emotions, she maintains “unacknowledged equilibrium” by “a massive effort of will, not to see anything and to respond.”<sup>20</sup> In this scene, Amelia's will to ignore everything terrible is especially noticeable, although it is also a turning point when she decides to destroy the balance of ignoring by calling her parents to “do somethin’ about this,”<sup>21</sup> with ‘this’ referring to Mike and Mena’s obscene behaviour. Amelia is saved by her older sister and her friends, and the scene turns into a bizarre fight. Apart from the conflict between Amelia, her sister and Mick and his wife, this scene also emphasises the perseverance of trauma throughout the generations. Amelia’s parents are turning a blind eye to Mick’s violence, accepting it as a norm, and all these patterns are most likely to continue as suggested by Mick's small daughter Orla playing with her dolls throughout the incident, reenacting the event, also accepting it as the standard of familial life. Another example of the conflict and trauma going on for generations is Amelia’s later encounter with her nine-year-old cousin: “Amelia could see he'd been drinking. She felt like crying. She didn’t know how to deal with this nine-year-old drunken person, and this was in spite, or maybe because of, having often been a nine-year-old drunken person herself.”<sup>22</sup>

During the confrontation with Mick and Mena, Amelia’s defensive mechanism of suppressing begins to collapse as “chinks were appearing in her armour, her precious lack of food was saving her no more,” and “the starver’s fortress was at last beginning to crumble.”<sup>23</sup> The inner fortress she built to lock up her emotions and traumatic memories and keep them at bay resembles the treasure trove from her childhood. Apart from the “Minors and Mediums”, such as a lace handkerchief, bits of coloured glass, or a tube of glitter, the most precious treasures are the thirty-seven rubber bullets. She guards this trove just as she does with her

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<sup>18</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 121.

<sup>20</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 233.

<sup>23</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 124.

feelings, hidden so nobody can find it. The most prized objects are also somehow connected to trauma: the Black Queen is the only chess piece Amelia managed to save from Mick's fit of rage; hence it represents personal trauma; the rubber bullets symbolise the community trauma of the conflict. Ironically, Amelia loses her treasure trove to Mick in another traumatising experience during which a family member again abuses her. Mick not only steals her treasures but also manipulates their mother into believing Amelia wants to join IRA when she is sixteen. This scene ends up with Amelia losing her precious possessions and arguably also losing trust as her mother believes Mick's lies almost without any doubt.

After the incident with Mick and Mena, Amelia moves from her home and later from Northern Ireland. This is an aspect of the Bildungsroman since leaving was established as a regular part of the genre, especially in Irish literature. Moreover, leaving is also one of the coping mechanisms with trauma. However, it does not resolve Amelia's problems; neither does she abandon her restrictive routine, and before she comes to terms with her emotions, she also goes through an episode of alcoholism. Nevertheless, this critical point forces her to realise that fasting and restriction cannot solve her problems as her traumatic memories start to resurface as ghosts from the past and confront her when she is in a hospital. During these encounters, Amelia faces a certain sense of survivor's guilt, partly connected to the forgetting, or attempting to do so, which was discussed previously. When she is at the hospital in a delirious state, confronted by the visions from her past, she refuses to wake up. Lehner argues, "Amelia's refusal to awaken represents, on the one hand, her avoidance of the reality of death (in sleeping she prolongs the suspension of its reality); on the other hand, it represents her refusal to survive: she is burdened by survivor's guilt."<sup>24</sup> Yet she is also consumed by fantasies of taking revenge on everyone who traumatised her, which, as Judith Herman generally describes it in connection with trauma, is a wish for catharsis, a way to restore her power as the roles of the victim and the perpetrator are reversed.<sup>25</sup>

Amelia ultimately makes amends with all her suppressed emotions in the last two chapters, and she starts to explore her new identity as she leaves the old restrictive one. Since the Bildungsroman often ends with achieving happiness, or at least perceives it as the highest value, and finding one's identity, the last chapter, 'A Peace Process, 1994,' possibly aligns with this aspect of the genre. Amelia returns to Belfast, and with a group of her friends, they go on

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<sup>24</sup> Lehner, "The Irreversible," 290.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 189.

a day trip and end up on Rathlin Island. After initial scepticism, often based on their traumatic experiences, they find themselves sitting on a cliff that strangely resembles the cliff from Amelia's hospital visions. Rathlin Island mirrors Ardoyne in many ways: both places are haunted by traumas and prone to violence as "people had been butchered and murdered and then thrown over [the cliff]"<sup>26</sup>, and they are afraid that Ambrose Gray, one of the inhabitants, threatens to do the same to them. The group is very aware of the parallels between the island and Ardoyne, and they begin to wonder if Rathlin has also been their homeland. They start to question what they used to consider as normal as the island serves as a mirror of their past. Lehner claims that the will to reconsider the attitudes, and established patterns of violence that brought even more trauma, offers hope for all of them to cope with their traumatic experiences.<sup>27</sup>

I would argue that from the perspective of the Bildungsroman, the ending is somewhat ambiguous within the genre as it contradicts the idea of final conforming to society. They reject the societal norms, achieve some sort of happiness, or at least embark on a journey towards it, yet it is not connected to the loss of freedom as in the classical Bildungsroman. On the contrary, they gain a new sense of liberty. This sense of freedom could be perceived in them discarding the patterns they grew up in while sorting out a crisis. When angry Ambrose Gray begins to approach them and threaten them, they walk away rather than doing anything violent:

They could throw him over the cliff, they supposed. But call them failures; in spite of their upbringing, they weren't really the sort of people for throwing other people over the cliffs. They could have thought of doing so, they supposed. Hatred and revenge thoughts were also within their upbringing.<sup>28</sup>

Arguably, they create their own community with their standards that often strictly reject those of the society they grew up in., and this might also be their maturation.

The novel might be read in the tradition of the feminist Bildungsroman as introduced by Felski. It shares the linear structure with the male Bildungsroman and focuses on female development. The novel does not centre on Amelia's role of wife or mother that she should fulfil. *No Bones* follows the growing up and development of a girl caught up in the middle of a

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<sup>26</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 319.

<sup>27</sup> Lehner, "The Irreversible," 291.

<sup>28</sup> Burns, *No Bones*, 320.

conflict, abused by her family and members of the broader community. Due to various traumatic experiences and a sense of unfulfillment, Amelia develops an eating disorder to gain at least some control over her life, even though it comprises restrictive habits and suppressing emotions. The novel conforms to the genre of the Bildungsroman in several crucial aspects. Amelia undergoes development that is constrained by society and its norms and achieves self-determination. Apart from Amelia's trauma, which is the main issue, the novel also depicts the traumatic experience of other characters, demonstrating how trauma is present throughout society and representing different types of traumatic experiences and coping mechanisms.

## 5 Milkman

*Milkman* tells a story middle sister, a young girl who is being stalked by Milkman, a paramilitary. As he follows her and she is seen with him in public, the rumours of their alleged affair start to spread. Even though the narrator never encourages Milkman in his endeavour, she is ostracized by other people for supposedly having an affair with an older man, moreover, a paramilitary. The novel takes place in a much shorter period than *No Bones* as it describes events of several months. Such a short time span might seem unusual for the Bildungsroman genre; however, the narrator tells the story with a delay of many years, which makes it possible to recognize her development. Similarly to Burns's first novel, *Milkman* addresses the question of trauma and how it impacts one's identity while also living in a long-term violent conflict, in this case unspecified but strongly resembling the Troubles.

Unlike *No Bones*, the setting of *Milkman* is anything but clearly defined. The narrator remains nameless, same as all the characters in the novel, and the reader knows her only as middle sister. According to the narrator, her father was unable to remember the name of his children; hence they are called by their birth position: "As for the names of us offspring, never could he remember them, [...] Sooner or later, by running through, he'd hit on the correct one at last. [...] after a bit, he dropped the mental catalogue, opting instead for 'son' or 'daughter' which was easier."<sup>1</sup> She claims that the siblings start to use 'brother' and 'sister' among themselves, and since the narrator is the fourth of seven girls with three younger "wee sisters", she is middle sister.

The narrative is more consistent than in *No Bones*, even with its many digressions, as there is one first-person narrator speaking from a certain present point. To use Gerard Genette's terminology, *Milkman* uses the autodiegetic narrative<sup>2</sup> since the middle sister is the hero of her narrative, and moreover, she tells it in her own way. The perspective alternates between internal and external; hence the narrative switches from the immediate one of experiencing the events as they unfold and the one in which there is a distance caused by the fact that the events are not narrated by a teenage girl. Siân White points out that the narrative technique, along with employing many digressions from the main events, "blur the distinction between the experienced then and the telling now."<sup>3</sup> The story illustrates a tension between what she

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Burns, *Milkman* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 245.

<sup>3</sup> Siân White, "A "Hair-Trigger Society" and the Woman Who Felt Something in Anna Burns's *Milkman*," *Genre* 54, no. 1 (April 2021): 129. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00166928-8911537>.

perceives and experiences and what others believe. The narrator does not provide a detailed account of the events but focuses on their effect on her. The main plot line is intertwined with different digressions, such as the great canicide, one of the very few instances of violence that does not happen off stage, or the history of the international women's group of the area. Even though they might make the narrative harder to navigate, they provide the context, illustrate the oppression and fear, and demonstrate the pressure the narrator feels to explain the context.

There are no place names, and no city is ever mentioned, but the descriptions resemble Belfast – “sad and lonely road ran between religions”<sup>4</sup> and “staunchly no-go areas.”<sup>5</sup> Hutton argues that the sense of Belfast emerges from these various geographical details. She also draws attention to the picture on the book's cover, which is a picturesque photograph of Belfast Lough at sunset, which, according to her, creates “an interesting disjunction between the physical form of the book and its written element.”<sup>6</sup> In omitting anything that could set the story in a specific place, Burns suggests that these events could happen in any repressive society in the middle of a conflict.

As for the temporal setting, the novel provides a few hints about when the story probably takes place. When middle sister talks about her third brother-in-law, she describes him as oblivious to “the political problems of eleven years,”<sup>7</sup> suggesting that the events probably happened in the late 1970s. More importantly, however, the narrator tells the story twenty years later as she states as she questions Milkman’s behaviour: “I didn’t have those other thoughts until later, and I don’t mean an hour later. I mean twenty years later.”<sup>8</sup> The narrator ironically marks the period in which she retrospectively told the events as “the era of psychological enlightenment,”<sup>9</sup> which could be a reference to the era after the signing of the peace agreement and the process of peacebuilding, the effort to address the trauma and psychological damage caused by the conflict. While most critics would argue that the narrator present must be in the late 1990s, White believes that based on different allusions, one of them being a supposed reference to a 2012 perfume advertisement, middle sister narrates her experience from the early 2010s.<sup>10</sup> As the difference between past and present should be the twenty years it took the

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<sup>4</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 74.

<sup>5</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 168.

<sup>6</sup> Clare Hutton, “The Moment and Technique of *Milkman*,” *Essays in Criticism* 69, no. 3 (2019): 362. <https://doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgz012>.

<sup>7</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> White, “A Hair-Trigger Society,” 129.

narrator to speak up about her experience, this argument seemingly clashes with the narrator referring to the 1970s: “This was the Nineteen Seventies”<sup>11</sup> or “It was great hatred, the great Seventies hatred.”<sup>12</sup> I would argue that more than the precise time of the present narrator, it is crucial to acknowledge the distance of several years between the story and the narrator telling it. This gap demonstrates how persisting trauma is challenging to cope with or overcome. Middle sister acknowledges that she was not able to question Milkman or his behaviour and did not even have the language to do so.

Thanks to the narrator’s distance from the young middle sister, she realises how absurd and bizarre her story might appear. Therefore, she assures the reader: “I’m not making this up.”<sup>13</sup> What she, together with the whole community, considered to be a norm, for example, the banned names, “the tribal identifiers of ‘us’ or ‘them’, of ‘their religion’ or ‘our religion’,”<sup>14</sup> she acknowledges how far-fetched it might seem and even emphasizes the bizarreness with her language.

The time frame might not fit that typical for Bildungsroman as the novel takes place within months. It could be argued that the narrator undergoes a development even within the short time between the first encounter with Milkman and his death, but the Bildungsroman tends to focus on a more extended period of one’s life. Nevertheless, if we consider the distance between the narrator and the period when the events happened, the time span is over twenty years, almost the same as *No Bones*, and more importantly, corresponding with the aspects of the Bildungsroman. The narrator certainly does go through a certain kind of formation. Moreover, the sense of her development is enhanced by the distance between when the events happened and when the story is told. Such a distance then enhances the notion of maturation typical for the genre.

Analogically to *No Bones*, the protagonist’s search for identity is affected by a traumatic experience and a clash with the community. The middle sister is a Bildungsroman protagonist who is somewhat ostracised by society. Even before her alleged affair with Milkman, she is somewhat singled out due to her habit of reading nineteenth-century novels while walking, which is later “added as further proof against me.”<sup>15</sup> This habit of hers is her way to stay out of the ongoing conflict and possibly provide herself better safety as she wants to avoid what White

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<sup>11</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 96.

<sup>13</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 311.

<sup>14</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 3.



describes as “tribal allegiance” that is “enforced by threat of violence, social pressure and constant surveillance – by the state, by renouncers or defenders, and by neighbourhood gossips.”<sup>16</sup> Contrary to her efforts, it makes her even more suspicious in the eyes of the community.

Aaron Kelly argues that the paradigm of Irish nationalism and unionism “frustrates the establishment of a properly constituted public space”<sup>17</sup> as these sectarian categories prevail as means of identification in Northern Ireland. Middle sister looks for identity outside of these political categories. White states that by inventing her own terms, the narrator “avoids settling for binaries that are inadequate for describing this world's complexity.”<sup>18</sup> She refuses to engage with the conflict and draws away from the “hair-trigger society” where “violence was everybody’s main gauge for judging those around them.”<sup>19</sup> While I agree that the middle sister wants to escape somehow the conflict and all these labels that come with it and that her specific language offers a certain distance from the conflict, the binaries remain even in her invented terms. There is still the notion of “us” and “them”; there are “our names” and “their names”, “our community” versus “their community”.

The opening passage immediately provides a broader context of sexual predators, violence, the community and the effect of rumours. The narrator explains that she was stalked by Milkman and that he was shot. It also instantly reveals what names the narrator uses. Characters are described mainly through their relation to the middle sister or their societal role. Hence there is maybe-boyfriend, third brother-in-law, the real milkman and stalking Milkman, tablet girl or nuclear boy. This provides for irony in the title as there are two milkmen: the real milkman, who falls in love with the narrator’s mother, and Milkman, the narrator’s stalker. It is almost ridiculous when the news reports reveal that milkman's name really was Milkman in the last chapter. Such a surname seems odd, “but when you think about it, why was that weird? Butcher's a name.”<sup>20</sup> After the revelation of Milkman’s real name, people feel “cheated” and “frightened” since the codename “the milkman” was intriguing and mysterious but “once out of symbolism, [...] once into the everyday, the banal, [...] any respect it had garnered as the cognomen of a high-cadre paramilitary activist was undercut immediately and, just as

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<sup>16</sup> White, “A Hair-Trigger Society,” 121.

<sup>17</sup> Aaron Kelly, “Geopolitical Eclipse: Culture and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland,” *Third Text* 19, no. 5 (2005): 548.

<sup>18</sup> White, “A Hair-Trigger Society,” 121.

<sup>19</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 304.

immediately, fell away.”<sup>21</sup> People begin to question his identity based on his real name and even doubt if he ever was a “sinister paramilitary” or if “poor Mister Milkman had been nothing but another innocent victim of state murder.”<sup>22</sup>

The discussion about names is essential when considering aspects of self-formation since identity also comprises a name. The narrator’s name is never revealed, but several characters use it, and it is usually during a moment of crisis. Somebody McSomebody when he forcefully attempts to start a relationship with her, and later the groupies say her name when they threaten her in the club toilets. Nevertheless, there is a time when tablets girl’s sister addresses middle sister by her name in a way that “felt warm, friendly, it felt relief.”<sup>23</sup> The issue of names and how they might define one, especially in the perception of society, also appears in an episode in which the narrator describes a couple who keeps a list of names not allowed in the area because they were too much “of the country over the water”: Lance, Percival, Wilbur, Wilfred, Peregrine or Norman and the list keeps on expanding.<sup>24</sup>

As discussed above, apart from people’s names, middle sister comes up with her own terms connected to the conflict: renouncer-of-the-state, defender-of-the-state, country-over-the-water, country-over-the-border. For anyone familiar with the Northern Ireland context, the meaning of these terms is apparent, and in omitting the proper names, Burns forces reconsideration by making the familiar strange. Others can see the book as more universal and relevant even beyond the context of Northern Ireland. Anna Burns comments on the setting: “I would like to think it could be seen as any sort of totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions.”<sup>25</sup>

The invented terms might also suggest the narrator’s estrangement from the community and her resentment of its norms and values. Middle sister points out how twisted these values are when longest friend confronts her because of her “dangerous reading-while-walking”,<sup>26</sup> which makes her one of the beyond-the-pales. The narrator argues: “Hold on a minute, [...] Are you saying it's okay for him to go around with Semtex but not okay for me to read Jane Eyre in

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<sup>21</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 305.

<sup>22</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 305.

<sup>23</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 267.

<sup>24</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 22-3.

<sup>25</sup> Anna Burns, “It’s nice to feel I’m solvent. That’s a huge gift’: Anna Burns on her life-changing Booker win,” interview by Lisa Allardice, *The Guardian*, October 17, 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/17/anna-burns-booker-prize-winner-life-changing-interview>.

accessed 31<sup>st</sup> July 2022

<sup>26</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 201.

public?”<sup>27</sup> to which her friend retorts that, “Semtex isn't unusual. [...] It fits in more than your dangerous reading-while-walking fits in.”<sup>28</sup>

The community of *Milkman* is closely tied to identity formation, which corresponds with the aspect of the Bildungsroman that the protagonist's instability is mainly due to the contradiction between their aim to establish their identity and the strains posed by society. The community builds middle sister's character mainly based on rumours Milkman himself started. However hard middle sister tries to ignore or avoid it, the gossip continues. With the gossip and fuelling them, Milkman gains and retains control over the narrator; ultimately, it is the reason for her isolation by her neighbours and family distancing themselves.

The position of the middle sister within the community becomes that of an internal exile. While Amelia in *No Bones* leaves Belfast, middle sister stays in the city but is kept on the fringes of society, although she remains part of the community, at least to the degree that she is trapped in its pressures and norms. In an attempt to refute the rumours about her and Milkman, she decides to appear not affected and take on “a terminal face – nothing in it, nothing behind it, a well-turned-out nothing.”<sup>29</sup> However, this leads only to further alienation. Her performed affectlessness gradually becomes real: “My seemingly flattened approach to life became less a pretence and more and more real as time went on... My feelings stopped expressing. Then they stopped existing.”<sup>30</sup> As the others from the community start to find her inaccessible, the same happens to herself too. This attitude resembles Amelia as she also attempts to hide her emotions.

While Amelia is physically abused by members of her family and the community, middle sister's abuse is more subtle and less perceivable. Even the narrator herself is not sure what, if anything, is happening to her. This is partly because there is no term for her experience to describe it accurately, nobody recognises such a thing as stalking, and partly due to Milkman never touching her. He is mainly an omniscient threat who always appears out of nowhere, knows everything about her and her family, or threatens to kill her maybe-boyfriend.

Milkman is killed by the state forces, Somebody McSomebody is beaten up by the groupies and “is had up at a kangaroo court” for ¼ rape.<sup>31</sup> In light of these events, middle sister realises she should have spoken up about the “encroachment upon me by the milkman.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 200.

<sup>28</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 201.

<sup>29</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 176.

<sup>30</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 178.

<sup>31</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 310.

<sup>32</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 346.

Although she is aware that at the age of eighteen, she was not able to oppose Milkman “having been brought up in a hair-trigger society where the ground rules were – if no physically violent touch was being laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being levelled at you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn't there?”<sup>33</sup>

A betrayal of trust, which is connected to trauma, is also an issue in the novel. The trauma is more complex since not only does the community or her family not believe middle sister, but the narrator even doubts herself: “There was no overt sense here that he could be transgressing so that again perhaps I was mistaken and he wasn't transgressing.”<sup>34</sup> During their first encounter, he offers her a ride in his car and “he wasn't being rude and he knew my family, for he'd named the credentials, the male people of my family.”<sup>35</sup> When she is confronted by her mother and maybe-boyfriend about her alleged relationship with Milkman, she cannot find a way to express it:

There was still my lack of certainty as to whether or not there was anything to tell... That was the way it worked. Hard to define, this stalking, this predation, because it was piecemeal. A bit here, a bit there, maybe, maybe not, perhaps, don't know. It was constant hints, symbolisms, representations, metaphors.<sup>36</sup>

She admits that at that time, she did not know how she could speak of this dilemma. Even though she cannot define what is happening between her and Milkman, she is sure of the danger he poses, and it causes a bodily reaction of shudders, shivers, and numbness in her legs which she describes as “anti-orgasm.”<sup>37</sup> Analogically to *No Bones*, Burns depicts the haunting nature of trauma and also how the mental struggle is reflected in physical symptoms.

Another feature contributing to the traumatic experience is the misogyny in this patriarchal society. The narrator being a female is a vital factor as her alleged affair with Milkman never affects his reputation, even though he is married. Connecting the patriarchal society with its gendered double standards and middle sister's traumatic experience, White argues that “normalised violence, misogyny, and sexual predation discourage individuals from

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<sup>33</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 136.

<sup>35</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 79.

speaking out or trusting themselves.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, one of the community’s highest values is hypermasculinity which, together with nationalist politics and violence, gives power.<sup>39</sup>

Middle sister connects her personal experience with the problematic attitude within the broader community. She describes the way women are treated as less, disregarded by men, and the predatory behaviour and violence women have to face:

They don't see you as a person but instead as some cipher, some valueless nobody whose sole objective is to reflect back onto them the glory of themselves. Their compliments and solicitousness too, are creepy. They're inappropriate, squirmy, calculated, rapacious, particularly as not long afterwards – or not long before as in my case – you know it's going to be insults, threats of violence, threats of death and variations on stalk-talk.<sup>40</sup>

However, this attitude is rooted in the opinion of the majority of the community, regardless of gender. It is ironic when the middle sister talks to her longest friend and believes that “the main point” and the problem is Milkman and their relationship, but her friend argues that the whole situation with him has actually helped her as he puts her in the centre of the action.<sup>41</sup> According to her, Milkman somewhat solved her biggest issue – being considered odd because of her reading while walking. Such disregard for trauma, which can be perceived from the friend, is usual in society, similar to that in *No Bones*.

Similarly to Burns’s first novel, *Milkman* also provides examples of trauma experienced by others besides the narrator, which underlines the ubiquitous violence. The narrator’s detachment enables a critical distance, and she connects the personal experience, and not only hers, with the broader context of the community. She realises the effect and causes of the trauma of others which often proves a correlation between mental health issues and the political situation. She acknowledges that in the case of Somebody McSomebody, the destruction of his entire family “had unhinged him” and “must account, at least in part, for his losing grip so spectacularly.”<sup>42</sup> Middle sister’s eldest brother moved to the Middle East “for a bit of peace and quiet and sunshine instead”,<sup>43</sup> her longest friend is the only member of her family that has not

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<sup>38</sup> White, “A Hair-Trigger Society”, 113.

<sup>39</sup> White, “A Hair-Trigger Society”, 122.

<sup>40</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 133.

<sup>41</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 203.

<sup>42</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 133.

<sup>43</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 274.

been killed because of the conflict. It seems that almost every character in the novel has a similar traumatic experience, and it emphasizes not only the omnipresence of the violence but also the long duration of the conflict.

As mentioned in the previous chapter about trauma, storytelling has been advocated as a means of therapy and seen as particularly helpful for those who felt their experience had been ignored. I believe this is the case with middle sister, and the novel is a literary reflection of the therapeutic use of storytelling. Her experience was marginalised when she was going through being stalked by Milkman, and only after twenty years can she find the language to speak about it. Edkins talks about this dilemma of the survivors of trauma. They cannot find words for their experience as “the only words they have are the words of the very political community that is the source of their suffering. [...] the words of the status quo, the words that delimit and define acceptable ways of being human within that community.”<sup>44</sup>

The ending of *Milkman* might suggest conforming to society in a way. Middle sister still rejects the community's norms but possibly feels like a member of it in a way. As she returns to her regular runs with her third brother-in-law, she concludes that “people in this place did give a fuck.”<sup>45</sup> After the terror of Milkman subsides, middle sister can get rid of her constant fear of “being followed, being spied upon, photographed, misperceived, encircled, anticipated, [...] ex-maybe boyfriend being killed by a car bomb.”<sup>46</sup> After Milkman’s death, middle sister feels a sense of freedom, similarly to some Irish Bildungsromans mentioned in the second chapter of the thesis. Even though the ending appears to be a new beginning for middle sister, who is finally free of Milkman’s stalking, and his death is a seeming closure to the traumatic experience, it is known from the first pages of the novel that the trauma did not disappear. On the contrary, middle sister has been unable to communicate her traumatic experience for years.

As the events happen within a few months, it could be suggested that *Milkman* is a coming-of-age novel. However, the novel still focuses on the development and forming of the identity of middle sister. Due to the digressions, much of middle sister’s past and growing up is revealed, and also because of the distance between middle sister narrating and middle sister experiencing, it is possible to perceive the change of the narrator over the many years, which is comparable to *No Bones*. While the violence and traumatic experiences in *No Bones* are usually

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<sup>44</sup> Edkins, *Trauma*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 246.

<sup>46</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 302-3.

explicit, middle sister faces a less perceivable threat, although not less dangerous or damaging. Violence in *Milkman* is mainly off-stage, unlike in the first novel.

While *No Bones* describes different ways of coping with trauma – Amelia’s eating disorder, trying to forget the traumatic experience or leaving the traumatic environment, middle sister, at first, is trying to escape the reality of the conflict by her reading-while-walking habit. It is debatable whether her strategy is successful as it draws attention to her, and in the end, “the community has pronounced its diagnosis on [her],”<sup>47</sup> and she is “considered a community beyond-the-pale.”<sup>48</sup> The coping mechanism that proves to be helpful for middle sister is storytelling when after several years, she is able to find the accurate language for her experience and communicate it.

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<sup>47</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 200.

<sup>48</sup> Burns, *Milkman*, 199.

## 6 Conclusion

In contrast to Moretti's belief that the Bildungsroman declined and almost disappeared in the twentieth century, this thesis discusses the aspects of the genre in two novels published in the twenty-first century. Even though the scope of the thesis is limited as it focuses on two novels by the same author, I would argue that the use of Bildungsroman within contemporary Irish literature of the past fifty years is not on the decline. On the contrary, the genre offers an interesting form for the Irish context and could be a place of innovation and variety.

Drawing on the work of Abel, Hirsch, Langland and also Šnircová, *No Bones* and *Milkman* could be discussed within the female Bildungsroman. While the early female Bildungsromans still recognize marriage as a prominent part of female development, whether as the ultimate fulfilment or as the impulse for rejection of societal norms, the twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels cease to focus on this aspect. This could be the result of women gaining the opportunities which used to be reserved primarily for men; hence they are no longer defined only within the domestic sphere. When considering *No Bones* and *Milkman*, the unifying aspect, which also correlates with the genre of Bildungsroman, is the main female protagonist who develops and forms her identity while going through a traumatic experience that stems from an ongoing conflict.

As for the narrative strategies, each novel employs a fairly different one. *No Bones* is more distorted, the narrative perspective changes, and the narrative oscillates between first- and third-person, yet aligning with the conventions of the Bildungsroman, it is linear. The narrative strategy simultaneously illustrates the tension between trauma and the Bildungsroman as it disrupts the genre's linearity while emphasising the traumatic experience. With this technique, Burns also accentuates the connection between political conflict and personal trauma.

This correlation between public or communal and personal can also be perceived in *Milkman*. Unlike the first novel, this one follows the first-person narrative. While it is more consistent in the question of the narrator, it is distorted by many digressions from the main plotline. Nonetheless, the narrative alternates between the immediate one of experiencing the events and the one that is distant from the past. Both novels include some tension which is enhanced by the narrative strategies. It might be argued that the tension within the narrative reflects that in the society during a conflict.

An aspect connected to the conflict happening in both novels is trauma. The trauma of both protagonists correlates with their development and their search for identity. Amelia and



middle sister's trauma are also closely tied to their position as women in a misogynistic society that oppresses women. Apart from gender inequality, both novels also demonstrate the marginalised position of other people who do not fit in with the normative society – queer, struggling with mental health. I would argue that the role of community in the issue of trauma is more prominent in *Milkman*. However, the influence of society is essential in both novels. Both demonstrate the extent of trauma in society and how communal trauma is intertwined with personal trauma.

The ending of both novels might suggest gaining some freedom. Middle sister has a feeling of liberty after Milkman's death as he no longer poses a threat. Although as she says at the novel's beginning, it takes her many years to address her traumatic experience. Amelia and her friends find it during their trip to Rathlin Island. Even though they return to Belfast, to their habits and what they consider a norm, they are able to reject some of the old violent patterns. That contrasts with Amelia's time in the hospital when she wants to revenge herself as a part of her facing the aftermath of her traumatic experiences. Perhaps it would be more accurate to conclude that both protagonists find some stability in their life

The origin of the Bildungsroman, which was partly influenced by the disruption of the continuity of the generations, is reflected in both novels. Both Amelia and middle sister attempt to extricate themselves from social structures and norms that are imposed on the members of the society throughout the generations. I believe that they both succeed in this effort. They reject the violence, but also the binary perception of the world, and they are able to overcome their trauma. As the circumstances one was born into gradually ceased to matter at the turn of the eighteenth century, and although the sociohistorical context is different in the novels, it is possible to perceive an analogy to the two protagonists' refusal to be defined by the societal norms they were born into.

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